

Women's History Month

Deputy Secretary Jae K. Davenport Is Carving Out A Place Of Her Own In The History of Virginia Women

As promised in an earlier e-mail, it is my honor to present to you our Deputy Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security **Jae K. Davenport** as our special spotlight feature as DJJ continues its observance of Women's History Month. After reading Jae K.'s story below, I am sure you will agree that she represents the latest generation of women whose accomplishments were inspired in large part by other strong women before her, and that she will do the same for generations of young women yet to come. We at DJJ thank her for her steady support and leadership during our transformation effort, and especially during the past year as we have battled through the pandemic.

And now ... meet Jae K.

– Valerie Boykin, Director
Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice



Jae K. Davenport, Deputy Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, proudly serves diverse constituencies across the Commonwealth. It is no surprise that her sources for inspiration are equally wide-ranging.

She was born in Seoul, Korea, and led a very structured life, going to school six days a week, lining up by height and doing warm-up exercises each morning before school began. Children were expected to address elders with formal language to show respect. When she was 8 years old, her parents decided to move to the U.S. "I am incredibly inspired by my parents' decision to leave all their family, friends, and their lives behind to move to the U.S. for better opportunities for my brother and me," Jae K. says. "I realize now how fearful my parents must have been to not speak the language, have little money, but be certain of a better life in the U.S."

As a new arrival from an Asian country, however, she remembers that the road to acceptance was sometimes rough. "I was teased – other kids would make 'chink eyes' at me, and make fun of my first language," she remembers. "It seemed to me as if everyone thought people of Asian descent were all Chinese. These things made me feel very insecure." Her steadiest role model was her mother. "My mom did not know how to sew a button when we first moved to the U.S.," Jae K. says. "To support our family, she learned how to sew with no formal training and now she is a sought-after formal wear expert seamstress who often fixes other people's mistakes on very nice dresses. And she's dealt with hundreds of stressed brides! But my mom gets much pleasure out of making people happy on one of the most important days of their lives. She inspires me to be confident as a Korean woman and to have a strong mind."

Jae K. found additional inspiration in an unlikely place: Yo! MTV Raps. "I didn't understand the lyrics at that time, but I loved watching the videos and hearing hip-hop music," she says. "It was the only thing on TV that I enjoyed that I didn't need to fully understand. I think the style of rapping, the dancing, and artists like Queen Latifah and Salt n' Pepa helped me to develop an attitude to get through those tough times."

It wasn't long before Jae K. got her first paid job, arranged for by her mother, at a Korean-owned dry cleaner. After the school day was over, she reported to work to tag clothes, organize the orders and run the cash register. Jae K. recalls that the job was "brutal – there was no air conditioning in the facility, and there was constant steam from the dry cleaning machines." It took her a long time to earn her first \$1,000, and all of it went toward the cost of a new car for the family. All the while she was working, however, she was thinking about something she was told as a very young girl.

"I was told that lawyers stand up for other people," Jae K. remembers. "So, for as long as I can remember, I had a general desire to become a lawyer." After graduating from James River High School in Chesterfield County, she attended Mary Baldwin College (now university) where she earned her BA, with a major in political science and a minor in economics. She then attended Syracuse University College of Law where she earned her JD. She passed the Virginia Bar exam with the help of another key source of inspiration: author Paulo Coelho, who wrote "The Alchemist." "It's one of my favorite books," Jae K. says. "I read it when I was studying for the Virginia Bar exam. It made me feel like I could accomplish anything and that I should chase after my dreams. I credit passing the Bar that summer to that book."

Having achieved her dream of becoming an attorney, her first job as a public defender was in Franklin, VA, where she represented juveniles and adults charged with misdemeanors and felonies in three jurisdictions. She then served as the Standards of Practice and Legal Training Attorney for the Virginia Indigent Defense Commission (VIDC) where she oversaw the enforcement of the mandatory standards of practice, certification of court-appointed counsel and legal training for all public defenders and certified attorneys. She was appointed by Gov. McAuliffe as Deputy Counsel. Gov. Northam then appointed her as Deputy Secretary. "I am fortunate to work with a lot of experienced, intelligent and passionate people, from Secretary Moran to the agencies' leadership and staff and the Governor's office," says Jae K. "I get to work with an incredible team on very important policies that impact individuals' daily lives, public safety and the criminal justice system. It has been a privilege to be in this role."

To young women, Jae K. offers the following advice: "Work hard so that you can take a risk and bet on yourself. Be flexible and open to opportunities, and trust your instincts." But while doing it, she also suggests a useful self-reflection: "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."