

City's Chinese celebrate a remarkable life

Lawyer Andy Joe honoured tonight

BY PETTI FONG, VANCOUVER

When Andy Joe's friends began making plans to celebrate his 80th birthday tonight, they quickly realized that booking a table at his favourite restaurant in Vancouver's Chinatown wouldn't be enough.

In fact, they'd need all of the Foo Ho Ho restaurant to handle the crowd of 130 well-wishers honouring the man who was the first Chinese lawyer allowed to practise in British Columbia, and who over the course of 50 years became a prominent voice for Chinese Canadians, helping to safeguard their rights, culture, and even Vancouver's Chinatown itself.

When he was born in Victoria in 1926, one of 13 children, B.C.'s Chinese community was at least a generation old. Young Andy was accepted into the Royal Canadian Air Force and then discharged in 1946, but there were no jobs for the 20-year-old after the war.

"He rode his bicycle to look for work and was just told over and over again, 'We're not hiring Chinese,'" remembers his former law partner, David Chong.

"His experiences weren't unique, but this was how Andy was different: Others may not have even tried to apply, but Andy felt these things weren't right and he continued applying. That's why he was always very outspoken about any type of discrimination."

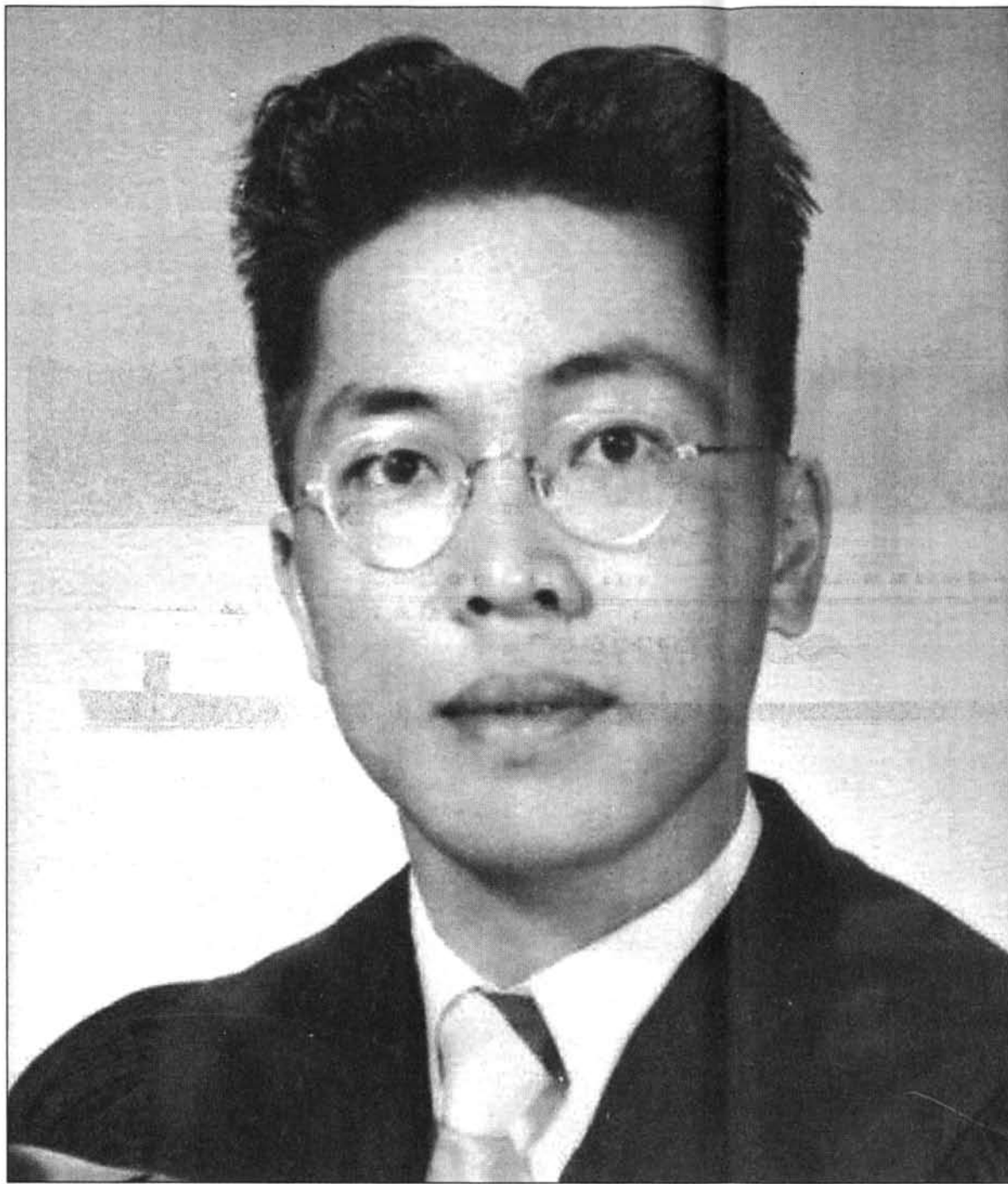
It also spurred his decision to enter law school. In 1953, when he was called to the bar, Mr. Joe began practising in Chinatown where he gained a reputation for being willing to help anyone, regardless of whether or not the person in need of help could pay.

"He had a lot of people who came to him for help," says his brother Ron Joe.

"Many, many of them couldn't afford to pay for a lawyer, but that didn't stop Andy from becoming their lawyer."

People also turned to Mr. Joe when they needed help dealing with bureaucrats and politicians. Chinatown merchants asked Mr. Joe to be their voice when the government planned to impose health regulations on barbecued meat, changing what he called "5,000-year-old traditions."

His method of persuasion was to hold a barbecue for politicians where he served *char siu* (barbe-



Andy Joe, in his 1952 graduation photo. Mr. Joe was the first Chinese Canadian to practise law in B.C.

cued pork), roasted duck and glazed ribs. The proposed regulations were dropped.

Another case involved two Hong Kong seamen who had been badly treated at sea: When they docked in Vancouver, they wandered around Chinatown until a merchant sent them to Mr. Joe.

He went to see the shipping company's agent on behalf of the men, only to be dismissed with a warning he remembered decades later — that he was a "nobody" who couldn't possibly take on the company's legal talent.

What the agent didn't know was that Mr. Joe had helped many dock

workers in the past. For 23 days, the workers shut down the port in support of the Hong Kong men.

On the 24th day the shipping agent phoned, asking Mr. Joe if they could settle the dispute.

"I remember being totally impressed with the way he handled that call," Ron Joe says of his brother. "He was a fighter and he could have made it difficult for the company. He said, 'Let's keep it simple. Pay them their back wages. Fly them back to Hong Kong and you have to promise they will face no retaliation.'"

As Andy Joe's reputation grew for helping those in need, his power al-

so grew as a community leader. Though never tempted by politics himself, he backed the New Democrats in the 1970s, establishing a community office to help elect Dave Barrett.

Earlier, in the 1960s, Mr. Joe helped organize the community to fight the city's plans to build a freeway that would have carved Chinatown into bits and demolished hundreds of homes in Strathcona.

"He was a strategist," says city councillor George Chow, who has known Mr. Joe since the early 1970s. "It was a pivotal time in the community — which was still relatively small, but it was growing and all of

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Ron Joe, brother of Andy Joe

us recognized that."

Mr. Chow said that by the mid-1960s, Chinese Canadians were beginning to try to right historical wrongs, such as the head tax, and they were becoming politically involved.

In 1978, in one of his biggest cases, Mr. Joe took the mighty Chinese Benevolent Association to court, arguing that the group should hold elections.

After the judge ordered an election, a group led by Mr. Joe, the Committee to Democratize the CBA, easily won control of the organization.

The fight was more than a local issue; it signalled a shift in policies and attitudes that played out on the international stage. The influential CBA had often been accused of being a front for the Taiwan government, while Mr. Joe (who helped found the Canada-China Friendship society in 1963) was one of the first in Canada to push for more relations with mainland China.

By the time Beijing and Ottawa established diplomatic ties, he was on such good terms with the Chinese government that he often flew to Ottawa to help it set up its first diplomatic office.

While his reputation was solidly established, public recognition did not spell financial success. In his first years, Mr. Joe made so little money practising law that he had to also work nights at a liquor store. Even when he was able to quit the night shift, he remained unmotivated by money and ignored repeated calls by friends to replace his worn overcoat.

"He just wasn't interested in material things," says Mr. Chong. "He cared more about getting things done."

Mr. Joe and his wife, who passed away about a decade ago, had four children. He now lives quietly in a senior's residence in Yaletown.

"Andy, like many in his generation, faced a lot of problems," says Mr. Chow. "But they faced those problems and they fought hard for all the things we have now. He empowered people to speak up, and that's something his friends want to thank him for."