

You Need to Fight for the Things You Deserve

In 1990, I won Kramer Elementary's highly cutthroat 1st Grade Spelling Bee. The stakes were dizzying. Not only would the winner be showered in glory, the principal had announced that the winner would also receive a \$20 gift certificate to Ponderosa Steakhouse®. No one in my family had ever been to a steakhouse or eaten a steak before, let alone up to 20 dollars' worth of steak from a culinary powerhouse like Ponderosa.

The odds, however, were stacked against me. My family had only immigrated to America from China, where I was born and raised, a year earlier. English was a constant struggle for us. My first grade teacher had even told my parents that my linguistic skills were "poor" and "lagging far behind" my peers. But the allure of Ponderosa was too great, so I quietly resolved to win that gift certificate for my parents.

And I did just that. On the day of the Bee, I felled one competitor after another, until only one remained—the cagey David S. When asked to spell the word "around," however, David slipped up, spelling: "A-R-O-N-D." All of a sudden, it was my turn. I deployed the letters slowly, carefully, and one at a time: "A-R-O-U-N-D." David's head fell into his hands. I had won.

But the story does not end there. Even though I had won, my teacher—the same teacher who had insisted that my language skills were poor—refused to give me my prize, the \$20 Ponderosa gift certificate. Instead, she scolded me for being "disrespectful" when I asked her for it, and sent me home empty-handed. To this day, I have no idea why.

Crushed and confused, I went home and tearfully explained everything to my parents. The next morning, my father skipped work and drove me to school. He marched straight into the principal's office, where he demanded a meeting with the principal, the vice principal, and my teacher. I did not participate in the meeting that ensued. And I do not know what exactly was said, but I still remember my father's angry, raised voice.

After some time, my father emerged from the office. My eyes darted to what was clutched in his hands—a \$20 gift certificate to Ponderosa with my name filled in above the words "SPELLING BEE CHAMP." He then drove me to Ponderosa, where I cashed in my winnings. Unable to afford anything else on the menu, my father sat and watched me wolf down my tiny steak, before telling me something I'd never forget: "We are in a strange land. You will need fight for the things that you deserve here."

This was one of my first lessons in advocacy. Now, as an attorney, I am honored to be an advocate for my clients. Though the cases I contend with now are much larger in size, and the stakes much greater, the model "advocate" in my mind that I seek to emulate is not Clarence Darrow, Thurgood Marshall, or Atticus Finch (great as they each were). It is my father fighting in broken English for my \$20 gift certificate.



Education:

JD, Columbia University School of Law;
BA with honors, English & African American studies, Northwestern University

Company Name: Latham & Watkins LLP

Industry: Law

Company CEO: Richard Trobman, Chair and Managing Partner

Company Headquarters Location: n/a

Number of Employees: 5,000+

Your Location (if different from above): New York, New York

Words you live by: "言必信, 行必果"
("Words must be believed, deeds must be fruitful.")

Who is your personal hero?
Kazushi Sakuraba

What book are you reading? *Where I'm Calling From* by Raymond Carver

What was your first job: Call center

Favorite charity:
The Robin Hood Foundation

Interests: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu