At exactly one o’clock, the gym doors were opened and a horde of students and visitors rushed in. It was Living History Day. Dressed in our costumes and surrounded by our props, each remarkable American stood by his or her display.

The day went by in a flash and, before I knew it, all three judges were standing next to my table. Mr. Kaplan taped an award onto my display and said, “Peter, you have taught us that it is not just famous Americans who have made significant contributions to our history. You have reminded us that, without the hard work of each and every American, our great country would not be what it is today.”

Here’s how I introduced my remarkable American.

“My name is Peter Chen and I was born in 1845 in a small village in northern China. Despite my parents’ pleas, I decided to leave China and seek my freedom in a new and different place. I had no money, so the only way I could get to America was to sign a contract to work for four years in exchange for wages and free passage on a ship.

“After a long, hard voyage, we came ashore in San Francisco, California. The year was 1865. I didn’t speak one word of English. I was immediately transported into the countryside, where I was given a sledgehammer and told to get to work. Mile by mile, driving spike after spike into the steel rails, I helped build the first transcontinental railroad in the United States. I hammered my way into American history.

“The history of our country was changed forever by the sweat and toil of laborers like me. When you talk about our country’s history, please, please, don’t forget people like us.

“By the way, the thoughtful, intelligent boy in your class with a name exactly like mine is my great-great-grandson.”