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BAR ASSOCIATIONS • Nov. 23, 2007

## New President Helps Fill Void for Asian-American Lawyers

By Rebecca U. Cho

Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - Soon after Helen B. Kim left a budding career as a classically trained pianist to become a litigator in New York in the 1980s, she came face to face with a hard truth: She did not see any Asian-American female litigation partners at the big New York law firms.

"There was a lack of role models or mentors at that time," Kim said.

She found those mentors in the handful of Asian-American bar associations that existed at the time.

Now Kim, 45, a securities and commercial litigation partner in Baker Hostetler's Los Angeles office, has become the new president of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, one of the groups whose members helped fill the void she experienced as a young lawyer.

As the national voice for 40,000 lawyers and judges and 53 affiliate groups, the association gives Kim the opportunity to help strengthen professional alliances between members and increase the profile of Asian-American attorneys.

The group counts as members Cardinal Health general counsel Ivan Fong, Dell general counsel Lawrence Tu and former U.S. attorney Carol Lam, now legal counsel for Qualcomm.

Since Kim first entered the legal profession, Asian-Americans have become the fastest-growing minority group in the legal profession, according to data from the American Bar Association. From school years beginning in 1996 to 2006, the number of Asian-American law-school enrollees grew from 8,500 to 11,000. In the same period, African-American enrollment saw little to no growth, at 9,500, and Mexican-American enrollment hovered at 2,400.

In turn, the association has seen a hike in support and interest in recent years. In 2004, the association's annual convention drew 500 people. In 2007, that number more than doubled to 1,200.

The bulk of the group's sponsors are law firms, with some of the most generous donations coming from Chicago's Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione, New York-based Dewey & LeBoeuf and Chicago-based Seyfarth Shaw. Corporate sponsors include Wal-Mart and Anheuser-Busch.

Trial lawyer Brian Sun, a partner at Jones Day in Los Angeles, was the association's president from 1992 to 1993 and one of the founding members.

"Our physical presence is being felt, as well as the advancing of civil rights," Sun said about the association's growth.

He said the increasing number of Asian-Americans entering law and positions of authority in legal institutions are helping fuel the growth.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the association organized groups of lawyers to provide legal and language communications aid to the Vietnamese communities affected by the disaster. The group also provides language access to the courts for non-English-speaking Asian communities.

Les Jin, the group's executive director, said Kim has proved to be an exceptionally hard worker in the organization.

"She always dives into what her responsibilities are with a great deal of passion and enthusiasm," Jin said. "She's very committed to the organization, to its values and ideals."

Kim, who became president last weekend, said she hopes to improve communication between affiliate groups and lawyers through a more accurate and accessible database management system.

She also said she wanted to raise representation and involvement of South Asian and Southeast Asian American lawyers.

"After focusing on the growth of NAPABA's infrastructure for the past few years, we now want to increase the delivery of services to our individual and affiliate members," Kim said.

She is the first Korean-American female to take over the presidency since the association formed in 1988. She also serves as the second vice president of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles. Kim is the co-editor of the Securities Litigation Journal, published by the American Bar Association.

She became a member in 1997, during which she served as president of the Korean American Lawyers' Association of Greater New York. She joined the board in 2001 and worked her way up the executive committee from secretary, to vice president of membership, and then vice president of finance and development.

Kim, a native of Los Angeles, received her master's degree in classical piano performance from The Juilliard School in 1984. Seeking greater autonomy in her professional life, she switched to law and graduated from Yale Law School in 1987. She worked as a partner in Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal's New York office before returning to Los Angeles in 1999.

She worked at Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson in Los Angeles as a partner, moving to Baker Hostetler in 2004 shortly before Fried Frank closed its Los Angeles doors.

Becoming involved in the legal community was an important way to meet colleagues when she first moved to Los Angeles, Kim said.

"I really wanted to get immersed in the legal community and didn't really know people in the legal community," Kim said. "I joined WLALA and formed a lot of friendships."

Kim also serves on the board of the Korean American Coalition of Los Angeles, a nonprofit advocacy organization.

She has kept up her interest in classical music, serving as a board member of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. Her two children study music at The Colburn School in downtown Los Angeles.

"I feel blessed I had other opportunities, but I haven't abandoned music at all," Kim said.

Local affiliates of the Asian-Pacific American lawyers' group include the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Los Angeles County, Orange County Asian American Bar Association, the Japanese American Bar Association of the Greater Los Angeles and the Korean American Bar Association of Southern California.

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