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Scholar Program for Future Asian-American Lawyers Expands

MEGAN SPICER, The Connecticut Law Tribune

December 11, 2015

Jean Lee didn't anticipate the Don H. Liu Scholars Program to be as successful as it was coming out of its first year, but now heading into its sophomore year, the program has been extended and a \$15,000 scholarship will now be offered to three budding Asian-American law students, not just two.

The scholars program, offered through the Asian American Bar Association of New York, was created after some former presidents of the AABANY were discussing the retention of minorities and women in the legal industry, said Lee, a former AABANY president.

"That sparked the idea for the scholarship," said Lee, who is also vice president and assistant general counsel at JPMorgan Chase & Co.

Michael Huang, the immediate past president, suggested naming the scholarship after a Asian-American lawyer who had made an impact, and it became clear that Liu, general counsel for Norwalk-based Xerox Corp., was the right choice.

"He has the most number of mentees that we know of," Lee said. "And he gives an enormous amount of free time to a lot of us, not just in the northeast, but also to the national convention."

That was the start of a program that would "develop the pipeline" for the next Asian-American successors in law. "We are focused on students who are going to be partners at major law firms and general counsel." Initially, the scholarship was offered only to students at law schools in the metropolitan area, about a dozen or so, Lee said. But since the success of the first year, it has expanded to seven states and Washington, D.C., and to more than 20 schools.

"We weren't expecting to do this so soon," Lee said. "We were going to wait five years to expand."

But it's been because of Liu that the scholarship has grown, Lee said. The scholarship is offered to Asian-American law students who are the first in their families to go to law school.

Liu, who was born in Seoul, Korea, and immigrated to the United States in 1972, believes diversity is important to firms and corporations, which is in line with the goals of the scholars program. Liu, who is a member of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, and the Asian American Diversity Advisory Counsel for Comcast Corp., could not be reached for comment.

"It dawned on me that being a minority wasn't necessarily a negative," Liu said in a 2013 interview with the American Bar Association. "The firm was starting to see diversity as a good thing. But a badly implemented affirmative action program creates the misimpression that people made it because they are a minority and not because of merit. It is incumbent upon firm leaders to make sure that wrong perceptions do not exist. A diversity program that exists to bring in diverse people only for color sends the wrong message. It is up to the leadership to make clear that that is not what the diversity program is for. The leadership has to make clear that the standards have not been lowered, that the real purpose of the diversity program is to make sure that the law firm reflects the real world."

He serves as general counsel, secretary and corporate senior vice president of Xerox, a position he has held since 2007.

Liu has been instrumental in turning AABANY from a fairly humble but decently sized organization into one that is recognized across the country and has surpassed a lot of expectations, Lee said. The organization provides social and education opportunities for its members, as well as "innovating and mentoring programming." It was during one summer networking event that Keli Huang, now a second-year law student at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University, learned of the scholarship. Huang was one of the scholarship's first two recipients last year.

Huang attended an event the summer before her first year of law school and knew she had to be selected for the scholarship, which was announced that year.

"First in the family to go to law school and in addition, I would be provided \$10,000 and mentoring?" Huang said. "I thought I absolutely had to get this." Lee said the selection committee, which Liu was a part of, unanimously chose Huang and Michelle Li, a second-year law student at New York University School of Law.

Huang said the mentorship program provided through the scholarship has been incredible. She has worked one-on-one with Liu in preparation for job interviews.

"My mentors were always there to remind me that this is my path," Huang said. "The support has been incredible." Liu and Huang speak every few weeks and she said he has made himself available on weekends to conduct mock interviews with Huang. She said there is a stark difference in being able to work with someone who is active in the field versus working with a career counselor at the school because Liu is able to directly provide real-world guidance.

"He's incredible," Huang said.

There is an effort on behalf of the Asian-American lawyers in high- or midlevel corporate America to break the "bamboo ceiling," Lee said. "The goal is to have 20 Asian Pacific American lawyers in Fortune 500 companies by 2020."

To achieve that, she said, there must be an effort made in the law schools.

Within two years, the scholars program, which is now an independent nonprofit, has raised more than \$300,000 for the scholarship, Lee said. Along with the financial assistance and mentorship opportunities, scholarship recipients are also provided help in obtaining summer jobs. Huang was hired to work at Kirkland & Ellis as a summer associate in 2016 and Li was hired at Cravath, Swaine & Moore, also as a summer associate. Both are first-generation immigrants from China and are committed to working in a private practice on graduating from law school.

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