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WASHINGTON LAWYER

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA BAR MAGAZINE

JUNE/JULY 2018

THE PRO BONO EFFECT

Theodore A. Howard
Works to Narrow
the Justice Gap

ONE YEAR LATER

A Look at the
Re-Envisioned
D.C. Bar
Communities

Meet Esther H. Lim

47th President of the D.C. Bar

DCBAR.org

New Beginnings, Stronger Commitment to Access to Justice

This year ushers in new beginnings for our organization. We are the largest unified bar in the country, with 107,000 members in all 50 states and in more than 80 countries. We are the proud owner of a stunning, new 100,000-square-foot building at 901 4th Street NW. We also celebrate the 40th anniversary of the nationally recognized D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, which makes a difference in the lives of 17,000 clients annually.

As we mark these new beginnings and a milestone anniversary, we reaffirm our commitments to promote access to justice through pro bono representation, to foster mentoring, and to increase diversity in the legal profession — ideals that our past presidents and our Bar have steadfastly championed.

In the summer of 1984, a year after I immigrated to this country, this Bar welcomed its 13th — and first female — president, Marna S. Tucker. She devoted her first president's page to "The Bar's Role in Serving the Public and Its Members," urging our members to "serve the public better by discharging our professional and moral obligation to the community."

In the summer of 1995, when I took the bar exam, this Bar's 24th president, Robert N. Weiner, wrote in his first president's page: "An architect needs a blueprint. A writer needs an outline. And a D.C. Bar President needs an agenda . . ." He spoke eloquently of "helping those most in need" and advocated that the "local community should be our focus."

In the summer of 2006, when I was on the Bar's Board of Governors, I served under our 35th president, James J. Sandman, who in his first president's column poignantly underscored the importance of "pro bono activities and mentoring programs" and the need to "improve the diversity of our profession." His goal was "to grow more John Pickerings," whom he called "a legend" and "a natural leader."

In the summer of 2012, when I was serving as the founding managing partner of Finnegan's first office in China, our Bar's 41st president, the late Tom Williamson, wrote passionately about the "importance of renewing and expanding the Bar's commitment to promoting and supporting access to justice for the District's most needy and vulnerable residents."

Now, as I pen my first president's column in the summer of 2018 to become our Bar's 47th president, the title of Williamson's first column echoes: "While Leaders Change, Bar Priorities Do Not." Embarking on new beginnings at the Bar's new home in Mount Vernon Triangle, I reaffirm these stirring commitments of the past. As lawyers, as a bar, and as a profession, we must harness our strength and gather our voices to advance access to justice through pro bono work, serve our members and our communities, and grow more John (and "Johnna") Pickerings through mentoring and diversity efforts.

It has been a pleasure working with, and learning from, the outstanding Patrick McGlone, who exemplified utmost professionalism and leadership. I dedicate this column to all past presidents of the D.C. Bar and the many men and women who have led our Bar and bettered our communities, and to the countless future leaders yet to come.

I am honored to serve this distinguished Bar and look forward to working with you in the upcoming year.

Esther Lim



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Photo: Patrice Gilbert Photography

A Conversation With
ESTHER H. LIM
47th President of the D.C. Bar

Interview by Tracy Schorn



Esther H. Lim was sworn in as the 47th president of the D.C. Bar at the Celebration of Leadership on June 12, 2018. Lim is a partner at Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner, LLP with more than 20 years of experience in patent litigation, prosecution, and counseling.

Lim sat down with *Washington Lawyer* to share her vision for the Bar, how her incredible life story — coming to the United States as a 12-year-old, non-English-speaking Korean immigrant — has influenced her passion for access to justice, her adventures working in China to open Finnegan's Shanghai office, and what she does for fun. Welcome, Esther!

You once wrote a moving account of your maternal grandmother who survived the Korean War and the concept of *jung* — compassion. You wrote: "The history, the heritage, and the story of my family have indelibly shaped me as a person, as a mother, and as a lawyer." Can you tell us how this *jung* legacy has influenced your service as a legal professional?

No matter who we are and where we come from, we belong to a community. Support by and for that community wields significant impact in times of and in places with great need.

My grandmother survived a tragic war that tore apart a nation and claimed countless lives. In many ways, my grandmother embodies the concept of *jung* — deep compassion and generosity — as she persevered through unspeakable atrocities with her two young daughters, ages eight and five, after losing her husband and her home in the war. With almost nothing, communities pulled together to care for one another. My grandmother, a war survivor with a lifelong principle of hard work, perseverance, and frugality, scraped together every penny to help those around her.

Only two generations later, as I reflect on my life with my two young daughters, ages nine and five, I am filled with a sense of profound gratitude and awe at the vast differences between the world that my grandmother endured and the one I encountered.

That perspective of the history, the heritage, and the story of my own family shapes my views on how lawyers can and should help those in need, especially in the communities where we work or live. As lawyers, we have the ability and the responsibility to support and raise up our communities.

My amazing grandmother, Ok Yun Kim (1918–2018), graced this earth and blessed our lives. My family and I are enormously proud of her and deeply grateful to have celebrated the 100th year of her remarkable life while she enjoyed good health, a beautiful smile, and a very sharp wit. She will always be adored, admired, and cherished by us.



*Lim's grandmother,
Ok Yun Kim, circa 1968.*



Lim (second from left) and her family in the 1970s.

“That perspective of the history, the heritage, and the story of my own family shapes my views on how lawyers can and should help those in need, especially in the communities where we work or live.”

You immigrated to the United States at 12. Can you tell us a bit about that experience and your upbringing?

Moving halfway around the world to America without speaking a word of English makes you deaf-mute overnight. You get to see the world through a completely different lens in many ways — linguistically, socially, culturally, and racially. It was a true test of sink-or-swim, and I learned to adapt to the new environment quickly while helping my family make ends meet.

Four days after moving to the United States, I started seventh grade as the only Asian student at my public school. During those initial days of fear, shock, and uncertainty, my first angel in America appeared in my life, a teacher named Mrs. Jean Herbert. While she taught science class, she would squeeze in time to teach me English with a picture book she bought for me. There, I learned my first English words: “children,” “playground,” and others.

Just before summer break, she wrote her name and phone number in that picture book. I couldn’t read it, but I brought it home to my dad who knew English. (He was self-taught.) Concerned, Mrs. Herbert wanted to make sure that I had a way to learn English over the summer. Upon learning that my family had no means to take English lessons, Mrs. Herbert found herself agreeing to teach me, my three siblings, and my mother over that summer (and in the summers that followed) around the dining room table in her sweet home. To this day, my siblings and I would remember with fondness Mrs. Herbert allowing us to reach into her cookie jar after every lesson.

Mrs. Herbert was never paid a penny. Her kindness to help a frightened immigrant girl and her family during a time of great need was priceless. I am forever grateful for the difference she made in my and my family’s life. I have had the good fortune of having many amazing angels who blessed my life as teachers, mentors, and supporters. They have allowed me to reach for the stars in this remarkable country where impossible dreams are possible.

I have the greatest respect for teachers who shape minds and touch hearts. That is in part what motivates me to teach as an adjunct professor at Howard University School of Law. I have been teaching there since 2003 and have met tremendously talented and caring students who want to use the law to make a difference. And I hope to make a difference in their lives, however small.

You have a background in mathematics and computer science. You’re sort of a double threat. When did you become interested in pursuing a law career?

Even as I struggled to learn English, I always excelled at math and understood numbers. There was a certain beauty in problem solving, logic, and precision. From my first exposure to computers in high school, I loved programming — enabling an otherwise dumb machine to solve problems. It was fun and stimulating.

My curiosity about the law is rooted in my experience growing up as an immigrant and my interest in technology. As a young immigrant, I came to learn through adversity encountered by my family that people are helpless and powerless without access to and protection of the law. That, combined with my interest in computers and math in college, naturally led me to the field of intellectual property law.

Your practice at Finnegan focuses on intellectual property law for global companies. What interests you most about that area of law?

Learning is the best part of this career. As a patent litigator, you learn cutting-edge technology from computers to pharmaceuticals. Technology is ever-changing and impacts every aspect of our lives — how we communicate, learn, and work. The law is also evolving to catch up to technology and changing social standards and values. Being a part of that change, particularly in an increasingly global legal market, is fascinating.

You lived in China and speak Mandarin.

From 2008 to 2014, I lived in Shanghai, opening and managing Finnegan’s first office in China. When the chair of the firm approached me about serving as a founding managing partner, my first question was, “Do you know I’m not Chinese?” After a long reflection and soul searching, my husband and I made the big move. It was a great adventure professionally and personally, and, somehow, I eventually conquered that impossible language.

I think it’s important to be open to different cultures and new experiences. My daughters spent their formative years in China and are growing up trilingual. Recently, they’ve been learning Spanish in school. We try hard to retain their

language abilities. We speak Korean and Chinese at home, and they go to weekend language schools. It's a lot, and it gets confusing or comical with multiple languages being spoken in the home at any given time. But we're trying to raise them to be world citizens and appreciate their heritage.

How did you first get involved with the D.C. Bar?

I have been very active with bar associations, including serving as president of the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of D.C. I also have had leadership roles with the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, the American Bar Association, and the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, among others. Perhaps due to my active bar involvement, I was invited to serve on a committee of the D.C. Bar in 2002 and, thereafter, I served on the D.C. Bar Board of Governors.

Can you tell us about your pro bono work? Does any particular client story stand out?

Over the years, I have worked on a number of pro bono matters, including veterans' appeals, landlord-tenant cases, and special education matters.

A recent case that stands out is a case in which we represented a single mother with five kids suffering various health issues and learning disabilities. We helped her secure a newly renovated apartment free of serious mold, water leaks, and

infestation issues that had been ongoing for over a year. The landlord refused to fix the apartment to make it habitable and safe, and threatened to relocate the family to crime-heavy neighborhoods, with schools lacking support for learning disabilities. Through litigation and negotiation, the client and her family were able to move out of the uninhabitable basement apartment and into a newly renovated second-floor apartment in the same school district. Making a difference in such a tangible way was enormously rewarding.

It is a powerful experience being in landlord-tenant court. You see all these unrepresented people about to lose their homes. All they know is that they have a big problem. It makes whatever we're going through seem trivial — these people have so little and endure so much day in and day out.

My first time in D.C. Superior Court, amid the chaos of a myriad of cases, distressed D.C. residents, and lawyers, I recall vividly witnessing Judge Ramsey Johnson handling each case called with compassion, respect, and even humor. It gave me tremendous pride to be a part of D.C.'s legal community and made me grateful for our incredibly caring judiciary. Because regardless of how many hundreds and thousands of landlord-tenant cases may have come before the court, and how many thousands more will follow, on that particular morning for that particular pro se litigant, that is the only case that mattered and could make an immediate and significant difference in their lives.

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Lim's daughters Hana (front) and Nora.

“We hear so much about random acts of violence, but random acts of kindness are truly transformative. So many unsung heroes out there touch lives every day through pro bono advocacy and legal clinics.”

I also enjoy volunteering at the walk-in legal clinics, including the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center's Advice & Referral Clinic on Saturday mornings. When you see the elderly with walkers lining up an hour before the clinic opens at Bread for the City, it demonstrates how much need exists in our community and how much people depend on pro bono attorney volunteers to help with critical issues in their lives.

We hear so much about random acts of violence, but random acts of kindness are truly transformative. So many unsung heroes out there touch lives every day through pro bono advocacy and legal clinics. I am so proud to be with a firm that champions pro bono efforts. For pro bono work in 2017, 49 Finnegan attorneys qualified for the D.C. Courts' Capital Pro Bono Honor Roll. That is an awesome accomplishment.

What do you plan to emphasize during your tenure as D.C. Bar president?

It is so exciting to think about the Bar's future in its stunning new home. I will strive to continue the Bar's legacy and impact by ensuring that the Bar (1) stays relevant in a modern legal environment through physical and technology infrastructure to enhance membership value and to engage members, (2) stays

connected to the community through volunteerism and pro bono representation of those in need, and (3) stays committed to increasing diversity in the legal profession through outreach and mentoring.

How do you unwind? What's Esther Lim like at home?

We're into reading together as a family. Our home library is packed with Korean, Chinese, and English books. My husband reads the Berenstain Bears to the girls in Chinese! That's a favorite. My kids' favorite Korean books are the Pucca series, infused with world exploration, culture, and mystery.

I love nature and hiking. I feel centered when I'm in the woods. One of my favorite memories is doing yoga with my girls on an enormous rock in the middle of a beautiful river at Yosemite National Park. I have been exposing my daughters to hiking from early on. Now, my five-year-old can blaze through a whole trail without assistance. And she dreams of being an astronaut so she can go to the moon to study rocks, or a lawyer so she can "help people." My nine-year-old is a Girl Scout and is already helping people through community service and fundraisers.