

NCVAA—CREATING A VOICE FOR VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN ATTORNEYS

VIETNAMESE IMMIGRANTS BEGAN ARRIVING IN THE UNITED STATES IN LARGE NUMBERS NEARLY 40 YEARS AGO, RIGHT AFTER THE FALL OF SAIGON. MANY OF THEM SETTLED IN PLACES LIKE CALIFORNIA, LOUISIANA, TEXAS AND MICHIGAN, WORKING AS SHRIMPERS, FISHERMEN AND SMALL MERCHANTS.

Now as the community comes of age, more young Americans of Vietnamese descent are going to college and moving into professions, including law.

Estimates of Vietnamese-Americans working in the legal field range from 1,000 to 2,000, but anecdotal evidence suggests the numbers are rising. In the last decade or so, several Vietnamese-American lawyers groups have popped up around the country; among them, the Vietnamese-American

Bar Associations of the Greater Washington D.C. area and of Northern California. About nine years ago, these groups came together to form an umbrella organization known

as the National Conference of Vietnamese-American Attorneys (NCVAA). The organization formally incorporated as a bar in 2010.

Though there are several Asian-American legal groups, NCVAA is America's first national Vietnamese-American bar association. NCVAA was formed when some young Vietnamese-American lawyers who belonged to other local and regional associations of Vietnamese-American lawyers and often ran into each other at various law conferences decided to form their own national group as a way to connect and perhaps even socialize but, most importantly, create a national voice like some of the other bar associations formed along ethnic lines, says president Nguyen Vu, a Washington D.C.-based corporate attorney.

Kim Nguyen, a senior associate at an Orlando, Fla., law firm who is also NCVAA vice president, says a large number of people in the community still don't speak English, particularly those from her parents' generation. Many of them are mystified or intimidated by the workings of the law and some would prefer to deal only with an attorney who speaks their language.

"It's nice to build a network," says Nguyen. "So if they have a need for an attorney, there's someone they can reach out to. With my last name, I get a lot of calls from people looking for a Vietnamese attorney. This morning I got a call from someone. I had to speak Vietnamese to her. She was looking for an attorney who speaks Vietnamese, so I referred her to someone in Ohio."

NCVAA often recruits Vietnamese-American under-

graduates to help out at its signature event, its annual national conference, as part of an effort to expose them to attorneys and the legal profession. In addition to networking opportunities, the conference

features professional development workshops. Sometimes the organization honors high-profile jurist at the conference. Past honorees include Jacqueline Nguyen, a judge on the ninth circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals. Nguyen, who immigrated to the States as a 10-year-old, is said to be the first Vietnamese-American woman to serve as a judge.

Many Vietnamese immigrant parents know little about the legal profession and are likely to steer their children toward engineering, medicine and pharmacy—traditional middle-class occupations in the old country, Vu says.

"A lot of them don't know they can study law with an engineering degree and become patent attorneys," he adds. "We let them know there are other avenues out there."

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Most of NCVAA's pipeline development work takes place at the local level under the auspices of some of the member groups. For instance, the Washington, D.C. group regularly meets with young people and takes questions about the practice of law.

Each year, the Vietnamese-American Bar Association of Northern California (VABANC) awards a fellowship to a freshly minted attorney interested in practicing public interest law, specifically on issues and cases of interest in the Vietnamese-American community. The non-renewable, one-year fellowship is for attorneys of Vietnamese descent or any attorney working on issues affecting the Vietnamese community. The attorney works independently with the aid of this stipend. This year the award was raised to \$50,000, up from the \$35,000 given annually for the past three years. Much of the fellowship is funded with a recurring grant; the rest of the money comes from donations from other attorneys.

"It's something we're very proud of," says Christine Pham, an area attorney who is the incoming president of the Vietnamese American Bar Association of Northern California Law Foundation, the charitable arm of the group which awards the fellowship. "We are one of the few minority bars that has a public interest fellowship. The goal is to provide opportunities for attorneys who work with the Vietnamese-American community."

The fellowship is just one of the high-profile programs offered by the Northern California group. For several years, VABANC has teamed up with the Santa Clara University law school and the Alameda County Bar to provide a monthly legal clinic in English and Vietnamese in Oakland and San Jose, according to Pham.

"We vet every appointment so that they are meeting with someone who can answer their questions," says Pham, a Michigan native born to immigrant parents. "It takes a lot of work but we find that it works better so we can assign them with the right volunteer attorneys."

She notes that a large number of Vietnamese immigrants came here as refugees and still grapple with a

number of issues, including language proficiency.

"Many former political prisoners [who came] here had low rates of education, high rates of poverty and suffered from trauma," she says. Compared to most of the other Asian-American groups, members of the Vietnamese community tend to have lower rates of income and are less likely to go to college, she says. "We want to be able to (help) on issues where they can't afford attorneys—like housing, family law and immigration."

NCVAA officials say that the importance of this kind of help was demonstrated in a couple of high-profile instances in the last decade. One was in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the other was after the BP oil spill in the Gulf in 2010. Both disasters had a devastating impact on the livelihoods of Vietnamese-American fishermen and shrimpers. Several attorneys of Vietnamese descent stepped up to provide assistance.

"A lot of Vietnamese attorneys mobilized and were able to come out and act as a conduit between the government and the people," says Nguyen. "One attorney went to Mississippi and worked full time to assist the Vietnamese fishermen. He translated and explained (legal and compensation issues) to the community."

These collective and individual endeavors, she says, helped affirm one of NCVAA's missions and that of its affiliates of serving as a valuable resource to the Vietnamese-American community. **D&B**



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