A Work of Welcome: Journey of Success in Immigration Law Runs Through UB Law School

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A WORK OF WELCOME

Journey of success in immigration law runs through UB Law School

Margaret W. Wong ’76 is running down the carpeted hall of her Cleveland law office. She is late for an appointment with a visitor, carefully shoehorned into a schedule that includes a full slate of clients, the duties of managing partner, and answering the call when dozens of community interests want her time and her energy.

She did not build a small empire of immigration law by taking it easy. The journey of more than two decades has taken her to a good place. Margaret W. Wong & Associates, with six lawyers and 25 paralegals and other support staff, has become a Midwestern powerhouse in immigration, with offices in Cleveland, Columbus and Detroit. Her clients are both individuals and families seeking green cards, work visas and residency, and businesses looking to solve the legal problems of their foreign-born workers. Wong’s firm includes staffers who speak a United Nations of languages – Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi, Albanian, Tagalog, Russian, Spanish, French and German. In the waiting room, a world map is studed with pushpins indicating the clients’ country of origin.

“It takes a lot of blood, sweat and tears, this practice,” Wong says when she finally reaches her conference room, lined with plaques and other honors. “It is very emotional. Every time I read the paper, I tie it into my practice.”

When she first came to Cleveland, the field was wide open. “The big firms did not do immigration law back then,” Wong says. “It was too much trouble, or they did not have the ability to work with different cultures. In the 1970s, ’80s, ’90s, we dominated the market. Now you have a lot of young lawyers and immigration consultants, so there is a lot more competition.”

But Wong & Associates marches on, doing what the firm does best – getting involved in their clients’ lives, taking their problems personally, and trying to make it all better. A client who needs a work permit, for example – “If I miss one day, they miss a day of work,” Wong says. “Speed is important.” The firm advertises in local ethnic newspapers, but word-of-mouth is the best recommendation.

And expectations run high. “This is a hard practice,” Wong says. “People cry. They do not leave the office. Somebody is in jail, his family asks me, ‘Will he be out in a week?’ I say, ‘I will do my best.’ Then they tell people, ‘Ms. Wong says he will be out in a week.’ ”

It is a long way from her beginnings in Hong Kong, where she was born after her parents fled there following the Communist takeover of China. She left Hong Kong in the late 1960s and became an immigrant herself, coming to the United States on a student visa along with her younger sister Cecilia. Between them they had four suitcases and $165. Wong worked her way through college in Iowa and then Illinois as a waitress, and spent summers doing hotel work in New York’s Catskills resorts.

A full scholarship to UB Law School, she says, made the dream possible. She is thanking the Law School for the opportunity it gave her by joining the Dean’s Advisory Committee and making a major gift of $100,000.

She says that the casual racism of
an earlier time never troubled her in Buffalo. "They were all very welcoming and nice," Wong says. "I never felt anything but the same as the other kids. UB never treated us differently. I forgot I was Chinese for a while!"

She had not yet become a U.S. citizen and was not sure she could even take the bar exam. Professor Janet Lindgren, she says, did the research and assured her that non-citizens could be admitted to practice.

She passed the bar, but could not find a job in law. She worked a temporary position as a legal and financial officer for the City of Buffalo, then moved to Cleveland to become a management trainee at a bank there. After a brief stint at a Cleveland law firm, she struck out on her own, with a $25 desk and not even a secretary. She called everyone she knew and handed out her business card on buses. Slowly the business built up, to the point a few years ago when Wong moved it into a beautiful new building on downtown Chester Street and christened it the MWW Center. "After counseling and advising thousands of immigrants all these years and obtaining permanent residency and fighting deportation, we have developed a comfortable rhythm to this practice," she wrote in a holiday letter.

Now Wong finds herself mentoring the children of clients, nudging them to stay in school and get into college, even tossing a little tuition money their way here and there. She has even hired some of them at the firm, building on their language skills and their ties to the immigrant community. She also created an internship program in which children from affluent Chinese families she knows spend a summer at the law firm; the goal is for them to see that others have it a lot harder in life.

That sense of family grows from the closeness Wong has cultivated within her own family. She and her husband, pharmacist Kam Chan, have two children, both currently in college. Her mother, Alice Kuan, lives in Cleveland; Margaret’s siblings Cecilia, Rose and George also are in town. Every Wednesday night they all get together at Wong’s Shaker Heights home – it is the only day she leaves work early – for dinner, wine and conversation long into the night. Her nephew Joseph Fungsang once wrote of those dinners in the company of his eight cousins: “One finds him- or herself in the context of the group and in the process develops as an individual. And being part of the greater whole – there is no better feeling.”

Wong is legendary for her work ethic; she lists her hobbies as “reading, writing, working and swimming.” She begins her day with an early-morning swim at home and is at her desk by 6 a.m. Most workdays are 12 hours long; on the weekends she reads legal journals and research. She has recently taken up knitting – “I take it to functions like dinners, so at least I do not waste time” – and the precise art of Chinese calligraphy. “I am learning how to get my mind more creative,” Wong says. “In order to become the best of the best in whatever field, the mind has to be flexible.”

Even in her diversions, though, she cannot see herself slowing down. And the next phone call from jail, or from a client under siege by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, is surely not far away.

Life is busy, to be sure. But to see her clients leading productive lives – that is the payoff. “It is nice,” she says. “I can go into any hotel, and they all know Margaret Wong.”