

AAPI Heritage Month: Q&A with Don Liu

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

In celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, John Ho, co-chair of Cozen O'Connor's Asian Attorney Resource Group, spoke with Don Liu, who serves as executive vice president and chief legal and risk officer for Target, about the evolution of Asian American attorneys in the legal profession.

John Ho: Thank you so much, Don, for taking some time to talk with me today in celebration of AAPI Heritage Month. You took your first general counsel role in 1999 to become the only Asian American general counsel in a Fortune 500 company at that time. Since then, you have seen the number of Asian American GCs grow. Do you think it is growing at an appropriate pace? If not, do you have any thoughts on ways we can tackle this issue?

Don Liu: The number of Asian American GCs has grown exponentially since 1999, when I was the only Asian American GC in the Fortune 500. The number now stands around 35, the last time I checked. The percentage growth that number represents is significant.

The tremendous growth in that number came from a combination of different factors. First, there is simply a lot of talent among Asian American lawyers. Many are capable of running large law departments – and I know personally many future Fortune 500 GCs who will soon get that opportunity. Second, NAPABA has been instrumental in identifying, recruiting, and, most importantly, preparing these talented lawyers to be ready for GC roles.

At the National Asian-Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA), we present panels, workshops, and mentoring sessions tailored to support the professional and personal growth of talented Asian American lawyers. NAPABA complements these sessions with the In-House Counsel Summit, which is typically held during the summer. At the Summit, we focus on developing soft skills that are essential to the leadership role of the General Counsel.

John Ho: I have personally witnessed how generous you have been with your time at NAPABA. Are there any particular resources and/or groups that you would recommend to Asian American attorneys who want to get more involved in AAPI legal issues?

Don Liu: I strongly recommend that Asian American lawyers become active with NAPABA and its local chapter. I began my journey with the Pennsylvania chapter of NAPABA both for professional and social reasons, finding some of my closest friends, mentors, and advisors along the way. I don't know anyone who attends their first national NAPABA conference and does not immediately fall in love with it. And, for those unable to travel to the national conference, I recommend getting involved with a local chapter of NAPABA. I also recommend getting involved with civil rights organizations like Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (the board of which I was a member for ten years) or Asian Americans Advancing Justice, which are civil rights organizations that do such good work for the Asian American community.

John Ho: Great advice; Don and I couldn't agree more with getting involved in NAPABA, and like you, I have met so many people I now call great friends. Could you share with the Cozen community an Asian tradition from your family or heritage?

Don Liu: My parents taught me the importance of work ethic and sacrifice for the family through their example. As first-generation immigrants, my parents worked day and night – literally. They once owned a restaurant on 12th and Market Streets in Philly, which was open 24/7. (Fun fact: In the movie Rocky II, Sylvester Stallone runs right by my parents' restaurant!).

My mother worked a 12-hour shift during the day, and my father worked the 12-hour shift at night. The sacrifices they made for our family drove me professionally and personally. I made sure that their sacrifices were not in vain. I am grateful for everything my parents did for my siblings and me. We all succeeded in life due in large part to their sacrifices.

And I am also grateful for the example they set for us, which will benefit their extended family for generations to come. I'm sure my family experiences resonate with most Asian American families.

John Ho: Thank you for sharing that, Don. In what ways do you plan to celebrate or pay tribute to Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month?

Don Liu: Do a lot of what I am doing for you – celebrate the successes of Asian Americans and discuss the challenges that face us. We still have a long way to go, but we have a lot to be proud of!

John Ho: On behalf of the Cozen O'Connor community, thank you again, Don. We really appreciate your time and insight, and I look forward to seeing you at the next NAPABA conference.

We hope you will continue to follow Cozen O'Connor on LinkedIn throughout the month of May for our continued celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.