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Record growth for Chinese American Bar Association

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When Jeffrey J.H. Koh joined the Chinese American Bar Association of Greater Chicago in February 2014, the organization had a paper list of about 50 members, he said.

Koh, now group president, said the organization currently has 400 members on its e-mail list and is laying down a mentorship program that could create a pipeline of members for years.

As some other bar associations across the nation have struggled to maintain their membership numbers for the past few years, CABA has grown exponentially. Members credit the recent growth to modernizing the bylaws, governance structure, technology and communications plus reaching out to young lawyers.

Gary Zhao, a partner at SmithAmundsen LLC who was president of the CABA when Koh joined, said the organization was not growing when he took over as president in 2012.

"It's been there for a very long time, it's well-known in the Chicago legal community, but it wasn't dynamic," Zhao said.

Zhao said his presidential focuses were networking and professional development, which in turn would help attract and retain members.

"If we develop good lawyers that would become judges, that would become leaders in their own law firm, that are able to grow their own practice, I think they will in turn contribute that time, human resources and maybe financial resources from their own successful law practice back into the Chinese American Bar Association," he said.

With Koh at the helm, the organization has expanded its efforts to volunteer and give back to the Chinese-American community and to mentor young members.

Koh, who grew up in Hong Kong and became interested in the law after volunteering for the pro-democracy Civic Party in high school, has always been big on volunteering.

He clerked at the Delaware Court of Chancery after graduating from the University of Michigan Law School in 2012, spent two months working as a legislative aide at the Hong Kong Legislative Council, then joined Ropes & Gray in Chicago in 2013. He said his new firm encouraged his volunteerism too.

Laura G. Hoey, a Ropes & Gray partner who is on the firm's pro bono committee, said in a statement that pro bono is a hallmark of the firm.

"In Chicago, and firmwide, we are committed to the advancement of people of all backgrounds and helping impoverished individuals, underserved communities, nonprofits and small businesses," she said.

Koh said the chance to volunteer for a larger community than he had in Delaware was part of what made the move to Chicago exciting. He started by volunteering at the Chicago Volunteer Legal Services' Chinatown Pro Bono Legal Clinic, which meets once a month for four hours.

Koh brought fellow attorneys to volunteer with him and was awarded a Distinguished Service Award of 2015 by the volunteer group.

He said he met CABA board members while volunteering, so he attended the bar's Lunar New Year event.

"They decided that they liked me," Koh said. "They actually offered me a board position the next day."

Zhao said Koh made a "very big impression on me when I first met him" and that Koh was a great social networker. He thought Koh would be able to bring more members.

"I thought at the time we needed to have some fresh energy, fresh blood in the organization," Zhao said.

Koh became secretary shortly thereafter and upgraded the organization from a paper membership list to a MailChimp e-mail list.

As president-elect starting in September 2015, Koh rewrote the organization's bylaws, including a way to conduct electronic balloting.

"What's interesting is they hadn't been modified since Justice Liu was president 20 years ago," Koh said, referring to the late Laura Liu, who was the first Chinese-American woman to be elected judge in Illinois and the first Asian-American person to serve on the Illinois Appellate Court.

He also changed the organization's governance structure. When Koh joined the CABA, some of the same members had been on the board since the organization was founded in 1986.

"They've been on the board for longer than I've been alive," Koh said.

Koh wanted to keep that institutional expertise, but also wanted to bring in new leaders. He created an advisory board with eight members, where senior board members could stay involved, and a general board of 18, which opened spots for young blood.

He said getting more people to join the organization and regularly attend events is "sort of a snowball effect."

He said the CABA tries to host one event a month and has one board meeting a month to plan future events. The CABA Christmas party had 60 attendees and the Lunar New Year party had 80.

Since joining the CABA, Koh joined the Asian American Bar Association in Chicago's board. He said the five Asian-American bar associations — the CABA, the AABA, the Korean Bar Association of Chicago, the South Asian Bar Association of Chicago and the Filipino American Lawyers Association of Chicago — collaborate and co-host events.

Koh is also a member of the American Bar Association and The Chicago Bar Association and involved with the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce. He said he attends as many Chinese-American Chicago organizations' events as possible.

Koh said another thing that differentiates the CABA from other bar associations is the concentration of Chinese people and Chinese-Americans in Chinatown on the South Side and in Little Saigon in Uptown. Koh said the CABA has been teaming up with social services organizations in those areas like the Chinese American Service League and the Chinese Mutual Aid Association to give more back to the community.

“One of my platforms has been to bring the Loop down to Cermak or up to Argyle,” Koh said, referencing the fact that many attorneys’ offices are downtown while Chinatown and Little Saigon are at those respective Red Line CTA stops.

Koh said he got younger members by being connected with the local law schools. He said CABA members have become friends with the president and the social chair of the Asian Law Students Association or the Asian Pacific American Law Students Association at the schools in Chicago and at Notre Dame and Indiana University each year.

He said that creates a pipeline of future CABA members and gives those students a hand figuring out the job market and what community organizations they can get involved in after graduation.

The organization recently paired 60 law students with bar members for a mentoring program.

Zhao is matched with two law students from China at The John Marshall Law School with whom he meets once a quarter for a year.

Zhao himself is a Chinese immigrant and native speaker of Mandarin Chinese. He gives the students tips on the cultural barriers to overcome as well as advice on networking and resume-building.

“I wish I had that program when I was in law school,” he said. “My law school career office was very helpful, but there just wasn’t enough lawyers who immigrated from China who were mentoring.”

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