

## CPCS Honors AAPI Heritage Month

"There are a lot of battles to be fought, so I just hope that the next generation that is coming up does not shy away from that challenge. I hope that they realize and recognize the sacrifices that people have made to put myself and other Asian American leaders in the positions that we are in. I hope we are able not only to leverage that and do greater things for ourselves, but to also make room for the next generation of attorneys who are coming up. They are the ones who will pick up the mantel and continue the fight against injustice."

Asian American Law Journal. Asian American Law Journal, Jeff Adachi, 15 Asian Am. L.J. 225 (2008).

The theme for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month 2023 is "Advancing Leaders Through Opportunity," and in the quote above from the late former San Francisco Public Defender Jeff Adachi<sup>1</sup>, he captured the reality that - for many AAPI community members - encouragement to achieve comes from the advocates, who in prior generations struggled to obtain opportunity, access, and individual rights. Two of our AAPI public defense colleagues, MHL D Managing Director Michelle Yee and PDD-Worcester Trial Counsel Jennifer Coliflores have experiences in line with Jeff's hope and exhortation, as you will see in their journeys to CPCS.

Michelle's family came from Hong Kong to Boston in 1969 to connect with her dad's adoptive father, who settled here in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century after serving during the Second World War. Her family sacrifices, including her father's work in Chinese restaurants, her Mom's work in her grandparent's laundry (and in a sewing factory, a dim sum restaurant, and as a home health aide) supported Michelle and her siblings' academic pursuits. Michelle was also heavily inspired by her mother, who lived with a significant mental disability, which opened her mind not only to the reality of mental illness and the benefits of treatment but to a person's right to autonomy and choice.

Inspired by her world history teacher to consider going into foreign affairs, Michelle was an International Relations major at Brown University. There she gained her passion for community affairs and studied in China. Serving as an Immigration law administrative assistant with the International Institute of Boston, the seed for law study was planted, and she went to the UCLA School of Law. After a short stint in insurance defense, Michelle took time to start her family, and when her third child entered kindergarten, she took on part-time work for Greater Boston Legal Services' Elder Law Unit, and subsequently, worked as a CAFL and MHL D bar advocate, serving clients from 2006-2011. Michelle also served with MHL D's Roxbury Brockton Commitment Unit until 2015

---

<sup>1</sup> (U.C. Hastings '85...I was in the class of '84, and allies with key Hastings Asian Pacific American Law Student Association members, but sadly our paths did not cross. This interview captures Jeff's journey, vision, and commitment to public defense. [https://lawcat.berkeley.edu/search?p=035:\(\(bepress-path\)jaali/vol15/iss1/8\]](https://lawcat.berkeley.edu/search?p=035:((bepress-path)jaali/vol15/iss1/8))

and then moved to roles as Assistant General Counsel with the Department of Developmental Services and the Department of Mental Health, rejoining CPCS in 2022.

Ultimately, Michelle was led by her broader vision for making an impact and her belief that we all have leadership capacity, along with the support and positive encouragement of her mentors, friends, and colleagues. She emphasizes good goal setting, not being afraid to speak up, ignoring the feelings of impostor syndrome, and committing to lifelong learning and public service as keys that have helped her lead.

For Jennifer Coliflores, Trial Attorney in the PDD-Worcester office, leadership and the law are natural outgrowths of her family and her community's commitment to volunteerism and public service, both here in Massachusetts and in the Philippines. These attributes have influenced Jennifer's embrace of her culture and community while inspiring her to take on important leadership roles and use her knowledge to mentor and promote young Filipinos to their own roles as leaders. When her family came to the US, Jennifer saw that they could lean on Filipino family members and friends for help, and her family's commitment to support her and her sibling's educations served to ground her values and commitment to giving back.

At Colby College in Waterville, Maine, Jennifer majored in International Studies. She received distinguished scholarships, including one allowing her to intern in the Philippines, helping promote the country as a tourism destination. On campus, she was a co-founding President of the Colby Filipino Club, along with being a stellar rugby player. At Roger Williams School of Law, Jennifer distinguished herself academically as a Dean's Scholar and took on volunteer leadership roles across varied Student Bar Associations. During both her undergraduate and law school careers, through today, Jennifer has taken on internships and paid roles where she worked among the highest levels of our local, state, and federal governments, including as a Special Assistant to former Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey.

Jennifer joined CPCS in 2011, starting as a 3.03 certified Student Attorney, then growing through work as an Investigator, Staff Attorney, and now Trial Attorney. Along with her trial advocacy, she has honored her commitment to the community and has carried that vision to roles in the legal profession. She is a founding member of the Filipino Lawyers Association, Vice President of the Massachusetts Youth Leadership Foundation, and was recognized as an Outstanding Filipino-American by the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, through the Filipino Young Leaders Program she helps lead.

Recently, Jennifer became CPCS' representative to the Supreme Judicial Court's Lawyer Well-Being Committee. In this role, she draws upon her own experience of being the only AAPI woman in the court, misidentified or asked to repeatedly show that she crossed the bar, which was validated within the 2019 SJC Well-Being Report on Affinity Bar members' experience with bias.

Today, Jennifer remains focused on passing along what she has learned to the next generation, just as Jeff Adachi asserted, encouraging other attorneys to lead, young people to learn and dream, and encouraging respect for public defenders. She stresses the importance of knowing your roots and being proud as essential to this path.

CPCS is fortunate to have Michelle and Jennifer as essential colleagues in the rich tapestry of who we are and what we commit to in honor of justice. They live with respect for who they are and where they come from, as powerful members of the Asian American Pacific Islander community and query what Jeff Adachi might have said in seeing that his words in 2008 hold such meaning nearly decades later from raising this hope and challenge for his community.

Happy AAPI Heritage Month, CPCS, and let us thank Michelle and Jennifer for sharing their stories!

Here are a few more links, including some from Suffolk Law School to help make AAPI Heritage Month rich for us all.

- [Stop AAPI Hate](#) offers a wealth of [resources](#) on legislation, community-based organizations, mental health support, and educational materials, including a [timeline](#) of AAPI history
- GBH is offering a hybrid webinar, ["AAPI Cultural Heritage Month: The Invisible Becoming Visible,"](#) on May 22
- Boston's [Museum of Fine Arts](#) and Salem's [Peabody Essex Museum](#) are both offering Asian-themed exhibitions
- The 2020 PBS documentary series [Asian Americans](#) can be streamed online
- Boston.com offers a list of [additional reading options](#) about Asian American And Pacific Islander Heritage Month