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Profile

Steve Koh

Reaching for the Stars (or at Least the Satellites)

By Joe Bringman

Steve Koh is a living embodiment of the American dream: a partner in Seattle's largest firm, a member of its executive committee and president of the Federal Bar Association of the Western District of Washington. Not bad for a son of political refugees.

Son of Refugees

Although Koh was born in West Seattle and raised in Bellevue, events half a world away, years before he was born, helped shape his life and character. Koh's parents lived in China. Both fled the mainland with their families during the 1949 Revolution - his father to Hong Kong, his mother to Taipei. Both later found their way to Seattle.

Not all family members were so lucky. One of Koh's grandmothers stayed on the mainland, trying to hold on to the family's property. The land was confiscated and she was imprisoned. She was released from captivity only after falling ill, and died shortly thereafter.

With this history, it is no wonder that Koh regards security as the most important gift his father gave him. Koh's father once feared for his own survival, but strove to remove that fear from his children. He counseled that great opportunities were open to them and pressed them to pursue professional degrees.

Go East, Young Man

Koh graduated from the University of Washington in 1989, with a degree in the business/accounting program. Koh's interest in accounting had waned, however; he turned down a job offer from Touche Ross and instead followed the footsteps of a cousin who had attended Yale Law School. This decision was strongly supported by Koh's mother and her family. Her father had been a senator in China before the Revolution. Studying law seemed consistent with his grandfather's legacy.

Although Koh did well enough to get into Yale, he had doubts as to whether he really belonged there. To prove himself, Koh took on numerous activities. He volunteered as a research assistant to Professor Harold Koh (not a relative) and, at Professor Koh's suggestion, interned for U.S. District Judge Jose Cabranes. He joined the Yale Law Journal, serving as articles editor. He managed the Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic, helping to convert that program from a sponsor of symposia to an active provider of legal services for international human rights cases.

After graduation, Koh married and moved with his bride, Barbara, to Washington, D.C., to clerk for Judge Patricia Wald of the D.C. Circuit. The clerkship was an exhilarating intellectual experience. Judge Wald constantly asked penetrating questions that went to the heart of her cases.

Furthermore, because all D.C. Circuit judges work in the same courthouse, Koh had opportunities to do more than prepare bench memos, draft opinions and discuss legal issues with his own judge and her other clerks; he frequently lobbied clerks of other judges over the content of opinions. If the clerkship itself was not sufficiently exciting, Koh's first child, a son, was born during that year.

The Justice Department

Having become parents, Koh and his wife wanted to stay in D.C. after the clerkship. Koh wanted a typically D.C. job - meaning public service - but one that would provide skills later transferable to civil practice. He was accepted into the Honors Program at the Department of Justice (DOJ) and assigned to the Civil Frauds Section of the Civil Division.

Koh recalls the heady experience, as a new lawyer, of having senior lawyers from big firms across the table in negotiations. He participated in a number of successful prosecutions. Most memorable were a fraud claim based upon the failure of landmine devices to work properly and a fraud claim against Seattle-area construction companies that were submitting false certifications about Minority Business Enterprise compliance. More somberly, Koh recalls meeting with a FEMA official who, during the meeting, received a call advising of the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing.

Homeward Bound

After he had put in 2-1/2 years at DOJ, Koh's wife and both their families wanted them back in the Northwest. Koh considered seeking a position with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Seattle, but decided it was an opportune time to try civil practice.

In December 1995, Koh joined the Seattle office of Perkins Coie. Although hired into the Aviation and Product Liability Group, Koh's workload was far more diverse - everything from core products liability work to air-crash litigation to defense of qui tam claims under the federal False Claims Act and class-action consumer protection claims.

Koh has a special fondness for his work defending Boise Cascade against consumer class actions charging the manufacture and sale of defective home siding. After successful resolution of Koh's first siding case, Commercial Litigation Chair Tom Boeder promoted Koh to the lead on Boise Cascade's next siding case, which went all the way to the Illinois Supreme Court, giving Koh his first oral argument to any state supreme court.

Koh already was nervous as he drove with local counsel to the courthouse for oral argument. And that was before they had a flat tire! At that point, Koh had only one thought: how fast could he run? And run Koh did - until a police cruiser picked him up and delivered him to the courthouse steps.

As if Koh's day had not had a sufficiently inauspicious start already, a protest commenced outside the courthouse, hundreds of semi-truck drivers blaring their horns. Koh could not even hear the arguments that were scheduled ahead of his. But, just as his case was called, the ruckus stopped. Koh went on to present the winning argument, justifying the confidence of the senior partner who had turned over the Boise Cascade work to him.

The Boeing Circle

Koh's father worked his entire career as an engineer in Boeing's commercial aircraft programs. Boeing was a source of great security for a family that had experienced tumultuous times before arriving in this country. Koh appreciated Boeing's stabilizing effect on his family and his life as he grew up.

At Perkins, Boeing again has played a big part in his life. His first major case concerned a 757 that plunged into the ocean off the coast of Peru when airline maintenance workers failed to remove tape that they had placed over the plane's airflow ports, causing instruments - including the altimeter - not to function properly.

Koh worked on other air-crash cases as well, but in recent years his efforts for Boeing have had a different focus. He successfully defended Boeing in several cases filed by qui tam plaintiffs under the False Claims Act and in lawsuits by airline passengers who asserted claims for deep-vein thrombosis. He has conducted internal investigations in response to government subpoenas. And he frequently represents Boeing in international arbitrations concerning satellite procurement contracts.

The satellite work takes Koh out of the country two to three times each year, sometimes to Paris or the United Arab Emirates and the like; sometimes to less fashionable locales. The work is unique. The technology is cutting edge and the contracts often are subject to foreign laws (often civil law) and procedures. Lawyers have to be aware of the sensibilities of foreign arbitrators, and the practice is less "in your face" than in the United States. As a side benefit to this work, Koh has gotten up close and

personal with commercial satellites in final production.

Giving Back

Koh is the new president of the Federal Bar Association of the Western District of Washington, following extended service as a committee chair, trustee, treasurer, secretary and vice president, and also serves as a lawyer representative to the Ninth Circuit Judicial Conference. Although Koh does not view himself as a trailblazer, he is the first member of any ethnic minority group to serve as president of the district bar.

Koh has two primary goals for his presidency. First, in response to the prevalence of electronic filing and electronic-discovery issues, and solicitations from Chief Judge Robert Lasnik, Koh has directed a committee to consider revisions to the local rules and to draft a form protective order for use in federal cases. Second, Koh is launching a major effort to expand membership beyond the traditional stalwarts.

Koh contributes to the legal community in other ways as well. He has presented CLE programs on civil fraud, law firm diversity and law firm hiring issues. He has published articles in the Yale Law Journal, the Yale Law and Policy Review and the Wake Forest Law Review.

Outside the legal arena, Koh is a trustee and vice chair of Childhaven, a nonprofit organization that provides therapeutic services and care to abused and neglected infants and preschool children. Koh's involvement with Childhaven began as a collegian, to satisfy a community service requirement. Because he enjoyed reading to and playing with the kids, Koh continued volunteering after the service requirement ended. When Koh returned to Seattle in 1995, he quickly renewed ties to Childhaven.

Koh has made administrative contributions at Perkins since his early days at the firm, primarily on the firm's hiring committee. In 2000, he was appointed committee chair. Koh believes that being asked to serve as hiring chair - even before officially becoming a partner - was a vote of confidence that provided instant recognition among many of his partners and contributed to his appointment to Perkins' executive committee in 2005.

Recognition and Humility

In 2002, Koh was named to the "Best Lawyers Under 40" list of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association and selected to participate in the Leadership Tomorrow program, which seeks to develop effective community leaders in the Puget Sound region. Koh also has been listed as a "Super Lawyer" by Washington Law and Politics.

More than recognition for his legal work, Koh wants to be recognized as a good father and devoted family man. His three children - his son is now 12, and he has two daughters, aged 10 and 4 - lead busy lives, and Koh tries to be part of them as much as he can. Last summer, he took his son to play in a baseball tournament and visit the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. He coaches his older daughter's basketball team and will continue to do so until her skill level passes the point where he can make value-added contributions.

If there is one point Koh wishes to stress, it is that he appreciates all who have taken an interest in his life and his career - his parents, mentors such as Professor Koh and Judge Wald, lawyers at DOJ and Perkins, and Judge Lasnik, among others - who prodded him to strive for excellence and presented him opportunities to flourish. Koh hopes that he has rewarded their faith in him, and that he will continue to do so in the many years that lie ahead.

Joe Bringman is of counsel at Perkins Coie. He is a regular and able contributor to the Bar Bulletin's Profile feature.

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