

Ventura's Asian American Bar Focuses on Bench

By Alexa Hyland
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Westlake Village-based attorney Dien Le opened the California directory of attorneys with a mission: contact everyone with an Asian-sounding last name.

Le's goal was to gather as many Asian-American attorneys as possible in order to launch the first Ventura County Asian American Bar Association.

After an initial push to recruit attorneys, Le formed a committee that later morphed into what is now a 13-member organization, established in February 2005 partly in response to the county's growing Asian-American population. Le served as the group's first president.

Mark Fang, a Camarillo attorney, has since taken the reins, but he keeps Le's original goals in mind.

"[As president], I want to reach out to the Asian-American community," Fang stated simply.

Also topping the association's list of objectives: securing the first Asian-American judge in Ventura County.

"We needed a judge and didn't have an association to push a judge," Le said.

Le said few Asian-Americans have been applying for local judicial appointments, largely because no one has encouraged them to.

Leah M. Gasendo, the organization's treasurer and a senior associate in the Ventura office of Dale, Braden & Hinchcliffe, is among those seeking appointment to the county Superior Court bench. Even



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One goal of the Ventura County Asian American Bar Association is to increase the number of Asian American judges. Leah Gasendo, right, the organization's treasurer, is seeking a judgeship. Mark Fang, left, is president and Dien Le is founder and immediate past president.

if she's not the first Asian-American judge in Ventura County, Gasendo said, someone of Asian descent needs to be on the bench.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Asian-Americans make up 6.3 percent of the population in Ventura County. Gasendo said she wants to represent the county's growing Asian influence.

"Statistically, judges and political representatives fall short of the [Asian] population," Fang said.

In addition, the organization is focused on increasing pro bono work

within the local Asian community.

Fang foresees the association's developing a self-help center, where Asian-Americans can work with lawyers who speak their native tongue. Fang himself is fluent in Mandarin Chinese.

"If lawyers know about us, they will think about sending their clients with language barriers to us," he said.

Fang also wants to "put some new muscles into the organization's pro bono community outreach [committee]."

Helping Asian-Americans navi-

gate the legal system in their native language will help ease the inequity that confronts those who lack access to legal assistance, Fang said.

"They are freshly immigrated and swallow their pain and pride," he said of those he has seen muddle through the legal system.

Through its scholarship program, the association hopes to encourage law students, particularly Asian-Americans, to pursue pro bono work.

For more information on the Ventura County Asian American Bar Association, visit <http://vcaaba.org/>.