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ATTORNEY OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

## Giving Voice to the Asian Community

Debra Wong Yang, Tai Park and members of The Alliance for Asian American Justice

BY GINA PASSARELLA

**WHEN A VIETNAMESE FARMER IN INDIANA WAS ABDUCTED** and killed, Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher's Debra Wong Yang found herself having to go through several layers of friends and family of the victim's relatives to convince the man's son and wife it was safe to talk with her. After all, she only wanted to help.

That's been one of the common hurdles Yang and Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan's Tai Park have faced in their efforts to triage potential cases of anti-Asian hate they have come across in the year and a half since forming The Alliance for Asian American Justice at the urging of Target general counsel Don Liu and McDermott Will & Emery partner Wilson Chu.

They currently have between 50 and 60 ongoing cases and have been referred multiple times more.

"It's trying to give a voice to the [Asian] community, help law enforcement get to the right place and send a public message that this is not OK and will not be taken," Yang says of the group's mission. "Any victim will have the entire community standing up behind them."

Since forming the alliance in April 2021, the group has not only triaged cases ranging from harassment and spitting to the Atlanta spa shootings, but has worked with dozens of Big Law firms to find the right pro bono assistance. Which partner at which firm speaks this Asian language? Which partner has experience with a certain investigating authority? Yang and Park manage that analysis, reviewing all the cases that come in and finding them the right home.

Since its inception, the alliance estimates its 100-plus member firms have spent \$7 million in pro bono dollars. The work isn't just litigation, but emotional support, getting families to trust the system, helping fill out forms to access services, and more. The team also focuses on educating law enforcement about whether these are hate crimes, and even sued a district attorney for not properly treating an Asian man beaten in San Francisco like a victim.

Yang recounts how she and so many of her fellow alliance members felt the Asian American grandmother that was attacked (there were several) looked just like their grandmother. It compelled them to action. For Park, it was a step back in some ways to find the country in this position in 2021.

"When I was a federal prosecutor ... every day I would say [in court] 'my name is Tai Park, I represent the United States of



"Any victim will have the entire community standing up behind them." —Debra Wong Yang

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America. ... Here I am 20 years after that seeing elderly Asian American women and men knocked down just because of the way they look. What education can we do for society generally to make them question why they would think there is a basis for targeting someone who is totally innocent?" Park asks.

The alliance is focused on what its next phase can be, beyond just taking on cases. Park and Yang say it will likely focus on building bridges with community organizations.

"As lawyers, we're not good at marching down the street with placards," Park says. "That's just not what we do. But on other hand, there are many former prosecutors in Big Law. It's our way of doing what we can."

In the process, it has given Asian American lawyers in Big Law a more prominent voice in their firms and given Asian American citizens a more prominent voice in the judicial system and beyond. ■