

Nikkei Newsmakers

MOVERS AND SHAKERS FROM JAPANESE AMERICA AND BEYOND

Asian Law Alliance's Richard Konda Receives APALI Civic Leadership Award

By BILLIE LEE

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CUPERTINO, Calif. — Richard Konda, executive director of Asian Law Alliance (ALA), became the first to receive the 2006 Asian Pacific American Leadership Institute's (APALI) Civic Leadership Award at the recent APALI Civic Leadership Dinner held at Dynasty restaurant in Cupertino.

APALI noted that Konda "is indeed a role model of Asian American civic leadership. He inspires other with his compassion, vision, tenacity and civic contributions."

Konda was part of a small group of law students at Santa Clara University who became founders of Asian Law Alliance in 1977. While waiting to pass his bar exams, he went to work for the organization in 1978 and never left.

Konda has devoted his whole career to representing low-income groups and immigrants. Early in his career, at ALA, his income was almost as low as those of his clients. While many in his office went on to higher-paying jobs, he stayed on to pursue social justice and defense of civil rights on behalf of the community.

As ALA enters its 30th year of service to the community, ALA board members are helping to get support from their companies. Among them are Stan Young from Heller Ehrman; Greg Sueoka from Fenwick & West; Catherine Shiang from McDermott Will & Emery; Henry Su from Howrey; Hugh Matsubayashi from MacPherson Kwok Chen & Heid; and John Shen from Comerica Bank.

ALA's annual fundraising dinner has also helped to augment needed funds.

"ALA heads an organization that gives legal assistance to about 10,000 people each year," Konda informed. "Our lawyers work with



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individuals as well as groups in the community and they deal with immigration problems, those suffering from domestic violence, issues on civil rights and social injustices.

"We also deal with political issues. Jack Maruhashi, one of our lawyers, for instance, has been involved in the adoption of bilingual ballots into our voting system."

"I like working for ALA, because there are always new challenges and new issues to deal with," said Konda.

"Recently," for instance, "Congress is again thinking about making changes in our immigration laws. We are concerned, since our office deals with many immigrants. The issue is not new to us. As far as I can remember, since 1980 and also in the mid '80s, there have been debates on how to deal with the question of illegal immigrants and social problems relating to immigrants.

"My concern is that if immigration laws are changed, Congress should be humane and fair. Many of the immigrants who are here have been separated from their families for long periods of time. I feel that our immigration laws should help to reunite families and also it should help immigrants earn their path to citizenship."

Konda has worked on problems of bringing justice to difficult cases. He told of the Bich Cau Thi Tran case, when he became involved in advocating for justice in police practices

"On July 13, 2003," he recalled, "police arrived at the duplex where Tran lived in answer to a call. When Tran came to the door, she was holding a Vietnamese vegetable peeler in her hand and the policeman thought that it was a weapon, then shot and killed her.

"When the incident was reported in the newspaper, people were outraged and afterwards, people got together to form a candlelight vigil for Tran and we also formed the Coalition for Justice and Accountability group.

"The group was present at the grand jury hearing and when the case was dismissed, we held a protest in front of San Jose City Hall.

"It still disturbs me greatly how something like this could have happened in the way it did to someone in our community," Konda said.

Konda was born and raised in San Francisco and attended UC Berkeley and Santa Clara University, where he received his law degree. He has worked at ALA for the last 28 years. He is married and has a young son.