

US Law Week

Why Paul Weiss Is the Pro Bono Go-To for Victims of Asian Hate

By Vivia Chen

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He preaches on Sundays in Chinatown, and she connects with clients in noodle shops in Queens. Meet the Paul Weiss partners who are leading the fight against Asian violence.

Instead of puttering around a country club in Greenwich, Conn., on Sundays, Lawrence Wee can be found at the New York Chinese Alliance Church in Chinatown. He's not just listening to sermons but giving them.

And rather than lunching at one of Manhattan's usual power haunts like Le Bernardin or Masa during the week, Jennifer Wu is holding court at a noodle shop in Queens or Yonkers.

While many lawyers of major firms do pro bono work for the needy or dispossessed, Wee and Wu take it to another level. They're in the trenches of the Asian immigrant community, and the reason Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison has become the go-to firm for victims of Asian hate crime in New York.

The firm is representing victims of some of the most vicious attacks committed against Asians this past year. Among pro bono clients are the families of GuiYing Ma, who died in February months after being attacked with a large rock in Queens; Yao Pan Ma, who was struck and kicked in the head while collecting cans in Harlem and died eight months later; Zhiwen Yan who was shot to death in April while working as a food deliveryman in Queens; and a 67-year old Filipina woman punched 125 times while taking out her garbage in Yonkers (she survived). The firm represents eight other victims of Asian hate crimes, though some are not public.

According to a newly released report by the Asian American Bar Association of New York (AABANY), "anti-Asian hate incidents continue to trend upward." Citing statistics from Stop AAPI Hate, the report says there was a significant rise in attacks from March 19, 2020, to the end of 2021—from 4,632 to 6,273.

"There's societal license to do violence against Asians," said Wee, which he attributes to the association of Asians with Covid-19.

What's frustrating, says the AABANY report, is that the "anti-Asian hate has not abated," despite the media attention after the spa shootings in Atlanta last spring and other attacks in New York and California.

Though the spate of hate crimes against people of Asian descent ignited a reckoning about the model minority myth and the distinct racism faced by Asian Americans, what victims and their families often need is something more prosaic: help to get on with their lives.

"We are there to find solutions to problems—like how to get medical care, government benefits, and for the undocumented, how to get a visa to stay in this country," said Wee, a partner in the Paul Weiss corporate department. "Being a victim is already hard, but being an immigrant on top of that makes it harder."

'This Is My Community'

"To do this work, you have to be grounded," said Wu, a litigation partner at the firm who specializes in patent matters. "You have to approach people with huge cultural care"—which is why she meets them on their turf rather than at Paul Weiss' midtown office. "Often, they don't trust people with money, and they're worried that you're in cahoots with authorities."

Some are also not trusting people in their own communities. "A lot of them are now wary because the people who set up the GoFundMe page take a chunk of the donations—20%"—a service that the firm provides for free.

Both Chinese speakers, Wee and Wu essentially play tag team in gaining the trust of the victims or their families. Wee's extracurricular activity as a preacher, combined with Wu's involvement in Asian American political circles (her husband Andy Woo is also a community organizer in Chinatown with close ties to New York State Sen. John Liu), explains why victims of Asian hate crimes seem to flock to Paul Weiss.

But why would two Big Law partners who grew up in a much more comfortable side of America—Wee is from a suburb of Cincinnati and Wu is from Scotch Plains, N.J.—be so vested in this immigrant community?

"I decided that's the place to be," said Wee about his decision to join a church in Chinatown. A graduate of Yale College and Harvard Law School, he explained: "Someone similarly situated to me might decide to go to a different church but I feel this is my community—this is the place I'm called to be." He was drawn to Chinatown because "it's an underserved community."

For Wee, who was raised as an atheist, there's also the religious component. "These are some of the least fortunate in our society, and we will be judged by how we treat the least unfortunate among us," said Wee. "I think God put me on earth for a reason—to help people with my skills."

But what do the parishioners in Chinatown make of Wee? Aren't they intimidated by someone with his profile—a hot shot partner at a hot shot firm? Is he perceived as a brother from another planet?

“Not at all,” said Wee. “Church is about everyone being equal before God. Everyone is as imperfect as anyone else, and what I’m trying to do is be better.” (Sidenote: Though Wee talked easily about the role of Christianity in his life, he did so with a lawyerly flair, arguing that his faith is based on logic. And in his sermons, some which are available on YouTube, his rhetoric tends to rationality rather than fire-and-brimstone.)

‘A Lack of Awareness’

Wu, a graduate of Harvard College and NYU School of Law, also feels that her connection with the community trumps her status as a Paul Weiss partner. Although her less privileged clients likely know her standard billing rates are beyond their reach, some try to pay her in other ways. “I’ve been offered a bag of rice for my pro bono services, or Kaplan test prep courses for my children,” she said.

Both Wee and Wu said that hate crimes against Asians are often overlooked or discounted—a theory that seems supported by the AABANY report that finds only seven out of 233—or 3%—reported attacks against Asians in New York ended in a hate crime conviction.

“Unless someone said, ‘You f—king Asian,’ it’s hard to prove a hate crime,” said Wee. “It’s not like the Asian is holding a stuffed panda, and someone comes along and stabs it,” added Wu. Often, she said, “the police are not writing down an incident as a hate crime. There’s a lack of awareness.”

As an Asian American woman, Wu also feels a special responsibility in the fight. Because some of the most horrendous violence is directed at women—in January, Michelle Go was pushed to her death in front of a moving subway train in Times Square, and in February, Christina Yuna Lee died after being stabbed more than 40 times by a man who forced his way into her apartment in Chinatown—Wu said: “It’s important for Asian women to be visible and important for me personally to help them.”

The attacks “speak to the perceived powerlessness of Asian women,” added Wu. “Even if I don’t feel that way, we’re all underestimated. There’s the expectation that we won’t fight back because we’re so powerless.”

Ironically, though, Wu admitted, Wee is a necessary part of her armor. “It’s good to have a male lawyer on the team,” she said. “There are gender issues in our community too. Even some Asian clients don’t want to admit it’s an Asian hate crime; it’s more comfortable to think that women are just vulnerable.”

Paul Weiss has spent around \$1 million on matters fighting Asian hate, said Wu. Though she and Wee have been the most visible faces in the effort, Wu emphasized that other partners at her firm, particularly Loretta Lynch and Jeannie Rhee, have lent critical help. “We all jump on the phone when victims approach us, and we know how to form trust.”

Undoubtedly, Paul Weiss deserves kudos in this endeavor. But is it possible that the firm will be criticized for “monopolizing” the most high-profile cases involving alleged cases of Asian hate?

“Some have accused us of trying to generate billable work through these representations,” answered Wu. But she chuckled at that suggestion: “It’s not like, ‘Oh, you’re a great civil rights lawyer so we’ll now hire you as our patent attorney.’”

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