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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Chanpone Sinlapasai

While the majority of Americans are practicing social distancing and dealing with the economic anxiety caused by the current COVID-19 health crisis, a lot of Asian Americans are also experiencing verbal and physical assaults stemming from bias and bigotry. The Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council even set up an online form, "Stop AAPI Hate," to collect incident reports.



Chanpone Sinlapasai.

Chanpone Sinlapasai, a respected Portland attorney, recently urged people in Oregon to report such acts and offered to help. Chanpone is someone many people, especially immigrants and refugees, turn to for aid — often in a direct and personal way.

Chanpone and her family fled Laos when she was four years old to escape the communist takeover. Like many political refugees, they endured hardship and danger to reach a refugee camp in Thailand. After entry into the U.S., her family lived in the Bay Area until she moved to Oregon to study law at Lewis & Clark College. Alongside her law partners, they opened Marandas Sinlapasai Garcia, LLC, a firm specializing in immigration cases.

Well before the Trump administration's travel bans began in 2017, Chanpone joined friends at Catholic Charities of Oregon to form teams to greet newly arrived refugees. The greetings became even more important and emotional when the numbers of refugees allowed to enter the United States were dramatically reduced. Chanpone said refugee admission is at an all-time low because of the travel bans. In 2017, she said the refugee resettlement ceiling was 100,000 but the U.S. resettled only 53,691, according to a Department of Homeland Security annual flow report. In 2018, the ceiling was 45,000 with only 22,491 resettled. Chanpone said the ceiling in 2020 dropped to 18,000 refugees.

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, anyone who is not a U.S. citizen can be deported and removed from the United States. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has continued efforts to detain people, while immigrant rights advocates are calling for the release of detainees in detention centers because of the potential spread of the virus and other health risks.

According to Sinlapasai, Southeast Asian community members are afraid of being targeted and deported. After looking at ICE's national data, she noticed an increase in actions against nationals from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 2018 and 2019. She is alerting Green Card holders who are renewing them or pursuing U.S. citizenship to

consult with an immigration attorney "to review the facts of their case," especially if they are fighting any kind of criminal conviction or reviewing post-conviction relief.

Chanpone is urging people to learn how to protect themselves by reaching out to nonprofit organizations that offer free or low-cost consultations. She mentioned resources like the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), which partners with local nonprofits such as SOAR Immigration Legal Services at Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, Immigration Counseling Services (ICS), Catholic Charities of Oregon, and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), noting that they all provide "pro bono and low bono citizenship clinics."

Unlike criminal court, in which one is appointed a lawyer, immigration lawyers are not provided for free under immigration law. Chanpone advises people in need find an immigration attorney. If an immigrant is accused of a crime, the immigration lawyer and the criminal attorney may work together in tandem to find solutions.

Chanpone says there are more than 15,000 AILA attorneys nationwide and she warns against taking legal advice from a "notary or someone who is claiming to be a lawyer," as this can sometimes happen in the immigrant and refugee community. "In the state of Oregon, this is a crime," Chanpone says. "A lawyer is a person who has taken and passed the bar in the state and has a license to help evaluate your case." She says people should confirm that the individual they are hiring has a license and is in good standing with the Oregon State Bar or any other state's bar. Unlike state or local laws, immigration law is under federal jurisdiction, so an attorney licensed in another state can practice immigration law in Oregon.

Without a doubt, Sinlapasai is a friend to Portland's immigrant and refugee community. She remains passionate about welcoming new arrivals even though "the opportunity to greet new refugees has diminished drastically." Recent greetings have not taken place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chanpone says she still wants to go to the airport "whenever the opportunity arises." Greetings for new immigrants and refugees had become a special event for the family members, nonprofit agencies, and the community at large. "We all came together, from all walks of life, to show love, compassion, and kindness to our newest Oregonians," said Chanpone — words she lives by.