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Chicago Lawyer Pamela Leeming Makes History As First Pakistani-American Judge in the United States

By Sanjay T. Tailor

Pamela Leeming believes strongly in the rule of law, so much so that when General Pervez Musharraf suspended and later arrested the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikar Mohammad Chaudhry, she helped organize an opposition rally among Chicago lawyers in the Daley Center courthouse in downtown Chicago. Lawyers of all colors and creeds stood in solidarity with the black suited barristers in Pakistan to support the rule of law and denounce the Chief Justice’s arrest. To her (and my) pleasant surprise, the rule of law in Pakistan had strong appeal, drawing over 100 Chicago lawyers, including presidents of major bar associations.



Pam has served the public for over 20 years as a Cook County Assistant Public Defender, trying felony and habeas cases in the state and federal trial courts. She has argued 16 times before the Illinois Appellate and Illinois Supreme Courts. Knowing her background, I was not surprised when Pam told me a few years ago of her ambition to be a judge. She almost made it in August 2008, when she was “short-listed” for an Associate Judge position. Although the stars did not line up for her then, she has been busy of late running for judicial election in the February 2010 Democratic primary in Cook County. Her dream came true even before the first vote was cast when the Illinois Supreme Court announced her appointment

to the bench last month. On December 1, 2009, Pam Leeming was sworn in as a Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County by Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke, making her the first Pakistani-American Judge in the nation and only current Asian American full Circuit Court judge in Illinois.

Pam is a founding member of the Pakistani American Bar Association, the first bar association in the United States exclusively serving the interests of Pakistani-American lawyers. She served as its first President, and currently serves on its advisory board. Pam also serves as Secretary of the Asian American Bar Association of Greater Chicago and co-chairs its CLE Committee. In addition, she has served on the board of NASABA. Pam’s sister, Anita Bower, an attorney in Washington D.C., co-chaired NASABA’s annual convention in Chicago in 2008.

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Pam has deep roots in the wider Asian American community. In 2008, for example, when it was the Pakistani-American community's turn to host the annual Lunar New Year banquet of the Asian American Coalition of Chicago, Pam chaired the event. Over 1200 people were in attendance to recognize the Honorable Timothy C. Evans, Chief Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County, for his leadership in diversifying the Cook County judiciary to include Asian Americans. In recent years, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and the Pakistani American Christian Association have recognized Pam for her contributions to the Asian American community.

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, Pam immigrated with her family to the United States in 1975. She was raised in Chicago, speaking both Urdu and Punjabi. She is a graduate of the University of Illinois and John Marshall Law School in Chicago. Pam and her husband Timothy John Leeming are the proud parents of four children. Between parenting four children, defending the indigent, and serving the bar and community, it's amazing that Pam has the time to campaign for judicial office. But then again, Pam is tenacious, dedicated, and hard working, qualities that will serve her well on the bench.

Honorable Sanjay T. Taylor is an Associate Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County, and is currently assigned to the Law Division of the Court.

Health Reform: Why it is Important to the South Asian Community

By Priya Murthy, Esq.

Mr. K., a former doctor from Bangladesh, immigrated to New York with his wife to be near his son. Now 67 years old, he has been working as a security guard for three years. His \$1,500 monthly salary is barely enough for rent and food. He suffers from hypertension and diabetes, but cannot get treatment because of the cost. Instead, when he becomes sick, he tries to self-medicate.

Mr. K cannot get health care because it is expensive and he is an immigrant. Restrictions in our health care system prevent immigrants from obtaining Medicare and Medicaid due to residency and work history requirements as well as high income thresholds. Sadly, stories like Mr. K's are common among South Asians and underscore the need for healthcare reform. With insurance costs rising, health care is often unaffordable; with 1 in 5 South

Asians lacking any form of coverage, life-saving treatment is frequently out of reach.

Congress is currently considering health reform proposals and debating various issues, including the public option, mandates, health insurance exchange, pre-existing conditions, cost, and the inclusion of immigrants. In the House of Representatives, members passed the *America's Affordable Health Choices Act*, which includes: the public option; prevents insurance companies from discriminating based on gender or health status; expands Medicaid eligibility; and prioritizes preventative care; and prohibiting public money spent on plans covering abortion, even if paid for with private premium dollars. The Senate recently moved debate to the floor on *The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*, which includes: a public option (either

where states can opt-out or based on a trigger mechanism for areas where private insurers do not meet affordability standards); a health insurance exchange; federal subsidies to assist low-income populations; taxes on high-end insurance policies; expansion of Medicaid; a new commission to control Medicare spending; and discounts for prescription drugs for certain seniors.

Many provisions included in Congressional proposals are promising, including subsidies, the exchange, and preventative care. But what will this mean for South Asian immigrants? Unfortunately, many may be left out. Legal immigrants, like Mr. K., may continue to face barriers in accessing care. Undocumented immigrants will also encounter challenges, which will affect many South Asians (did you know that Indians have the tenth largest undocumented population in the U.S.?).

When looking at proposals and watching the upcoming Senate debate, consider its impact on immigrants, particularly regarding the following issues:

- *Five-Year Waiting Period for Green Card Holders for Medicare and Medicaid:* As with Mr. K., low-income legal immigrants, despite paying taxes, must wait five years to access various government health benefits. Neither bill lifts this waiting period.
- *Access to Health Insurance Subsidies:* Government financial assistance helps ensure

that low-income individuals can afford coverage. While legal immigrants may be eligible for subsidies, neither bill allows eligibility for undocumented immigrants.

- *Access to the Health Insurance Exchange:* Undocumented immigrants may not be allowed to access the health insurance exchange. While the House bill permits participation if these immigrants use their own money, the Senate bill does not.

The need for health care reform is crucial towards building the economy and communities. Part of that equation is including immigrants by lifting current and proposed restrictions. South Asian community members can call their Senators and urge them to: support health reform; lift the five-year Medicare/Medicaid waiting period for legal immigrants; and allow immigrants to access subsidies and the exchange. After all, beneath all the talking points and buzz words, healthcare reform really comes down to affordable and accessible care for families, friends, and those like Mr. K.

#Story collected by South Asian Council for Social Services in New York City.

Priya Murthy is the Policy Director of South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), a national non-profit based in the Washington, DC metro area that amplifies the voices and perspectives of South Asians in national policy dialogues, and strengthens the leadership of South Asian organizations and individuals.

The Place for Diversity in a Bad Economy

By Tara Mythri Raghavan

As the year 2009 comes to an end with unprecedented layoffs and hiring freezes, any minority attorney or soon to be attorney must wonder whether diversity has a place in a bad economy. The short answer—diversity is here to stay, but being a “diverse” attorney today requires much more than checking the imaginary diversity box.

There is no question that the economy is affecting the scope of diversity programs. According to Eliza Park Musallam, a Career Counselor in the Office of Career and Professional Development at American University’s Washington College of Law, over the past year alone, there has been a significant decline in diversity receptions and firm sponsored diversity scholarships. To her, this confirms that in an economic downturn, the bottom line may cause some law firms to pay lip service to the issue of diversity. She thus emphasizes that the minority student today cannot rely on diversity initiatives alone.

Safraz Ishmael, a senior associate in Goodwin Proctor LLP’s Boston office and a member of the firm’s diversity committee, concurs. According to Safraz, although “diversity continues to be a top priority and the energy on the diversity committee [at Goodwin] has not changed,” firms like Goodwin do not recruit just for diversity’s sake. Rather, firms today are paying closer attention to grades and a candidate’s networking ability among other things. The so-called diverse candidate thus must stand out.

Despite her concerns about the effect of the dwindling economy on diversity initiatives, Michelle Wimes, Director of Strategic Diversity Initiatives for the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals (“ALFDP”) and member of Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP’s Diversity Committee is convinced that minority candidates can capitalize on the bad economy. Specifically, she notes that “this is an incredible time for law firms and law departments to get stellar minority candidates who have just gotten let go because of the economy.” Yet Wimes acknowledges that minority candidates need to be vigilant about availing themselves of opportunities, by taking advantage of bar sponsored job banks as well as the career services departments at their alma maters. For law students who are noticing a decline in plumb summer associate positions, Wimes strongly encourages non-traditional summer opportunities, including studying abroad and volunteering at law firms and not-for-profit organizations.

Given the current economic climate, attorneys recognize that being complacent about diversity does not help. For example, Kavitha Janardhan, a third year associate at Seyfarth Shaw LLP’s Chicago office and member of the Indian-American Bar Association of Chicago’s board, shares the concern of many young associates, that taking time away from work to participate in outside the firm events may be frowned upon. Kavitha’s solution—let your firm know what you are doing. She talks to her partners about her participation in IABA-Chicago, encourages others within her firm to attend its pro bono clinic and is as open as possible about her outside time commitments. She strongly believes that these efforts show that she is not a one dimensional associate, thereby making her more valuable to her firm.

Again, no attorney today can lean on diversity alone. Nagendra (Nick) Setty, Managing Principal of the Atlanta Office of Fish & Richardson LLP, and a member of the firm's diversity committee, puts it best when suggesting "if you want to be valued, approach being invaluable." So how does one become invaluable? Nick's road map is simple: spend extra time writing and speaking. If your law department or law firm environment does not provide the opportunities to improve these skills, Nick suggests that you get published in a trade journal and get involved with various organizations, not just a minority bar. While taking a leadership position in any bar association may be viewed positively, getting involved with an industry organization may ultimately be more helpful.

Despite the economic climate, diversity has not gone by the wayside. Nevertheless, attorneys across the board recognize that for diversity to flourish, the responsibility today falls on the minority attorney to show that he or she is the best diverse attorney for the job he or she wants or already has.

Tara M. Raghavan is an associate at Rakoczy Molino Mazzochi Siwik LLP in Chicago.

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

December 4, 2009

Friends,

So far, 2009 has been an exciting year for the South Asian legal community which NASABA represents. In the past few months, we have had an opportunity to witness an unprecedented number of attorneys of South Asian descent receive appointments in President Obama's administration. Last week, for the first time, a NASABA delegation was invited to the White House. NASABA leaders from around the country traveled to D.C. to attend the arrival ceremony for the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. When the event was moved indoors due to weather, the true advocates in our group emerged. Eventually, the most persistent among us made it into the ceremony and we applaud them for their efforts. It was an adventure regardless. Pictures from the day are posted on the NASABA website.

On December 1st, one of NASABA's former Board members and Chapter Presidents, Pam Leeming became the first Pakistani American to be appointed to a judgeship in the United States. We are extremely proud of her achievements and were thrilled to co-host a reception in her honor following her swearing-in. See Pam's story written by Judge Sanjay Tailor in this newsletter.

Recently, we have appointed a working group to establish NASABA's position on immigration reform legislation expected this spring. The South Asian community is a significant part of the most recent wave of immigrants and we believe that NASABA should be a leading voice in the immigration conversation. If you are interested in joining that effort, please email me.

NASABA achieved another milestone in its organizational history, when we hired our first full-time employee, an Executive Assistant, to work under the direction of our Executive Director, Rahul Ranadive. This will give us a daily administrative presence that we have previously lacked.

Finally, planning is fully underway for our 7th Annual Convention aptly themed, "Making History." We will gather in Boston from June 24-27, 2010. Please plan on joining us.

Regards,
Sonjui L. Kumar

President, NASABA