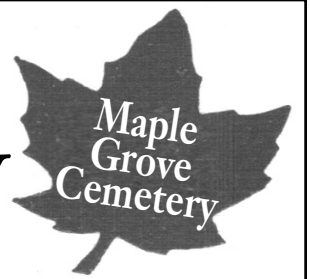


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Creating A More Level Playing Field For Immigrants

BY CAHIR O'DOHERTY

Arriving here at the age of twelve, Chung-Wha Hong – the Advocacy Director for New York's Immigrant Coalition – wholeheartedly believed in the myth of America. It was a myth powerfully conveyed by countless films, books and even Disney cartoons she had seen as a little girl.

America, she thought, was the place where your dreams came true, the place where your hard work was rewarded and your efforts always bore fruit. But her first teenage years as a new immigrant in Flushing soon brought that myth into much sharper focus. America, she discovered, was a place where immigrants struggled for their rights against powerful opposing forces; it was also a place where pay could be low and the hours long.

In high school Chung-Wha was occasionally ostracized for speaking accented English; and the struggles of her parents were reflected in the fact that she wasn't wearing the latest designer clothes. At school she felt the rejection of her peers and the experience marked her. Today she has a deep and enduring understanding of the issues that new immigrants face.

"Growing up here was a process of learning and demystifying the whole myth of America. Very quickly we were learning about the realities of the immigrant experience and how difficult life can be if you don't have the resources and economic status. We grappled a lot with poverty issues. I felt a lot of alienation at school because I couldn't get the right clothes, or I couldn't afford them. We definitely experienced a lot of the alienation that new immigrants face, but later on it became a real source of empowerment. Because of these difficulties that I went through I could really identify with other recent immigrants. It led me to the work I do. Now I want to help foster immigrant rights and improve the situation for lots of immigrants."

Working nowadays as the Advocacy Director for the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) Chung-Wha helps set the agenda at the head of an umbrella policy and advocacy organization that advises approximately 150 groups in New York State that work with immigrants and refugees.

The NYIC is now a leading advocate for immigrant communities on the



THE QUEENS COURIER/photo by Cahir O'Doherty

Chung-Wha Hong, the Advocacy Director of New York's Immigration Coalition learned the difference between American dreams and reality and her hard-won experience has made her the powerful advocate for immigrants rights she is today.

local, state and national levels. Its membership includes grassroots community organizations, not-for-profit health and human services organizations, religious and academic institutions, labor unions, and legal, social and economic justice organizations.

With its multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-sector base, the NYIC provides both a forum for immigrant

groups to share their concerns and it organizes collective action to address these concerns. With Chung-Wha's help it is becoming increasingly effective in its mission. As the city plays host this week to the Republican National Convention, the NYIC led a group of immigrant New Yorkers protesting the lack of progress on key immigrant issues. At the protest they unveiled a

top-ten list of ways that politicians should show respect and fairness to immigrants.

"Our priorities are civil rights and immigrant rights, so we naturally ended up working with coalitions. Most immigrant communities in Queens have language barriers and tend to be organized around ethnic identities. We communicate with all of them."

Since September 11, 2001, the situation for immigrants has become increasingly difficult. "Immigrants definitely feel attacked from all sides. From actual physical attacks to detention and deportation, to the indirect attacks where politicians and interest groups create a hostile environment for immigrants. It's not just a fear that people have – it's also a reality. Congress recently passed a bill that makes hospitals gather immigration status information from their emergency room patients – in order to get reimbursed for emergency Medicaid costs. The policy is set to begin on October 1."

In effect, the new policy means that many undocumented immigrants can no longer safely receive emergency treatment. "Most people I know would rather be sick than separated from their families and deported. This is one of the most dangerous public policies that Congress has passed. It happened behind doors and all of a sudden it's upon us. We at the NYIC will be urging hospitals not to participate in this program."

Chung-Wha knows that voting is the greatest tool in her organization's arsenal. "We've come to the conclusion that we're not going to see any policy changes unless we mobilize and educate immigrant voters. Our civic participation program cuts across all of our program areas and the main part includes voter registration. To date we've registered over two hundred and fifty thousand new citizen voters. It's the largest project of its kind in the nation. A big focus of our work here is to get out the vote."