Lunar New Year Gala 2020

Thursday, February 6, 2020
Pier Sixty, Chelsea Piers, NYC
PROGRAM

Welcoming Remarks
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Margaret Fung
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Emcees
Juju Chang
Co-Anchor, ABC News' Nightline
Sree Sreenivasan
Loeb Professor of Digital Innovation, Stony Brook University

2020 Justice in Action Awards Presentation

William F. Lee
Partner, WilmerHale
Presenter:
Debo P. Adegbile

Viet Thanh Nguyen
Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist
Presenter:
Jessica Hagedorn

Special Message
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William F. Lee

William F. Lee, a partner at WilmerHale, is one of the nation’s leading trial and appellate lawyers. He was the first Asian American attorney to lead a major American law firm, as managing partner of Hale & Dorr in 2000 and then as co-managing partner of WilmerHale in 2004. He has tried more than 200 cases to verdict and argued more than 100 cases to the Court of Appeals of the Federal Circuit and other appellate courts. In 2014, he was elected the Senior Fellow of the Harvard Corporation, the governing board of Harvard University.

Lee is well-known as an intellectual property litigator, representing Apple Inc. and other technology-focused clients. Among his many awards, Lee was named a 2016 Intellectual Property Trailblazer and Pioneer by The National Law Journal and received the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award from The American Lawyer.

Lee was lead trial counsel for Harvard in a widely-publicized lawsuit challenging the university’s admissions policy as discriminatory against Asian Americans. Lee defended Harvard’s race-conscious admissions process, building a strong factual record about diversity as a key component to Harvard’s educational ideals and the benefits of diversity for Asian Americans, as well as other students of color. In a 130-page decision, a Boston federal judge upheld the constitutionality of Harvard’s admission program and noted that ensuring diversity “fosters learning, improves scholarship, and encourages mutual respect and understanding.”

Lee’s staunch support of racial diversity was shaped by his personal experience. In public remarks, Lee has recalled a strong childhood memory of sitting with his mother while their Philadelphia neighbors voted to lift the restrictive covenant used to exclude people of color, thus allowing his family to move in. Early in his law career, Lee remembers being the only person of Asian descent in the courthouse. He later investigated bias in the Massachusetts courts, as a special assistant to the state attorney general, in the 1990s.

After graduating magna cum laude from Harvard University in 1972, he received his J.D. and M.B.A. from Cornell University in 1976.

For his trailblazing legal achievements and as a champion of diversity, AALDEF honors William F. Lee with the 2020 Justice in Action Award.

Viet Thanh Nguyen

Viet Thanh Nguyen is a writer, literary scholar, and cultural critic. His novel, The Sympathizer, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Nguyen is the Aerol Arnold Chair of English and a professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature, at the University of Southern California (USC). He is also a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times and a critic-at-large for the Los Angeles Times. Nguyen was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2017. Through these channels, he has humanized the immigrant experience in America and spoken out against the mistreatment of refugees and immigrants.

Nguyen came with his family to the United States in 1975 after the Vietnam War. His first home was a refugee camp in Pennsylvania. After receiving his B.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, he began teaching at USC in 1997. In an opinion piece in The New York Times, Nguyen likened the classroom to a democracy in which the “students’ obligation, as is the obligation of all citizens and residents, is to listen and to learn. To question. To participate. To be in a room where they share similarities and differences.”

Nguyen has been an outspoken advocate for refugees and immigrants. Using his storytelling gifts and powers of sharp critique, he has called out “the demonization of immigrants” and unleashed withering attacks on white supremacy and exclusionary policies. What is at stake, Nguyen wrote in The New York Times, is “the core vision of this country—as either a white-dominated country that suppresses people of color or a multicultural one with white people being just a group of many.” The battle of immigration, he said, is about “the country’s identity and destiny.”


For his outspoken eloquence and advocacy for immigrants and refugees in America, AALDEF is proud to honor Viet Thanh Nguyen with the 2020 Justice in Action Award.
About AALDEF

The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), founded in 1974, is a national organization that protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans. By combining litigation, advocacy, education, and organizing, AALDEF works with Asian American communities across the country to secure human rights for all.

These are some highlights of our recent work:

Securing economic justice – We won a New York federal appeals court ruling against the owner of Kum Gang San restaurant, who had fraudulently transferred his assets to avoid paying a $2.7 million wage theft judgment owed to 11 Korean and Latino workers.

Protecting immigrant small businesses – The City of Philadelphia agreed to pay $265,000 to settle our federal lawsuit on behalf of 23 Chinese takeout restaurant owners, who faced significant fines after discriminatory enforcement of a local closing time ordinance.

Preserving immigrant communities – We filed a lawsuit in New York state court to block construction of four new luxury megatowers in Manhattan’s Chinatown and Lower East Side, which would accelerate the displacement of tenants and small businesses.

Promoting educational equity – We represented 20 Asian American community groups in an amicus brief supporting Harvard University’s race-conscious admissions policy, which was upheld in September 2019 by a Boston federal court.

Defending immigrant rights – In this anti-immigrant climate, we have opposed policies that separate immigrant families, restrict access to green cards for low-income immigrants, and called for an extension of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

Encouraging Census participation – On behalf of 64 Asian American groups, AALDEF and NAPABA filed an amicus brief urging the Supreme Court to block a new citizenship question on the 2020 Census that would deter full participation by immigrant communities.

Expanding voting rights – We monitored polling places and conducted a multilingual exit poll of 750 Asian American voters in five states in the 2019 elections. We also successfully advocated for the hiring of Korean-speaking poll workers to assist voters in Harris County, Texas and testified in support of fair redistricting policies in Texas.

2020 marks a crucial year in the fight to preserve our democracy. From now until Census Day in April, we will marshal every resource to ensure full Asian American and immigrant participation in the all-important decennial count.

We expect a record turnout of Asian American voters in the 2020 Presidential election. To ensure full and equal access to the ballot box, AALDEF will continue to challenge voter suppression measures that prevent Asian Americans from exercising their right to vote. We will also collaborate with community groups across the country to recruit 1,000 volunteers to monitor polling places in 15 states and conduct a multilingual exit poll of Asian American voters.

Thanks to the many individuals, law firms, corporations, community groups, and foundations that have supported our efforts over the years. Together with you, AALDEF will continue to be a major force in the movement for social justice.
Justice in Action Award Recipients

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1988 Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga / Irene Natividad / Anthony M. Tung
1989 Benjamin Gim / David Henry Hwang / Grayce Uyehara
1990 Mary Frances Berry / Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña / Jack Greenberg / Pat Morita
1991 Connie Chung / Robert Matsui / BD Wong
1992 Gordon Hirabayashi / Maya Lin / George Takei
1993 Harold Koh / Yoko Ono
1994 Lani Guinier / Norman Mineta / Asian Americans for Action
1995 Shamita Das Dasgupta / Midori Shimanouchi Lederer / Deval L. Patrick
1996 Patsy T. Mink / Chang-Lin Tien
1997 Christopher Lee / Midori / Urvashi Vaid
1998 Bill Lann Lee / Nickelodeon
1999 Ira Glasser / Loida Nicolas Lewis
2000 Hiroshima / Dennis Rivera
2001 Bill Ong Hing / Wen Ho Lee Family and Legal Team
2002 Fred Korematsu / David Lim
2003 Margaret Cho / Bhairavi Desai
2004 Mira Nair / Alice Young / Open Society Institute
2006 Ivan K. Fong / Charles J. Ogletree, Jr. / Katrina van den Heuvel
2007 Javade Chaudhri / Nicholas deB. Katzenbach / Helen Zia
2008 Harry Belafonte / Art Chong / Seymour Hersh
2009 Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn / Sandra Leung / Dale Minami
2010 Juan Gonzalez / Larry Tu
2011 A.B. Cruz III / Lillian Kimura
2012 Parkin Lee / Jean Koh Peters / Fareed Zakaria
2013 John Lewis / Jose Antonio Vargas / Simone Wu
2014 John G. Chou / Aasif Mandvi / Mari J. Matsuda
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