

KIMBERLY YEE



KIMBERLY YEE

GOVERNMENT / LEGISLATIVE / JUDICIAL

In strategic planning meetings for her Fall 2010 campaign for a representative seat in District 10, campaign advisors and public relations experts suggested to Kimberly Yee that she may benefit by omitting one little thing from her signage: Her last name.

But for the native Phoenixian who was running for a seat in the north Phoenix district where she was raised, not including Yee was a huge deal - and a non-negotiable one.

"There was a discussion on whether Yee was too ethnic of a name to run on, that it would be a detriment. I was very adamant that we needed to keep it. I remember saying that if voters weren't ready for the 'Yee' part, then we would find out on Election Day and I would be willing to take that risk," she recalls.

After the polls closed on the evening of Nov. 2, 2010, Yee publicly thanked her supporters for making her the first Asian American woman to be elected to the Arizona State Legislature.

The significance of this milestone was foreshadowed two years earlier when Yee was elected as a national delegate to represent Arizona at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota.

By then, she had amassed an impressive career that included positions under two governors and service at the state and federal government levels in Washington, D.C., California and her native Arizona. Although she had spent nearly her entire adult life among political movers and shakers, including serving as policy advisor to former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in education, consumer and labor and workforce matters, Yee realized she was very much in the minority when it came to the national political arena.

"I was in this huge stadium in St. Paul and I looked around the room. I felt like I was the only Asian woman there. That put it to scale, that there was a need for Asian women to get involved and get engaged in politics," she says.

But the middle child of three siblings born to a Chinese-American businessman and a Chinese-American public school teacher was not fazed by the unmarked trail that she was being groomed to walk. Her upbringing prepared her for that.

"I was very blessed to grow up in a home where my parents really encouraged the confidence to step into a room and be a part of that network. When you come from a strong family unit, you walk the path and you enter the doors that become open. Some people are less confident in walking that path but we were raised to accomplish anything we desired. If anything it encouraged me to move forward because there was no one before me," Yee says. "I feel honored to be in this position."

While Yee was campaigning, she went door-to-door, easily navigating the streets she knew well. She was able to talk about being a student in the local schools, eating at the restaurants and growing up around the neighborhood parks that comprised the world of her future constituents, including her parents, who still live in the district. Although hers was literally an uncommon face in local politics, her experiences, personality and desire to improve the business climate and education opportunities were themes voters could easily relate to.

"If there were barriers, I guess I didn't see them. I felt I had to look ahead and keep walking," Yee says.

As a child, politics was not a career consideration that crossed her mind. She eyed journalism as a possible pursuit. But it was her time as a reporter, editorial cartoonist and art director for her Greenway High School newspaper that introduced Yee to the single experience that changed her future.

Yee, who had stories and cartoons censored and spiked by administrators in a process she felt was unjust and unconstitutional, wanted to make sure that didn't happen to others. In 1992, as a senior, she testified before the State Senate Committee on Education in support of an anti-censorship bill that would eventually grant more freedom for student journalism advisors at the high school and college levels to have a say in what could be published.

After the session broke, a man approached Yee and said: "If you didn't tell me you were an 18-year-old student when you introduced yourself, I would've thought you were a seasoned lobbyist who works down here on a regular basis."

The gentleman was then-Senator and longtime Arizona politician Matt Salmon. And it left a permanent impression on the ambitious and idealistic young lady, who opted to pursue Bachelor's Degrees in political science and English at Pepperdine University. She continued her education and earned a Master's Degree in public administration from Arizona State University.

"It was a moment in time, but words mean everything. That experience was so positive that it really did launch my political career early on. I didn't know I would be running for office one day, but it certainly got me engaged in the process. It showed me that anyone, regardless of your age, can participate in the political process and influence legislation," Yee says.

While in college, Yee worked in the Maricopa County prosecutor's office, and later for the United States Department of Justice, where she provided assistance in policy research. Yee served as policy advisor to former California Governor Pete Wilson as well as Schwarzenegger, and in Arizona served on the staff of the State Senate Committee on Education and was the director of communications for former treasurer Dean Martin.

While her affiliation is with the Republican party, Yee considers her political style is one that works across the aisle, bringing both sides together when proposing or sponsoring a bill that she believes will benefit all Arizonans, regardless of their political leanings.

Yee also hopes she will be a positive reflection of her home state and present a good first impression to outsiders who may think they know what the 48th state is all about.

"It is encouraging when I travel to other states and get the reactions I've been getting, which have been great. I appreciate that, if anything, I can portray that Arizona was ready to elect an Asian woman," Yee says. "I hope people will say that I made a difference and that the public service I gave to the state created good public policy along the way."