

## *Immigrant Shiao Yen Chin-Dennis Has Become a Global Role Model*

### ‘I’ve Broken Many Ceilings’

By Susan G. Hauser



As managing partner, Shiao Yen Chin-Dennis is committed to the ideals of diversity, equity and inclusion. At K&L Gates, she says, “everyone matters, and no one is invisible.” Photo by Jaime Valdez

George “Jerry” Oliver may be one of the few people who ever said “no” to Shiao Yen Chin-Dennis.

Beginning in the year 2000, Oliver — a labor and employment lawyer in Raleigh, N.C. — served as a mentor to Chin-Dennis, who as a teenager had immigrated with her family to the American South from Malaysia and was struggling to find her life’s path.

Now the managing partner at the Portland office of K&L Gates, a global law firm with 44 offices on five continents, Chin-Dennis was working at the World Trade Center in Raleigh when she met Oliver. She was toying with the idea of law school, and Oliver offered encouragement, advice and a recommendation letter to his alma mater, Campbell University School of Law.

Additionally, he showed an unwillingness to lower his expectations for his young

mentee whenever she veered toward underestimating her own potential. Whenever she suggested an easier or more convenient route, she heard “no” from Oliver.

Today, Oliver is proud not only of Chin-Dennis’ achievements, but of his refusal two decades ago to hire her as an intern or later as an associate with his firm, Fox Rothschild. Going to work at a labor and employment firm just didn’t jibe with the brilliant future as an international lawyer that he envisioned for her.

“The ‘no’s were the ‘no’s that I thought were right for her,” says Oliver. “I felt she needed to go where she would be given the opportunity to do great things in all of the ways that I thought she could.”

His refusal to budge paid off. Chin-Dennis did indeed end up at a place where her fluency in five languages, familiarity with

world trade, business acumen and management skills became valued assets. Four years after being hired in 2011 by K&L Gates as an associate, Chin-Dennis was named equity partner. Shortly after that, she became the Portland office’s recruiting partner. Last March, she was elevated to managing partner.

If there are other managing partners of U.S. law firms who are immigrant, Asian and female, Chin-Dennis says she has not learned of them. Indeed, only 1.2 percent of equity partners at the country’s large firms are Asian women, according to the American Bar Association’s 2019 “Profile of the Legal Profession.”

As she said in a recent interview with the *Portland Business Journal*, “I’ve broken many ceilings, glass and bamboo, in getting to this point of my career.”

#### Paying It Forward

Chin-Dennis’ path has made her a role model, even though it took her a while to accept the fact that a Chinese woman from Malaysia could use her ascent to the loftiest ranks of academia, business and law to become an inspiration to others.

“I realized that I have to pay it forward. I have to help others,” she told the *Journal*. “I feel a responsibility to lead, to inspire others, to push forth changes for the betterment of our community, and to leave a place better for our sons and daughters.”

But it wasn’t always so.

In May 2015, three months after being promoted to partner, Chin-Dennis delivered a talk with the title “Living the American Dream” at a diversity event at Portland State University. An attendee approached her afterwards and Chin-Dennis recalls that the woman said, “Do you know your story is very inspirational? And do you know you need to find your voice so other people can hear it?”



Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis poses with her fellow scouts in Malaysia in a photo taken before she immigrated with her family to Alabama. She is now a member of the board of the Boy Scouts of America's Cascade Pacific Council. Photo courtesy of Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis



Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis grew up in a small Alabama town after emigrating from Malaysia with her family. In this photo taken in the late 1980s, sister Shiau Hui Chin, mom Foi Fong Voon and dad Look Fatt Chin are in the front row, Chin-Dennis and her brother See Loong Chin in the back row. Photo by Jaime Valdez

“I was like, ‘Me? I’m your role model?’ Growing up in an Asian culture, you don’t talk about yourself and you don’t showcase all your achievements,” Chin-Dennis says. “As a child, I couldn’t speak unless spoken to. As a woman, I was not allowed to have a voice.”

Despite these limitations, she still was expected to be a high achiever — and she has certainly accomplished that, although not in the way her parents had hoped.

“If I’d done as my mom and dad wanted,” she says, “I would have gone straight to medical school,” just like her younger

brother and sister, who are now physicians in Texas.

Instead, Chin-Dennis was somewhat of a dabbler, earning a bachelor’s degree in international business, finance and German; a master’s in education, covering organizational behavior and psychometrics; a certification in human resources; and finally, a law degree and an MBA. She also did one year of coursework toward a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, but she dropped out after being accepted to law school.

“As it turned out,” she says, “everything helped.”

Brendan Gutierrez McDonnell, a partner at K&L Gates whom Chin-Dennis succeeded as managing partner, agrees. “She took all these different areas and then instead of just being a lawyer,” he says, “she’s a modern lawyer.”

In concert with McDonnell, Chin-Dennis has transformed the culture in K&L Gates’s Portland office, putting an emphasis on respect, inclusive collaboration and gratitude for each person’s contributions. She used her former employer as a model, replicating the more collegial and less hierarchical structure of the legal department at SAS Institute, a global analytics software developer near Raleigh.

“I brought a little of the SAS culture here because SAS is like a family,” she says. “We didn’t just talk about diversity and inclusion. We did it.”

Chin-Dennis serves on K&L Gates’ Firmwide Diversity Committee, is a co-founder of the Women’s Leadership Alliance and works closely with the firm’s Women in the Profession committee on initiatives for recruitment, retention and promotion. At K&L Gates, she says, “everyone matters, and no one is invisible.”

Among the results of that policy: In 2017, the *Portland Business Journal* named K&L Gates the most diverse law firm in Portland — the first large Portland firm to be so recognized. And now, says Melissa Speidel, the Pittsburgh-based director of innovation for K&L Gates, the practice implemented by Chin-Dennis and McDonnell of including staff (now called by the more respectful term “allied professionals”) in decision making, client meetings and pitches has been adopted firm-wide to great effect.

“It’s amazing how busy we have become,” Speidel says.

In McDonnell’s view, Chin-Dennis can rightly consider herself a role model for



Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis (front row, third from left) poses with colleagues from K&L Gates' Portland office after the firm was honored with a 2019 Building Diversity Award from the *Daily Journal of Commerce*. Photo courtesy of Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis

anyone now entering the legal profession.

"I would say that what we're seeing is the profession moving toward her," he says. "Companies are expecting us to be more well-rounded, they're expecting us to be diverse, they're expecting us to understand their business problems."

### Building Relationships

While working at SAS in North Carolina, Chin-Dennis put her many skills — including project management and fluency in four Asian languages — to work. She managed SAS's corporate affairs in Asia and established the company's R&D Center in Beijing, which now employs 400 people.

"She is the best networker I've ever met," says David Keim, general counsel at SAS for global corporate legal affairs and at that time Chin-Dennis's supervising manager. "When she needs something to happen in, say, Singapore, she knows exactly the person to call, exactly how to approach the situation, and to get the information or the result she needs to achieve."

At K&L Gates, Chin-Dennis has been able to continue her relationship with SAS because the company is now one of her

clients. And because maintaining and nurturing relationships is one of her life-long personal values (something she says she learned from her father), she is able to draw from her vast global network on behalf of the firm and others she represents.

Tom Cunningham, president and CEO of Climax Portable Machining and Welding Systems in Newberg, is one of the beneficiaries of that network. As Chin-Dennis' client for the past two years, he says he is still amazed by her global reach.

"She's just sort of one-stop shopping for us," he says. "She works as the conduit for what we need in the U.K., Dubai, Saudi Arabia and China, throughout the United States and other places. She's kind of our contact point, our relationship manager. We go to her for whatever we need."

That's not a surprise to McDonnell.

"We are definitely known as the global law firm in Portland and most of that came from her efforts," he says of his colleague. "We won an award (2015 Global Leader Award) within a couple of years of her being here."

Chin-Dennis has won many awards and honors of her own since coming to Port-

land. In 2014, she was selected as a fellow of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, a national organization of more than 240 law firms and corporate legal departments. In 2016, she was a recipient of both the *Portland Business Journal* "Women of Influence" award and the *Daily Journal of Commerce* "Women of Vision" award.

She currently serves as the chair of the District Export Council of Oregon, to which she was appointed in 2014 by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

### Making Friends

It's hard to believe that Chin-Dennis, who seems to have the world by a string, began her life in America in Sylacauga (pop. 13,000), a small and insular town in rural Alabama. Her aunt, who had already moved there, welcomed the family's help in her Chinese restaurant.

Chin-Dennis became the first Asian ever to attend Sylacauga High School. Although segregation was by then illegal, students self-segregated, gathering before classes in either the "white gym" or the "black gym."

"I went to whichever one was convenient," she recalls. "When I went to one



Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis chats with receptionist Penny Ragona at K&L Gates' Portland office. All of the firm's staff members (now called by the more respectful term "allied professionals") are included in decision making, client meetings and pitches. Photo by Jaime Valdez



Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis (left) sits with Pallavi Mehta Wahi and Brendan Gutierrez McDonnell at the *Daily Journal of Commerce's* Building Diversity awards ceremony. Chin-Dennis succeeded McDonnell as managing partner at K&L Gates' Portland office; Wahi is managing partner of the firm's Seattle office and chair of its Firmwide Diversity Committee. Photo courtesy of Shiau Yen Chin-Dennis

gym, my classmates would promptly say, "Hey, you need to go to the other one."

She was a top student but, as Chin-Dennis wryly observes, "That did not really help you make friends."

She had the same problem at Auburn University, from which she graduated magna cum laude. Classmates avoided sit-

ting next to her because she looked different, she says, "so I learned to make my own friends. I started the German Club and I started the International Business Club."

In spite of the obstacles she faced, Chin-Dennis remains proud of her Southern upbringing. "I married a Southerner and I'm probably one of very few Asian women who

can talk trash about football," she says with a laugh. "I know my sweet tea and I know my grits."

She and Wayne Dennis, a high school teacher who grew up in Sylacauga, divorced after raising two children: Daniel, a senior at the University of Oregon; and Allyson, a sophomore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## Finding Success

Chin-Dennis's first dive into international business came in 1997 when she went to work at Raleigh's World Trade Center, serving first as the business director but soon becoming executive director. "Her ability to manage all those details plus see the broad picture was rare," observes Pamela Davison Smith, who hired Chin-Dennis. "We could entertain an ambassador or a president of a country and she was perfectly comfortable."

Her secret: Emily Post. Chin-Dennis' 12th-grade English teacher recommended the etiquette expert so she could learn the differences between various forks and spoons. But the book offered much more, she says, including how to plan seating arrangements for diplomatic dinners.

Chin-Dennis won kudos for her savoir-faire, and her ability to build bridges between people resulted in business successes for the center.

By that time, Jerry Oliver was seeing results from his urging of Chin-Dennis to set her sights higher. She had gathered recommendations for law school from both him and North Carolina Secretary of State Elaine Marshall, who had gone on trade missions arranged by Chin-Dennis. Marshall, also a Campbell Law alum, says, "I thought Shiau Yen had that scrappiness that Campbell was looking for."

Chin-Dennis drove each day to Bules Creek, N.C., where Campbell was then located (the law school moved to Raleigh in 2009), after first dropping off her children with a sitter. "My daughter was 2 and my son was 5 when I went to law school," she says. "I drove 120 miles every day. How did I do that for three years?"

When it came time to find an internship as a first-year law student, Chin-Dennis gazed in the direction Oliver had been pointing and applied at SAS.

"We got lucky," recalls Patricia Brown, now chief legal officer and the person who hired Chin-Dennis. "We were all just blown

away by her. She'd already done work in HR and management, and she was so mature and thoughtful and business-minded. As a first-year law student ... good grief!"

The summer internship was extended to a year-round internship. It was extended again, this time to last through law school. And then SAS hired her.

"We were so impressed with her, and she fit into the team so well," says Brown. "She was always willing to help. Even if it was an area she'd never done before, she never blinked. She'd just jump right in."

On a particularly fateful day, Chin-Dennis met McDonnell, who was then managing partner at K&L Gates in Portland. He had been representing SAS in some Portland-based transactions, but as more Oregon companies came to him with global concerns, he says he realized he could use some help. By then, Chin-Dennis was ready for a new challenge, ready to become an international corporate lawyer at a global law firm.

From afar, Jerry Oliver watched as his mentee blossomed. He says he can't help but be pleased by his prescience. "I even told her, 'One day, you might end up as the managing partner!'"

"It's one of my favorite mentor success stories," he says. "But I just helped her along, that's all." ■

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