

PUGET SOUND BUSINESS JOURNAL

Opinion: I am proud to lead as my authentic self



Asian American and Pacific
Islander Heritage Month is May.



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Yes, I have an accent.

My name is Pallavi Mehta Wahi and I am the co-United States Managing Partner of K&L Gates. I am also the head of the Seattle office at K&L Gates and the firmwide chair of the diversity committee.

I am South Asian and a first-generation immigrant.

I am a leader because of my firm and its people. I am a leader because of the values this firm and its people lead with every day in every way.

I grew up in India and practice law in America. I do not have to tell you that. You hear all that in my voice. You hear that when I say the word “aluminum” or when I simply say “kilometer.” You hear that when I express formality in court or when I argue a motion. You hear that in the lilt of my accent. You hear many worlds mixed in my voice – many different countries in one.

Sometimes – a lot of times – you comment on it. Sometimes you tell me how good my English is. Sometimes you want to know where I am from, and insist on knowing where I am really from. Sometimes you tell me to take the side entrance or hand me the keys to your car to park it. You may ask why I immigrated to this country. You ask my heritage story – the one that truly sets out my background. You ask it and then ask it again.

Sometimes you may think it is funny to imitate my accent. It will be a joke. I have to have a sense of humor in hearing you do it. Accents are the easiest way to get to know people and you make fun of my accent because I am part of the team. You do it because I belong. Of course, I know you really are kidding, right? Sometimes you do that to my face. Many times I hear of it later when you recount the joke to me, or someone else nervously does.

This is what has happened to me for many years since I immigrated to this country 20 years ago. This is a conversation I have had many times with many different people.

But, you genuinely also want to learn, to know more, to know the story

of my different voice. You have and will express real interest in wanting to know who I am and what I represent as a global citizen. I hear that in your curiosity and your genuine passion to know more about me and my country of birth. I know you want to know more about me and my background. I want to discuss that with you. I want to explain my voice and my history. I want to share with you all the knowledge and pride I feel in my heritage and my background.

I want to tell you my immigration story and my journey to being a proud U.S. citizen. I want to tell you about my family and how my son is growing up as an American with his own American and Indian heritage. I want to tell you all about my accent and all about the history I am proud to carry for myself and my family. I want to share with you my secrets for a great curry and the life I led growing up in New Delhi, India. I am proud to do that with you and appreciate you doing that with me. I am proud that my accent leads to those conversations.

Sometimes, however, I will hear you patronize me when you tell me my English is good. When you tell me how surprised you are that it is. English is one of the national languages in India. I truly did grow up bilingual. I hear you tell me that you cannot understand me. Listen faster. My accent does not make me different – it is a part of my identity.

I will not tell you for the third time why I am not the valet and I do not want your car keys. I will listen to but will not take your advice to hone an American accent so I can fit in better. I will not go to “accent school” or even research what an accent school is. I will not agree with you that making fun of my accent is funny and I will tell you why it is not for any immigrant. I will stop that from happening to anyone and speak out about it. I will not let you define me by my accent. I also know you cannot use it to weaken me.

I am you when I question and am curious about other cultures and when I make the same assumptions and mistakes about other cultures. You are me as you and I learn together and educate each other as to our differences and similarities.

It is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month this May. I am proud to be Asian American, to have a voice and to be at a firm and be a leader as my authentic self.

And, yes, I have an accent.