

Community Spotlight – Irene Nakamura

Irene Nakamura overcame barriers imposed by the traditions of her ethnic background, the culture of corporate greed, social discrimination and stereotypes to achieve success as the founder of the only Japanese-American, female-owned, culturally diverse litigation support firm in the country.

JABA's Mike Madokoro had the opportunity to sit down with Irene and listen to her story, various excerpts of which are recounted in this article:

As a Japanese-American raised by an Issei mother, Irene was taught that her role was secondary to her brother's simply because she is female and he is male. In fact, Irene had to wait for her younger brother to graduate from college before she was allowed to enroll.

As a child, Irene did not complain or speak up about this difference in treatment, as her mother's expectation of her was "Gaman", which means "endure, tolerate, 'don't make any waves' – or more directly, 'suck it up.'" But since her brother did not complete his double-master's degree from Yale until she was 37, Irene decided to pursue court reporting against her mother's wishes.

Irene started her career as a freelance court reporter, working long hours and taking on an immense amount of responsibility. A few years into her career, she had the opportunity to work in the U.S. District Court, Central District of California, as a court reporter for the late Honorable Robert M. Takasugi and the Honorable George H. King.

Irene received ongoing support and mentoring from both Hon. Takasugi and his law clerk, Karen Uyekawa. According to Irene, "Judge Takasugi was like a father figure for me. He taught me compassion, to fight for what's right and to always have a voice. He frequently reminded me, 'You must be heard.' That, although I take down the record, I must make my own record."

Irene eventually returned to freelancing and started with a new company, hoping for a fresh start. But the company had strict deadlines for expedited deadlines for transcripts, which they offered for free – putting Irene right back in the "churn and burn".

In 2011, as the Christmas holiday was approaching, Irene received frightening news – a cancer diagnosis. Although she should have been focused on her health, she accepted a special client request that no one else wanted – a complex, multi-party case involving approximately 40 lawyers and 250-page depositions for a 5-day depo. Irene agreed to take the job on the condition that it would not interfere with her scheduled surgery and that the final transcripts would be completed after the holidays. Both the client and the company agreed to this condition.

Much to her surprise, immediately upon checkout from the hospital, Irene was met with angry, demanding and accusatory voicemails and emails complaining about her lack of response during her hospital stay. She was shell-shocked. To make matters worse, nobody bothered to ask how her surgery went.

After that incident, Irene vowed to start her own company and create an environment where people were treated with empathy, compassion, and equity – a workplace that empowered people and gave them the ability to thrive no matter what race, religion or gender. From this place of newfound clarity, iDepo was born.

In its first year, iDepo had just two clients but Irene felt empowered. Ten years later, iDepo is now nation-wide and specially registered and certified in eight states as a minority-and woman-owned business. Irene said, "iDepo is the living, breathing manifestation of my vision."

But building iDepo did not come without challenges. In Irene's words:

The most obvious challenge I faced was my own culture in which women are relegated to supporting, submissive roles. At the helm of my own company, that just wouldn't work. In addition, I was competing in a male-dominated industry. According to the American Bar Association Journal, 87% of American attorneys are white males, an "Old Boys' Club" which is especially challenging to navigate as a minority woman. To meet that roadblock, I hired White male sales reps. However, many of them had issues taking direction from a minority woman boss. [As to minority staff members, it was a challenge for them to be] accepted by clients. My experience shows the legal community still has a long way to go in addressing the inclusion and equity divide.

Dealing with racism and discrimination has been an ever-present challenge as a business owner. I have lost accounts from law firms because I am Asian and I was somehow responsible for the COVID-19 "Kung Flu." I lost another account because the law firm learned I was a non-white owner. I was shut out. They wouldn't return emails, phone calls, or accept in-person visits. In addition, I lost a large account because the law firm did not want to do business with my then Director of Operations, who is Black.

My staff has also suffered, both personally and professionally. Unfortunately, I have numerous examples. I find it very upsetting that people are being targeted due to their skin color, sexual orientation, or religion, here in a modern city like Los Angeles where we have a melting pot of so many different cultures...

One of iDepo's moderators is Muslim and a deposition attendant complained that I hired a Muslim who has an accent. iDepo also employed a transgender individual. He has not completed his transition and is often referred to as a woman although he identifies as a male.

It has been challenging finding law firms or lawyers who are truly open to doing business with a company that embraces this commitment to diversity in the same way we do. If I've seen this level of discrimination in my small company, you can only imagine the extent of the problem.

Although Irene's business has suffered as a result of the pandemic – e.g., "the rhetoric of the so-called CoVid-19 'Kung Flu' epidemic" and "an increase in racism toward Asians" – iDepo has opened a new office in Bremerton, Washington.

Irene's experience overcoming cultural roadblocks and several iterations of prejudice has taught her life lessons that she would like to pass down to others. In Irene's words:

You are not defined by your culture, your family, or restrictions others put on you. Education was important to my culture, but as a woman, it was unavailable

to me, or at best, I was encouraged to get just enough to get by because, according to my mother, I should become a wife and a mother. Ironically, and by choice, I am neither.

Next, even if you struggle with feelings of inadequacy, do it anyway. Your opportunities in both business and life are limitless. I am a successful businesswoman and founder of the only Japanese American, female-owned, 100% culturally diverse litigation-support firm in the country. I fought for it and am dedicated to empowering other minority businesswomen, my fellow stenographers, and my own employees.

There are four things, I feel, people who were taught limiting beliefs can do to break-free and live authentically in the workplace and beyond: (1) Identify your discomfort zone and the fears that are holding you back; (2) Don't wait to be 100% ready, as confidence will fill the gap; (3) Break free of toxic influence and self-sabotage; and (4) Find your power people – like-minded individuals who support, inspire, celebrate and push you to be better.

Irene hopes that her journey will encourage women and Asian-Americans to lift their voices:

In June of 2020, the American Bar Association reported on the ethnic diversity of its nearly 400,000 national members - 5% were Black, 5% Hispanic, and 2% Asian. This amounts to only 12% and among those only 3.5% were women. We must change these statistics.

Not only are minority populations under-represented, but they are also often the victims of discrimination. Asian hate is nothing new. In the nearly 60 years since the dark days of WWII, there has been slow progress. Our community has long been silent about the internment camps and their long-lasting ramifications. We don't need to look past our own state to find incidents like the one involving Yu Darvish, the LA Dodger, the victim of a racial slur during the World Series, the stereotyping of Asian actors like Bruce Lee and Pat Morita or attacks on Asian Americans. They permeate our nation.

The misinformation surrounding the origin and spread of the COVID-19 virus have only made matters worse. I believe we should have been voicing anti-Asian hate language earlier and louder. Why did it take physical attacks on innocent Asians and lives lost in the Atlanta shooting for us to break free from our cultural upbringing of "gaman" or "enryo"? We need to stop asking ourselves what will people think? What will people say? How many of us stand up for ourselves or for fellow Asians? How many have just practiced gaman? We need to break free from the toxicity of our environment, speak up and be vocal supporters of our brothers and sisters. Only then will people think twice about discriminating.

I live by the motto of HOPE, "Help One Person Everyday". Lifting just one person up gives both you and them the opportunity to make a difference.