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16

GENERAL COUNSEL TO THE GOVERNOR OF OREGON

LIANI J. REEVES

BY PATRICK FOLLIARD

For attorney Liani Reeves, high school began with nonstop bullying, a misery that she attributes to being one of very few minorities in a predominately white school. "Daily name-calling and fistfights weren't unusual, but I'm scrappy," says Reeves, who is Asian. And while she says bullying did not make her a better litigator necessarily, it did spark her interest in a legal career. "I was searching for a way to reclaim power in not just a physical way. I perceived being a lawyer as a position of power. It was a way I could protect myself and others."

Today she is general counsel to Oregon's Gov. John Kitzhaber. As the governor's chief legal adviser, Reeves reviews all bills submitted to the governor for his signature and vets candidates for judicial appointments. When she was appointed general counsel in January 2011, Reeves was unsure what to expect. "It's not a job for which you can easily prepare," she says. "There's only one person in each state who does this job, so it's very unique." It helped that Reeves came to the position with a deep understanding of state government and related legal issues such as constitutional matters, sovereign immunity issues and public employment. Reeves' ease with multitasking and a strong work ethic have served her well, too.

Prior to joining Gov. Kitzhaber's Salem office, Reeves had no political or professional affiliation with the governor. She was recommended for the job by Oregon Attorney General John Kroger, who knew Reeves from the Oregon Department of Justice where she had worked for 10 years, most recently as deputy chief trial counsel.

"At the Department of Justice, I had a broad policy impact on matters that directly affect the public like education and healthcare benefits, and environmental issues. And it's not like the federal government where things move slowly and get lost. I was happy in the department, and I loved being in the courtroom."

As the first Asian woman to be named general counsel to the governor of Oregon, Reeves describes herself as an example. "I want law students to know that whatever they want to do they can, even if that goal doesn't fit with other people's idea of what a certain kind of lawyer should look like."

Asians make up four percent of Oregon's population. And Asian representation in the state bar, says Reeves, is even smaller and very few of them are litigators.

"I've certainly walked into plenty of courtrooms over the years and been mistaken as the court interpreter or court reporter," says Reeves. In fact, before her career started, she was told that she was not aggressive enough for the courtroom. "When I was in law school, I interviewed at a private firm and was explicit about my interest in doing trial work and litigation. After talking to me for 30 seconds, they told me flat out I was too passive to be a litigator without knowing anything about me."

"I'm very conscious that people's notions of what it means to be a lawyer are often based on appearance and

gender. Culturally, my being an Asian woman in litigation is contrary to that perception. It's important to me that other Asians and women can see me as someone who has done that. In law school we're bombarded with what litigators look like and [they] never look like me."

Early in her legal career, Reeves became a board member of Oregon Minority Lawyers Association. "The Oregon bar isn't very diverse. When I first got involved with the association, I wasn't looking to hone my leadership or service skills. My goal was to connect with a community of diverse lawyers with whom I could share ideas. And I've been able to do that."

Born in Korea, Reeves was four months old when she was adopted by a white family from Oregon. "In my day, the model around interracial adoption was geared toward assimilation. Parents were advised not to cultivate differences, and to simply love their adopted children as their own. Today that model has changed. Parents receive training and coaching that help them to teach racial and cultural identity and that they should cultivate these things in their adopted children."

As an undergrad at Willamette University in Oregon, Reeves connected with an Asian community for the first time. "I went a little overboard, cramming my dorm room with Asian knickknacks whose meanings were lost on me," she says. "Over time I came to realize that culturally I'm just not Korean, but I've created a community that includes many Asian people including interracial adoptees—we share a lot of the same experiences."

At the Willamette University College of Law, Reeves joined the Multicultural Law Students Association, and she planned a university-wide celebration in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. with more than 1,500 attendees. The university recognized her achievement with an award named for the Rev.

King. Reeves received her J.D. degree in 2001.

Throughout her career in government, says Reeves, she never plotted a specific trajectory. "I've always approached my job as an obligation to make whatever institution I work for a better place. I never just did my job description. I look around at what can be improved and where there are gaps and what can I do to fix them. My objective is to do a good job and get things done. The opportunities follow."

Steven Powers, Gov. Kitzhaber's deputy general counsel who attended law school with Reeves, says, "We work hard and juggle an astounding number of issues each day, and Liani manages it all with grace and grit." Powers considers Reeves a true trailblazer: "Trailblazers are not just the first person to hold a position or the only person to hold a position; rather, trailblazers are those who make a path knowing full well that others will follow and who are willing to help people around them reach their full potential. Liani has consistently helped others around her (me included), and is a great mentor and friend to the next generation of lawyers and staff around her."

Recently Reeves and a group of peers inaugurated IMAGE (Inspiring

Minority Attorneys Toward Growth and Excellence), a program designed to support racial and ethnic minority attorneys in their first three years of practice. "We have a huge problem retaining minority attorneys in Oregon," says Reeves. "Minorities come to law school here and then feel out of place in the workforce. The first three years in the profession are tough enough without the added discomfort that can sometimes come with being a minority."

Reeves is unsure where she will go after tenure as general counsel to the governor closes. Wherever she ends up—returning to the attorney general's office, running for public office, or working with local or federal government—Reeves is certain to practice law through a public lens: "It's important to me that the law filters through what's in the best interest of the public and not exclusively a favorable financial or political outcome." **D&B**

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