

The Other

By Micha Star Liberty

"In order to be irreplaceable one must always be different."

– Coco Chanel

They say that what sets you apart sometimes feels like a burden. But it's not. It is what makes you great. In an organization of great lawyers, we celebrate and cultivate what makes us excellent trial lawyers. As we should.

It is so meaningful to me personally that I was sworn in as president of Consumer Attorneys of California in San Francisco, the city of my birth. I was born in the Haight-Ashbury in the early 1970s to a family that raised me to believe that we are all equal, we have a voice, and are worthy of a seat at the table. It was instilled in me that debate is healthy for any society, and that we have an obligation to help those in need if we can.

I am proud to be the 58th President of this organization. I am only the sixth female president. I have a tremendous amount of appreciation for the women who have come before me who I have been lucky enough to know and learn from. Mary Alexander, Sharon Arkin, Christine Spagnoli, and Elise Sanguinetti, I owe you each a debt of gratitude for the paths you've paved, the battles you've waged, and the barriers you've broken. Yet, there is more work to do.

Over the last decade, we have increased diversity in our executive committee. We will have the first Asian American woman president next year and in four more years we will have our first president who identifies as lesbian.

These numbers are important. Recognizing these differences is important. Until the ranks of our members and leaders are truly

reflective of our state and nation, we need to recognize and honor each as they come.

Let us also bear in mind that diversity is one thing, but inclusion in the power structure is something different.

It was important to me to be a leader in CAOC because I wanted to help set an example for those coming up behind me. When I worked in politics after college I was told that we each had an obligation to "carry as we climb." As one climbs each rung of the ladder of success you need to bring others up with you. For those of you out there who wonder if you can be a future president of CAOC, I hope that over the next year I can model a path to success. You don't have to have a traditional background to find a path to leadership, all you need is a passion for justice and a commitment to helping your brothers and sisters in this organization. You belong here.

And yet for as long as I can remember, I was acutely aware of being "the other" in some way.

It is completely normal to perceive distinctions from our peers and our elders, but labels can separate us. They can alienate. They create distance. Sadly, at times it feels as if they were intended to create that distance. And that is not a good thing. It's not a good thing in our salad bowl of a state, where we need to embrace and celebrate our differences, be they ethnic, or race, or identity. It takes a concerted effort – as individuals and as an organization – to overcome the perception that we are dissimilar in our power and our authority.

Shortly after I was born, my parents moved to Haiku, Maui and adopted the Aloha spirit, respect for the island's sacred lands, and embraced the traditional

Hawaiian culture as newcomers. But while we may have lived on the land, we were not of the land, as the civil rights fight for Hawaiian sovereignty taught us. We were never overtly discriminated against, but we were referred to as *hapa haole*, meaning half Hawaiian and half other. The term *hapa* is usually meant as a term of inclusion – like you're respectful enough to be invited to the birthday party, but not the luau or sacred ceremony. At its root it signifies partial belonging.

My time on Maui gave me an innate sense of civil rights, an appreciation for Hula, and the belief that girls should be like a pineapple: stand tall, wear a crown, and be sweet on the inside.

When we moved back to the mainland, I transitioned from Hula to ballet, while attending a performing arts school and dancing with several companies in California and New York. I was lucky enough to make lifelong friends with the people I danced with.

Then, on September 13, 1990, during my senior year of high school in San Diego, Amber Clark, one of the ballerinas I danced with for a decade, a beautiful girl with a bright future and a perfect pirouette, was stabbed to death and sexually assaulted along with her mother in their home by an assailant known as the Clairemont Serial Killer. Amber became my inspiration to help women and girls. I knew there was much work to do.

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A year later, during my first semester in college, on October 11, 1991, I was glued to the television watching Anita Hill testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. She told the committee and America that Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her while he was her supervisor. I was floored by her courage. And incensed by how she was treated by the Senators questioning her. The men on the committee asked: Was she was a scorned woman? They asked: What did she have to gain? I also remember the backlash against her for her testimony, and the bullying that went on. I will never forget the bumper sticker I saw time and time again with the simple call to action: “Honk if you think Anita lied.” Sadly, not much has changed since that day. I knew then as I know now: There remains much work to do. Just ask Christine Blasey Ford.

The next year, I volunteered for Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign and voted in my first election. After college in 1995 I moved to Washington DC and started as a White House intern during Clinton’s first term. I was one of the few interns with access to the West Wing. There happened to be another White House intern with access to the West Wing then whose initials were also M. L., but it would take several more years for that tale of abuse of power,

sexual harassment, and betrayal of trust to reach the American public. What followed was atrocious bullying that would have destroyed most 22-year-old girls. Again, not much has changed. The same month the Lewinsky Scandal became public, I left DC to go to law school, because I knew there was much work to do.

After law school, I focused my practice on the representation of survivors of sexual assault, abuse and harassment. I felt an obligation to stand up to bullies and became fiercely intolerant of anyone who mistreated others.

My involvement with Consumer Attorneys of California began as soon as my law career did. I joined the Board in 2003 after only two years of practice. I fought for the creation of a new lawyers committee and education geared toward newer practitioners with then President Sharon Arkin in 2005, and did the same for the women’s caucus in 2008. In 2010, Vincent Howard and I started the CAOC Diversity Committee. Diverse groups based on disability, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression have historically been under-represented in the plaintiffs’ bar and state bar in general. There was much work to do to overcome that disparity and to promote inclusion among the membership and leadership of CAOC.

Other than simply being the right thing to do, there are legitimate organizational

benefits to being more diverse:

1. More diversity means more money. Organizations that have more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenue.
2. Diversity leads to better decision making. Diverse teams making decisions outperform individual decision-makers 87% of the time.
3. Diversity generates higher membership rates by 67%.
4. Racially and ethnically diverse organizations outperform industry norms by 35%.

We have made great strides toward true diversity and more inclusion. But there is still work to be done.

I intend to work this next year with the CAOC advocacy team to help make your practices easier with civil procedure tweaks, to pass pro-consumer legislation and help elect political candidates who understand the need to improve the lives of California consumers and workers.

To every member of our organization I submit that if you want a seat at my table, I will make room. I see you and all you do. I recognize your struggles and honor your successes. I will include you in our work.

I will make it my mission over the next year to ensure that all are welcome at CAOC. All. Are. Welcome. Todos son bienvenidos; Tout le monde est bienvenu; Dōu huānyíng; Vse dobro pozhalovat’ and Aloha. ■

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new laws at every turn, in Congress, in the state Legislature, in ballot measures and, of course, in the courts. Passing these laws was a monumental task but keeping these laws in place so that future generations can enjoy the fruit of our labor is our continued and ongoing battle.

This will require all of us to stay committed and connected. It will also require you to be aware of what CAOC is doing in Sacramento by continuing to be engaged or

becoming engaged. Standing on the sidelines is no longer acceptable. All California trial lawyers benefit from the fruits of our labor and efforts – and all California trial lawyers need to do their fair share in these fights. So, if you are not already engaged, please join a committee that interests you, share your knowledge and expertise by volunteering to help with legislation or helping with one of the many causes and campaigns we pursue every year. While we will always be seeking financial help – since all of these battles require financial support to counter the millions spent

against us – your commitment and sweat equity are very important.

Thank each and every one of you for all you did in the past, all you did this year and all you will do in the future to provide the support CAOC needs to ensure California is a more just and equitable place for all.

It has been my honor and pleasure to serve as your President this year. I promise I will not fade away and that my commitment to CAOC, my fellow trial lawyers and to our clients will not end with the end of my presidency. ■