

margaret Wong

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ost of my legal practice involves immigration law, which is very personal for me. I remember coming here from Hong Kong. It was the end of the Vietnam era, and I came to Seattle on a student visa with very little money but very big dreams. The experience had a very

profound impact on my career and my life.

Being from the Far East, I was very supportive of the war in Vietnam. I knew that if the communists took over, thousands would be murdered. But when I got to Seattle, I was in shock. On the television, I saw thousands of young people smoking pot and protesting the war. Where I came from it was an honor to be able to serve your country, so I just didn't know what to think.

I came to the U.S. with my sister, and we were in Seattle for only 10 days before we moved to Iowa. I liked it there. There was no racism because we were probably the first Chinese people they had ever seen. I went to work as a waitress to earn money for college. Then, in 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court made a ruling that allowed foreign-born nationals to become notaries and lawyers, so I decided to go to law school in Buffalo. Back then, only about 20 to 30 percent of law students were women, and there were only three Asians in the whole school, so I was something of a trailblazer.

I didn't really think that doors were closed to me, but when I graduated I did have some trouble finding a job. I looked for jobs in New York, Washington, D.C., just about anywhere that would take me, but in those days the federal, state and city governments didn't hire Chinese women. I ended up teaching at the State University of New York at Fredonia. From there I went back to Buffalo, where I worked for the Mayor's Office as chief legal counsel for the HUD program. I came to Cleveland because I got a job at what was then Central National Bank. This is where my dreams really started to take hold.

I have some very fond memories of my first days here. I used to take

the train from the Terminal Tower all the way to Van Aken Shopping Center, which is at the end of the line. I lived in Chagrin Falls, so I took the Number Five bus all the way there.

We Chinese did everything in a group back then. That's how I met my husband. There were always 10 or 20 of us who went out and did things on the weekends or whenever we could find the time. His folks owned a laundromat, and his father worked for 11 years trying to save for the passage to get his family here. So, like I said, immigration is a very personal thing for me.

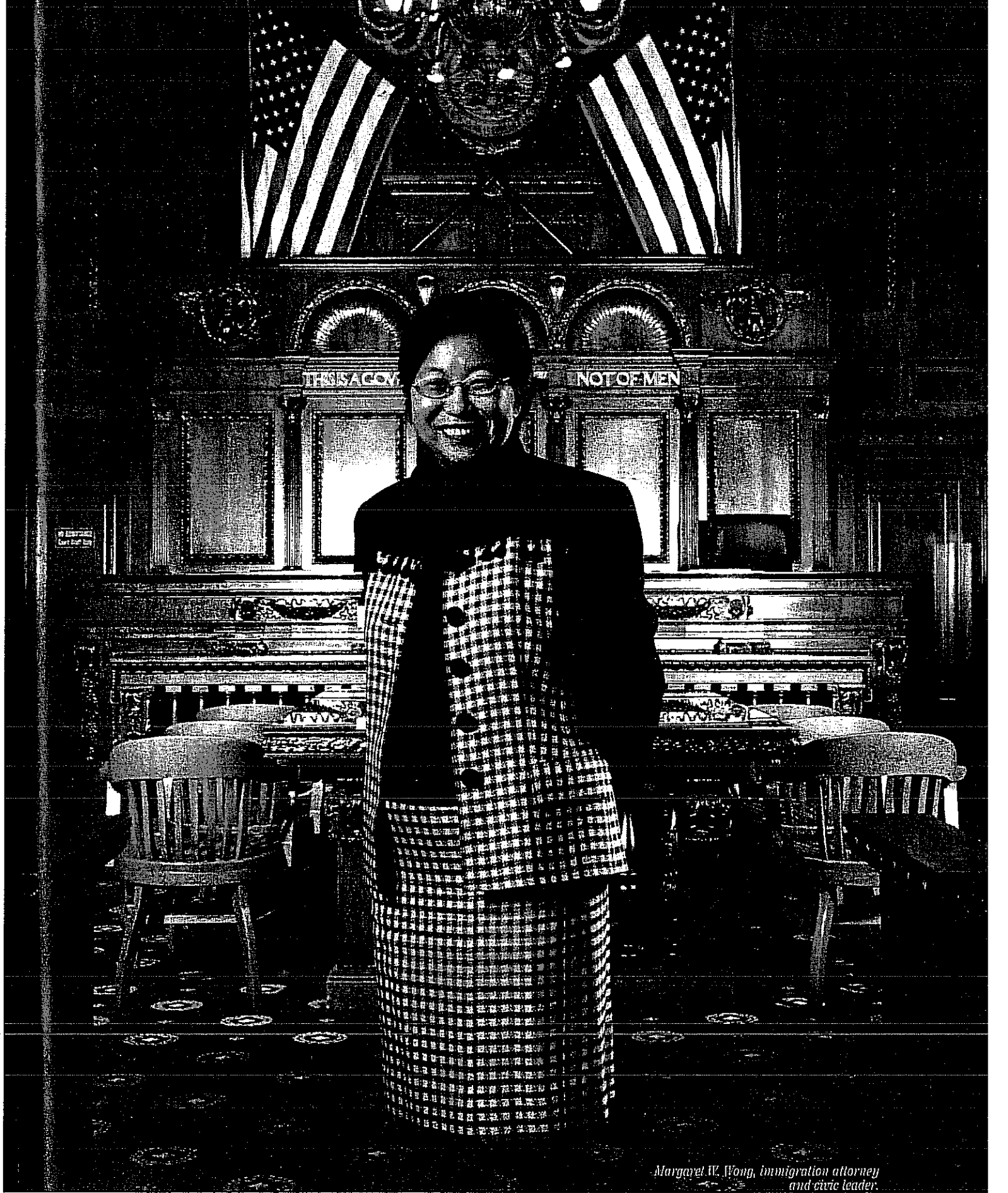
Of course, I never stopped working once I got here. As a young lawyer at a small law firm, I used to take time to listen to other court cases and learn trial techniques by watching other more experienced attorneys. I would call judges, and ask to be assigned as a second chair, or to an interesting case, just so I could continue to learn. I also took on a lot of work — work that didn't pay much — but it gave me a lot of experience.

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Now, of course, my practice is very well known. We handle immigration cases for numerous chief executives and their families as well as other individuals. Just recently, I won two People's Republic of China asylums, both of them stowaways. In Cleveland, that's virtually unheard of — and I feel very good about it because it's not just good for them, it's also very good for our community.

The people who come here from other countries are often very innovative people who bring with them skills and the desire to open businesses and employ people — which is good for our entire city. They also bring their dreams with them — dreams they hope to realize here. That's where I come in. I know where they're coming from. 🚗

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*Margaret W. Wong, immigration attorney
and civic leader.*