

Close Up

By Fran Henry



PHOTO BY SCOTT SHAW

Margaret Wong

Immigration lawyer Margaret Wong, 44, is president of the Federal Bar Association's Cleveland chapter. She and her husband, Kam Chan, have two children, Steven, 9, and Allison, 8.

We are dismayed by many things, but nothing more than the appalling shortage of new lawyer jokes.

"What do you call 10,000 lawyers at the bottom of Lake Erie?"

"A good start."

But how many times can we laugh at that joke? A couple hundred times, at most. Sad, but true.

And sadder yet: As the saga of Margaret Wong spreads throughout the land, *as we speak*, lawyer jokes are going to get much harder to write.

With a single sentence, Wong single-handedly undoes all of our heartfelt lawyer stereotypes.

"All law should be beyond money. Once you think about the money, you've forgotten the mission."

Her firm, Margaret W. Wong & Associates, charges flat rates for its immigration cases — \$1,000 to \$2,000, depending on the case. "Most lawyers don't believe we can afford flat fees, but ultimately you budget time and expenses. The system works."

And calls from clients are returned immediately, kinda like we're human beings with real lives. There's no waiting for Wong et al. to get back to you.

"Our clients are why we're here."

See what we mean. She's a radical babe.

"I never see myself as high-powered. I represent the nobodies, the people who need me most. I know how hard it

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is to get a green card. I identify with them.

"It's very high pressure. Everyone is scared and nervous, maybe afraid of deportation. The emotional issues are more traumatic than in divorce."

Wong herself used to be a nobody — a girl newly arrived from Hong Kong with \$265 in her pocket and a younger sister, Cecilia, in tow. They were on scholarship to Ottumwa Heights

College, an all-girls Catholic junior college in Iowa. (Margaret went on to law school at the State University of New York in Buffalo.)

"I'm the oldest in the family, and I eventually brought the whole family over." That includes siblings Rose and George and their parents.

"We were raised to please. I always asked myself, 'Would he or she like what I do?' Maybe that's from 14 years

of Catholic girls schools."

Her conscientiousness knows no bounds. It's almost frightening.

"Even when I win a case, I feel like I should've done it faster, or done something better."

(We generally feel that critical of our housekeeping. Did we dust this year? And why not? Etc.)

She is perfectly uncritical, however, of her husband, Kam. "I never thought I'd marry such a nice and quiet guy. We're so comfortable with each other," she says. "He's a gem."

Yeah, yeah, we know the type. Ward Cleaver, Ozzie Nelson, Gomez Addams.

"He normally cooks and I clean up." (Wong's advice for the newly involved: "You cannot spoil your man. If you do, they forget that you exist.")

Wong's face is more often than not lit up with a smile. "I don't fight too hard in life. I know somehow God will take care. A lot of people work 100 times harder than I do."

Yeah, her husband. (Laugh, Margaret.) In addition to cooking and getting the children off to school, he owns and operates a pharmacy.

She also is fairly imperturbable. "I don't need my space." But when she does, relief is at hand: "I'll go into my bedroom, take two deep breaths and I'm OK."

For her, what life boils down to is this: "I have my children, my husband, work. And my family. How lucky I am to have all my family."

And she also has weekly poker games with friends and family. "Anything I can do with my mind, I play. My body, forget it."

She wins a lot. And why aren't we surprised?

