

AsianWeek

Steel Inspired by Mom's Shop Harassment

Staff Report, Mar 16, 2007

http://news.asianweek.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=a3b5acae167d9c503bc2faf1cac8e12d

SAN FRANCISCO — Overcoming tremendously long odds and defying political pundits, housewife and businesswoman Michelle Park Steel became the highest-ranking Korean American ever elected to state public office through her election last fall to the California State Board of Equalization. She's part of an Asian American majority in which three of the five board members are Asian American women. Park Steel, a republican, now joins Betty Yee and Judy Chu on the board. A fourth APA, Controller John Chiang, sits on the panel as an ex-officio member.

"We call Bill [Leonard] our token white male," joked Park Steel. "It's really a testament to the openness of the American political system that we find ourselves in this situation. Obviously, we won't always agree with each other, in fact I think I'm the only board member who is a businesswoman, but clearly it's great to see that our community is starting to really get involved."

Park Steel was elected out of the 3rd Equalization District (Southern California — San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, San Diego and Imperial counties), which covers over 8 million people with a voter registration of 45 percent republican to 30 percent democrat. In sales tax alone, Park Steel's district generates over \$43 billion a year.

Despite an Asian American population of just 10 percent in her district, Park Steel is incredibly proud and attributes her victory directly to the role the Korean/Asian American community played. "I was an unknown and running against a well-respected assemblyman [in the Republican primary]. Who wanted to give money to me? I raised \$1.3 million for my campaign and I would say about 90 percent of that came from the Korean/Asian American community. Without them, there would have been no way I could have won."

Park Steel also heavily credits her mother in her rising so quickly in the world of California politics. "I literally started running for this office three years ago, she said, "My mother was not only 120 percent behind my effort, she helped with everything: looking after the kids, cooking — you name it, she did it. More importantly, ever since I was small she instilled in me that I could do anything I wanted, too. So even when people said I was a long shot to win, she said go do it, try your best." The first-time elected official also noted that when she was young, she remembered how the Board of Equalization used to harass her mother's garment shop. She said that it "really motivated me to run for the board."

Fluent in Korean, Japanese and English, Park Steel is married to former California Republican Party Chairman Shawn Steel. She has two daughters, Cheyenne, 18, and Siobhan, 15.

When asked what was the most inspiring moment of her hard-fought campaign, Park Steel's voice is slightly cracked and recalls, "I went to a senior citizen organization in San Diego made up predominately of Koreans and Asian Americans. I remember this clearly, there were 51 of them.

After my presentation, they not only urged me to run, but they had, among themselves, raised \$951 for my campaign. I was so moved and inspired by their act ... the faith they had in me."

"I look forward to serving in my new office," she said in closing. "While I don't think being Korean/Asian American will necessarily influence me on how I decide things, I think it's very gratifying that only in America could an immigrant Korean woman seek and get such a high elective office.

"I am part of the 1.5 generation," she continued, "and I think it's fantastic that we are now charged with handling the money of this great state. My main goal will still be to make sure that the taxpayer and the private sector have a voice on this most important of boards. Obviously a mainstay of Asian American survival in this country is small business, I hope to be their voice."