

# Former chemical engineer finds fulfillment in employment law

By Brian Cox

Nearly 25 years ago, the Legal Aid Society of Orange County pioneered a web-based application that enabled individuals to perform self-represented legal tasks and to prepare their own legal pleadings.

The LASOC executive director's young niece, who came by the Legal Aid Society offices three to four times a week during the summer to help with filing and other clerical tasks, remembers also helping to test the innovative program and find bugs that needed to be fixed.

Who knew that one day the quiet, somewhat reserved young girl would become an attorney herself?

"I logged quite a few hours there," says Bernice Wu, who is now an associate with Dillingham & Murphy, LLP in San Francisco. "I really enjoyed it. It felt nice to see the program being rolled out."

I-CAN!™ (Interactive Community Assistance Network) is a system of web-based interactive kiosks located in public libraries and courthouses that allows individuals to complete legal forms with minimal review by attorneys as necessary. The program has received several awards and currently is in use in nine California counties.

Wu's experience with I-CAN! was her first exposure to how the law can more easily help people in need find solutions to what can be complex problems.



Attorney Bernice Wu loves to travel whenever she gets a chance. Here, she is at the top of Klahhane Ridge in Olympic National Park in Washington State.



"I do really like assisting people and helping people," she says. "All those hours at the Legal Aid, even though I never met face-to-face with the people who came in for help, I thought it was really rewarding."

She now handles a variety of cases including employment law, labor law, and personal injury and receives a strong sense of fulfillment from assisting individuals.

Born and raised in Long Beach, Calif., Wu tended to be shy and preferred focusing on school and her studies rather than many social activities. It wasn't until high school, she says, that she started to come out of her shell. She remembers making a conscious effort to meet new people and make new friends. She was on the swim team, played the flute and piano, and was in the orchestra and the marching band. Her father was an accountant, who had immigrated to the U.S. from Myanmar. Her mother, who is originally from Malaysia, stayed home to raise Wu and her younger sister until they entered middle school, after which she took a job as a manager for a school photography company.

Somewhat unsure what she wanted to do for a career, Wu early on set her sights on becoming an engineer. It was a common career path in her family (her sister is a process engineer with a pharmaceutical company) and Wu enjoyed science. It seemed a natural choice.

At the University of California, Irvine, Wu earned a degree in chemical engineering. She was a board member of the university's chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and was project manager of the university's Chem-E-Car research team in 2013. Her first job out of college was with the Southern California Gas Co. working in pipeline integrity, safety, and regulations. She soon became involved with compliance work, handling audits by the California Public Utilities Commission and tracking non-compliance events such as leaks or accidents on the pipeline. She found the regulatory and compliance work engaging and her interest in law – first lit all those years ago in the LASOC offices – was reignited.

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**Attorney Bernice Wu has traveled extensively throughout Southeast Asia. This historic Buddhist temple in the ancient city of Bagan, Myanmar, dates from Pagan Kingdom of the 9th to the 13th century.**

In 2016, after two years with the gas company, Wu enrolled at the University of San Francisco School of Law. The transition back to school was seamless and Wu picked up on the material quickly.

“I think it was because of all the analytical thinking that I put in and learned in engineering and at my job,” she says.

Because of her chemical engineering background, Wu was initially encouraged to go into intellectual property law, but she quickly discovered that she didn’t find the field particularly interesting. The material was too dry and seemed to lack sufficient human interaction. She was drawn instead to employment law.

An externship at the Federal Labor Relations Authority was her first real foray into the labor and employment field. She connected with the work and was intrigued by the varied investigations into complaints by employees claiming violations of their union rights. Wu enjoyed interviewing the claimants, fleshing out the story, and writing up the facts to help determine whether the violation was actionable.

Wu also externed at the California Court of Appeals under Justice Jon Streeter, where she had the opportunity to hone her research and writing skills.

Upon earning her J.D. and passing the bar, Wu joined Dillingham & Murphy in 2020, mere months before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world.

“When I first started, I was assisting in our employment law cases and with personal injury cases,” she says. “Lately, I have been focusing a lot more on false claims acts and doing quite a bit of work on workplace violence restraining orders.”

A civil “workplace violence” restraining order can be utilized by a retail business against people who persist in disrupting commerce and threatening customers or employees. The orders stay in effect for three years and police are generally very willing to arrest and transport offenders away from the protected business.

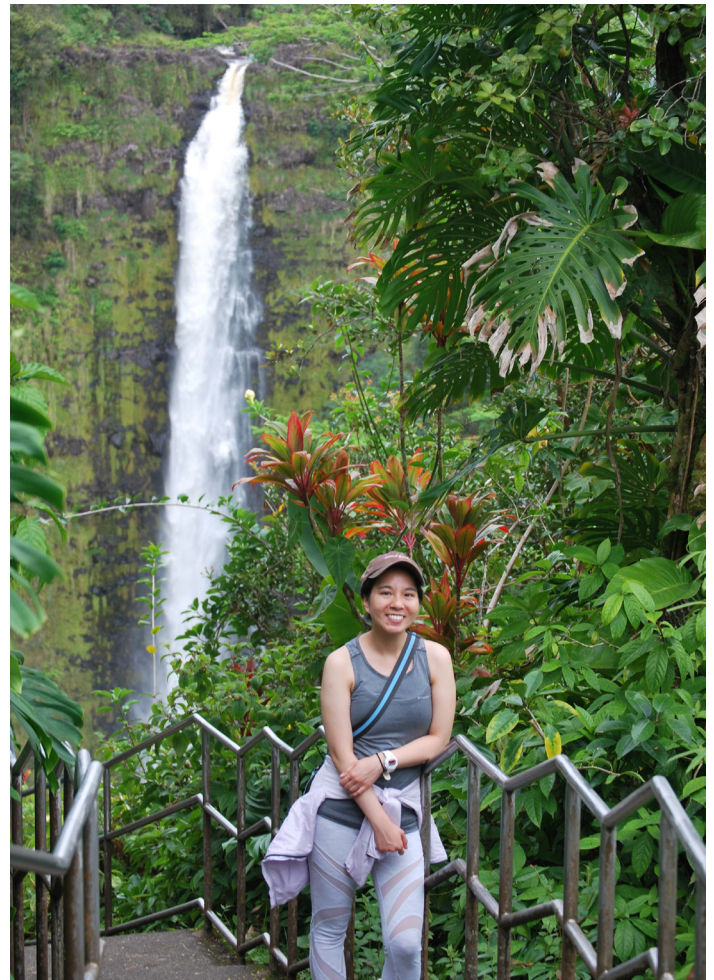
“I like those cases because it really feels that I’m helping to keep the employees of the store safe,” says Wu, who works with partner John Dahlberg on obtaining the restraining orders for clients.

Wu also represents employers in jury trials, arbitrations, and before agencies, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the California Civil Rights Department, and the Medical Board of California.

In her leisure time, Wu embraces her passion for ancient history and travel. She enjoys visiting old cities and museums. She has traveled extensively around Southeast Asia and has explored the ruins of Angkor Wat in Cambodia as well as toured the old Buddhist temple grounds and monuments in Bagan, an ancient city in central Myanmar that from the 9th to the 13th century was the capital of Pagan Kingdom (early Myanmar).

She’s a big hiker, loves to snorkel, and hopes to one day get her scuba certification.

She’s also into baseball and admits that being a Los Angeles Dodgers fan sometimes makes her Public Enemy No. 1 in the San Francisco office.



**Bernice at Akaka Falls in Hawaii, near Hilo. The falls plummet 442-feet into a stream-eroded gorge.**

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“I like the statistical aspect of baseball,” she says. “Some people say it’s really slow, but when the action is there, it’s exciting.”

But of all her interests and passions, Wu’s eyes light up the brightest when she talks about food and cooking.

“I come from a family of very good cooks,” she says. “My family is always getting together, whether it’s for a holiday or a random Sunday, to try a new recipe. Whenever we throw a large family gathering, there are a lot of helpers in the kitchen.”

Cooking is a creative outlet for Wu, and she enjoys experimenting with flavors – an interest that taps into her background in chemistry.

“I can let my mind think about something else when I’m cooking,” she says. “And at the end, you get to enjoy what you made...hopefully, it’s good,” she adds with a laugh.



**Bernice sports her love for the Los Angeles Dodgers in front of the Kyoto Imperial Palace in Kamigyō-ku, Kyoto, Japan. The former palace of the Emperor of Japan, it lost much of its function at the time of the Meiji Restoration, when the capital functions were moved to Tokyo in 1869.**