

Elsie Huang retires after six years as president of Asian Chamber

by Nikki Rosenberg

After six years of service, Elsie Huang is retiring as president of the Asian Chamber of Commerce of Houston. Her successor will be Rogene Calvert who takes over June 15.

Huang joined the Chamber as executive director shortly after retiring as a elementary school principal. But, shortly after taking on the job, the Chamber's board realized the incredible work she was doing and changed her title to president. Her success in both careers evolved from understanding the importance of civic duty.

Throughout her career, Huang has served on numerous boards; she says she will remain active on more than a dozen after leaving the Chamber. At 72, with two retirements to date, this vibrant woman is more active than many half her age.

The youngest of six, Huang moved to Houston from Tucson, Arizona with her family when she was 10. She graduated from Jeff Davis High School in 1955. Before attending the University of Houston, she owned and operated two beauty salons. After receiving her B.S. in Elementary Education and Sociology in 1971, Huang began teaching in Cypress Fairbanks ISD while pursuing her Master's Degree in Education Administration and Supervision. During the course of her career in education, she was a teacher, principal and counselor. In her capacity as principal, she won numerous awards and honors, including National Exemplary Principal Award from the U. S. Department of Education. She was honored at the 1990 Texas Council of Women School Executives and was featured in Who's Who in Professional and Executive Women and Two Thousand Notable American Women.

Throughout the course of her career, Huang has been active in civic life. She has been appointed to various boards and committees where she was able to effect change in the community and educational process. To date she serves on the Port of Houston Small Business Advisory Board, Gulf Coast Workforce Board, the Better Business Bureau, Crime Victim's Committee of the State Bar of Texas, Dr. Saavedra's HISD Public Engagement Committee, the Chinese Community Center Board and many others.

She was recently appointed Chairman of the Mayor's International Affairs and Development Council – Asia and Australia.

Huang's involvement with these and previous groups helped her face her first challenge as president of the Chamber: increasing membership.

Huang said, "My goals when I first started: I saw the membership and knew it needed to be increased.

Visibility, to be out there as much as I could. To offer a good range of speakers for our luncheons, seminars and quarterly breakfasts. And, of course, to get our own building.”

She attended as many events, grand openings and happenings in the Asian community as she could, inviting participants to join the Chamber. In addition, she organized and co-sponsored special events like breakfast meetings, expos and the annual gala. As the reputation of the Chamber spread beyond the Asian community, people began calling her for membership.

Huang noted, “Our Chamber is very different from any other Chambers in that only 50 percent of our membership is Asian. We have large companies, medium sized companies, and small companies as our members. We are very diverse.”

During her tenure, membership increased from less than 100 to over 900. As membership grew, so did the Board of Directors. When Huang began, there were only ten board members. Currently, the board consists of 24 members of differing ethnic backgrounds. Nationalities represented are Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Lebanese, Pilipino, Korean, Hispanic and Caucasian.

Second to rapidly growing the membership, the greatest change in the Chamber since Huang took office was the acquisition of its own office space. When Huang began, the Chamber operated out of one small office. Only four years later, in January 2007, the Chamber celebrated the grand opening of its new office space. The Chamber owns these spacious offices and a space next door which is leased out.

Huang reiterated that she was able to accomplish these initial goals because of her visibility and activity in the community.

She laughed as she said, “If I wanted to, I could have a luncheon engagement every day or a reception every evening. There’s always something going on. You have to pick and choose, because you can’t go to all of them. But, I try to be as visible as I can.”

After her retirement from the Chamber, she will likely stay as busy. Currently, she is producing a show with Edmund Gore through HCC and International Television called Asian Insights. The interviews and features are meant to educate and inspire Asians to become more active in the community.

Huang said, “We try to help young leaders become more civic-minded, to seek jobs in law enforcement or politics. We’re just not represented that well out there in the public life. We need to educate the Asians that there are many jobs other than lawyer or doctor or engineer that are needed.”

Having lived in the city for most of her life, she is aware of our city’s economic landscape. She is abreast of the global markets. With that in mind, Huang offered some words of advice to businesses today: “We are in a challenging time economically. [Business owners] need to take a deep breath, relax and don’t panic...this is the time to go out and do more advertising. The main thing is to just stick with it and be as conservative [in spending] as possible.”

She added, “This is also a great time to look at goals, re-new them, and see where you can improve your

business. Because, you know, it's going to turn around. It's just a matter of time.”

PULL-OUT QUOTE:

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