

ANNUAL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT SHARPENS YOUTH LEADERSHIP SKILLS, CIVIC GOALS

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – An excited George Washington University student of public health administration who just started a summer internship with the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans (NCVA) was almost gushing over the phone.

“I am so glad that I chose to intern here because I have an opportunity to learn about leadership skills,” Christine Wadhvani told *Asian Fortune*, referring, in part, to a forthcoming conference and her duties of answering telephone inquiries.

She helps with conference logistics and administrative support, as well as the organization’s project in enlisting volunteers for helping rebuild New Orleans, particularly Vietnamese American communities affected by Katrina.

Founded in 1986, NCVA aims to advance the cause and welfare of Vietnamese Americans “in a plural but united America – by participating actively and fully as civic minded citizens engaged in the areas of education, culture and civil liberties.”

Christine, like many a young person in the more multi-culturally mixed generation in the diverse Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, is part Vietnamese (through her mother) and part Asian-Indian (through her father). But like many an aspiring young American in an immigrant community, she is aware of her need to learn other skills other than getting a college degree.

And that’s exactly what the 20-year old organization NCVA has been aiming to do in the last four years, by holding an annual Vietnamese American Youth Leadership Conference.

“We have designed an ambitious agenda and lined up an inspiring group of speakers,” Hung Nguyen, NCVA President, told *Asian Fortune* above a din of social chatter two seats away in a table of well wishers during a gala/fundraising dinner held last month by AAA-Fund at China Garden in Roslyn, VA while also observing its 10th anniversary.

No wonder his intern was so keyed up herself.

This year’s four-day conference, held June 21-24 in the nation’s capital, had an overall goal of not only widening the youthful participants exposure to the nation’s public and private institutions and gaining ideas of how to lead in their future career endeavors, but also, and especially, of sharpening their social consciousness for “giving back to their community.”

The invitation to the summit was aimed at young professionals, college and high school students. At this time of writing, there were about 40 registered participants coming from California, Texas, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Arkansas and the closer states of Maryland and Virginia.

“There is even one straight from the Philippines!” Christine remarked approvingly. A male high school graduate aiming to further studies in the United States.

Housed at the George Washington University Center, the conference participants were treated to a tour of the U.S. Capitol, visits to Congressional offices, attendance at special briefings, and interactive sessions with experienced professionals, scholars and activists.

Altogether, the four-day program included workshop sessions, public speaking, team building, financial literacy, service learning, and how to write grant proposals.

The first day focused on pep talk – advising the youthful audience on how to take a stand, take initiative and be proactive.

“And a dinner of pizza,” Christine added as a sure teaser.

Highlights of the second day included presentations by James Ho, a U.S. Supreme Court clerk for Justice Clarence Thomas who spoke of how judiciary decisions affect public policy; Mina Nguyen, Director of Public Policy, Republican National Committee, and who played a leading role in the 2004 presidential campaign aimed at the AAPI electorate; and Mark L. Keam, Chief Counsel, U. S. Senate Judiciary Committee under Senator Durbin, Assistant Senate Democratic Leader ((Whip), former Assistant Chief Counsel at the U.S. Small Business Administration during the Clinton administration, and one of the most resourceful contributors to AAPI empowerment.

The third day delved on financial matters, drawing savvy from Freddie Mac and State Farm Insurance speakers on how to

maintain good credit, write proposals for community projects, mortgage and lending issues, and other economically self-empowering subjects.

The fourth and last day started with scenarios on what to do and pursue after college, a description of non-profit, advocacy organizations that proffer a rewarding alternative to public service, and development of an action plan. It ended on a celebratory note, with the giving of awards to those who have excelled in their line of work and for their contributions to community at a gala dinner held at the Fortune Restaurant in Falls Church, VA.

Other than those mentioned above, the list of two dozen speakers drew from among AAPI high achievers in the various fields of public service, military, advocacy work, academia, literature, and media. Quite a mesmerizing array of AAPI models to inspire, with their own experiences, their youthful audience -- many of whom have a background of survival being members of refugee families from Asia themselves.

They are, names alphabetically arranged and italicized:

Linda Akutagawa, VP Resource and Business Development, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc.; *Elena Arons*, of American Legacy Foundation; *Robert L. Bisi*, Dir. Communications & Outreach, Youth America; *Larry Berman*, Professor & Dir. University of California Washington Center; *Christine Chen*, Exec. Dir., Organization of Chinese Americans; *Dr. Ngoc Quang Chu*, President, Vietnamese Professional Society; *Christina Diaz-Malone*, Dir. National Initiatives, Freddie Mac; *Than H. Dinh*, Captain, U.S. Air Force, *Uyen Dinh*, Counsel, House Committee on Armed Services; *Janelle Hu*, former Executive Director, APIA-VOTE; *Daphne Kwok*, former Executive Director, APAICS and presently Executive Director, Angel Island Foundation Project; *David Lamb*, reporter and author; *Ngoan Le*, Senior Program Dir., Chicago Community Trust;

Phuong Ly, reporter, The Washington Post; *Sherri Ly*, reporter, WTTG/Fox 5 News; *Carl Nguyen*, Agent, State Farm Insurance, *Dr. Charles Cuong Nguyen*, former President, NCVA; *Maj. Nguyen*, AAPI/NAAN Program Manager, Federal Aviation Administration; *Bob Sakinawa*, Senior Counsel, Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA); *Shari Sitron*, Dir., Youth Activism Program, American Legacy Foundation; *Bryan Spoon*, Outreach Liaison, Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA); *Bouapha Toommaly*, Field Program Manager, Rural Coalition; and *Duoa Thor*, Deputy Director, Southeast Asian Resource Action Center.

What has been the impact of these youth leadership summits?

The current NCVA president, Hung Nguyen, who has training in psychology and political science, wrote:

“Surveys of VAYLC participants show: 83 % are using skills and knowledge they have acquired; 68% are sharing their skills and knowledge with others; 55% have interned at a government agency, corporation or nonprofit organization; and 39% have increased their community involvements.

“The answer to the question of ‘Are VALYC participants having an impact on the community?’ The answer is YES.”

Feedback from a at least three former participants said:

“I’ve become less timid and my leadership and communication have improved tremendously – all thanks to VALYC.”

“This year I helped facilitate a leadership conference for Asian American youth. I also volunteered with Catholic Charities and helped mentor new refugee children from Vietnam, Liberia and Burma as they adjust to life in the States. Thanks to VALYC for opening doors to me.”

“I value the workshops held last summer at both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party headquarters because the speakers reminded me about why I support the political party I do, and helped me understand difference paradigms of viewing the same issue.”

These would be music to the ears of not only the summit organizers but also its funding sponsors: Citibank, Freddie Mac, State Farm, SunTrust, AnviCom, Asian American Press, BN Magazine, Vietnamese American Television, International Leadership Foundation, Moonlight Group, Retina Studios, Spectrum Knowledge, and Youth Service America.

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