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Photograph by Sean Penello


Former mayor of Cupertino Dr. Michael Chang (left) started Asian Pacific American Leadership Institute seven years ago. Dr. Mae Lee is the associate director of the program.

## Asia Minors

By Sarmishta Ramesh

Institute offers Asian youth inroad to civic leadership and a place to discuss cultural issues in U.S. [More](#)

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## Cover Story



Photograph by Athanasia Brown

Students involved in the Asian Pacific American Leadership Institute program at De Anza College come from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Indian and Pakistani cultures and from all over Silicon Valley. This day students participated in a mock city council meeting.

# Asia Minors: Institute offers Asian youth inroad to civic leadership

By Sarmishta Ramesh

On a beautiful summer afternoon when teens everywhere are hanging out in malls and movie theaters, 58 high school students are closeted in a room at Cupertino's De Anza College. Strange as it may sound, these students have voluntarily given up a big chunk of their summer break to attend classes and workshops on civic responsibility and leadership skills. The month-long course offered by the Asian Pacific American Leadership Institute at De Anza College is geared toward creating more awareness about the need for community involvement among Asian youth in the United States.

APALI began seven years ago as the brainchild of Cupertino's former mayor and chairman of De Anza's Asian and Asian American Studies Department, Michael Chang. Chang says that even though Asian Americans form the second largest ethnic population in Santa Clara County, not many are involved in mainstream civic and political activities.

"The best way to introduce them to social and political issues is to expose them to the system when they are young," he says. He says APALI helps students get comfortable with their cultural identity while at the same time stressing the need for their voices to be heard.

On one Tuesday afternoon students pile into the classroom for an interactive panel discussion with a high-profile cast of city leaders. There's Otto Lee, Sunnyvale council member, Margaret Abe-Koga, environmental planning commissioner from Mountain View, Gilbert Wong, chairman of Cupertino's planning commission and Chang.

The student group is equally diverse. While most of them are locals coming from schools in Cupertino and Sunnyvale, there are a few who come from as far as Belmont and South San Jose. They represent the Asian diversity of the Bay Area with teens from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Indian and Pakistani cultures.

As the discussion progresses, students delve deeper into the social dynamics involved when Asians run for political office. Their questions explore the role of second-generation Asian Americans and women in local politics.

Lee points out that a majority of Asians involved in civic life were immigrants and, for unexplained reasons, second- and third-generation Asian Americans seemed to shy away public responsibilities.

Lee's comments about Asians in the Bay Area living in a cultural bubble set the class thinking.

"Here in Silicon Valley we have the numbers, so running for any political office is far easier. Go out to Iowa or Texas where the Asian population is miniscule," he says, "and then try to become a part of the mainstream system. That is a challenge."

According to the most recent census, Asians form only 4 percent of the U.S. population.

Abe-Koga, having lost a bid for the Mountain View City Council in 2004, offered her insight into the barriers Asian women face.

"There is a stereotype attached to Asian women. People both within our community and outside think of us only as moms and caregivers. And that is a barrier we have to break," she says.

The bottom line of APALI's summer program was echoed in Gilbert Wong's statement: "It is important for us to have a seat at the table too. If not, somebody else will make the decisions for us."

These discussions have already begun to affect the current batch of students.

Katherine Sun, a 16-year-old junior from Homestead High School and a Sunnyvale resident, says that in the past few weeks she has become more aware of her own culture and the history of stereotypes. This fall she will begin her internship program in Lee's Sunnyvale city council office.

Katherine is not the only one to intern in a city office. APALI, in partnership with Vision New America (a nonprofit organization that promotes civic participation of underrepresented ethnic groups), has placed students in the offices of the governor, state assembly members, county supervisors, mayors and city council members.

Apart from giving its students an opportunity to experience the inner functioning of public offices, APALI is designed to encourage students to talk about issues they face as Asian American teens. The four-week course is loaded with group and panel discussions, workshops, field trips to various local ethnic pockets and extensive reading suggestions.

"The idea behind the course to help them appreciate their whole dimension and urge them to be active in some way in their community," says Mae Lee, associate director of the program.

Lee says the discussions help students make sense of the discrimination around them.

"We tend to believe that there is no racial discrimination around us. But once the students start talking about it, some realize that they have seen patterns of discrimination around them, but have never really given much thought to it. Some might have experienced it themselves. But they very rarely get an opportunity to analyze their feelings about it," Lee says.

Nabeel Alam is a 15-year-old junior from Evergreen High School in San Jose. His parents moved to the United States from India. Nabeel says he took the course only as a requirement for completing his program with Vision New America.

"But the last couple of weeks have changed my views on two issues," he says. "Earlier I did not think that a person's race had any role when he or she is running for or taking up a political office. But I now see that is a crucial factor," he says.

Nabeel says that he has come to understand that stronger Asian representation means that the discrimination within the Pan Asian communities has to end. "We separate ourselves as Indians, Chinese, Pakistanis or other cultures. But I've come to realize that we need to stick together when working towards a common goal," he adds.

For others such as Betty Duong, the head intern at APALI, the course has been a life-altering experience. "I joined APALI seven years ago. I was then a freshman at De Anza and was directionless," she says. Duong remembers having difficulties as a teenager relating to her parents, who had moved to the United States in 1979 as war refugees from Vietnam.

"When I first took up the course, I was apathetic. But slowly I got hooked on it. It made me get closer to my parents." Duong says that the program required her to talk to immigrants and find out their stories. "When I approached my mom about it, initially she was hesitant. But then she began narrating stories of the horrors of war. Their constant sense of fear and the need to survive and provide for all of us children once here in America. That talk with my mom made me understand my parents far better than ever before," she says.

Duong graduated from UC-Berkeley this year. She says seven years ago she did not believe that Berkeley was even remotely possible for her.

"Michael Chang and APALI made me feel confident about my own capabilities," she says. Duong interns with APALI every summer and plans a career in immigration law.

More than half a decade into the program, APALI has begun to show results. A new breed of politically and social active young Asian Americans has begun to emerge.

Evan Low, a 22-year-old resident of Campbell and former student of APALI, ran for city council in 2004 and lost by a narrow

margin.

"People told me that I was too young to run for office. But if I'm not too young to die for my country and not too young to pay my taxes and vote, then why should I be too young to represent a city?" he says. Low is now serving on the Santa Clara County Commission on Senior Care.

Watching his students blossom makes Chang beam with pride. He says he did not expect his students to get politically active this early.

"According to my timetable they would have probably started in their mid-20s or early 30s. But that's the beauty of dealing with youngsters. They constantly challenge us," he says. "Our goal has always been to give them the time and space to understand that they can be Americans and Asian Americans at the same time. So it is really satisfying to watch them tread that path with confidence."

*For more information about APALI go to <http://www.svapali.org/>*

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