

## FEATURE

# In Service of the WYLD –A Personal Reflection

By Elizabeth Li



*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler...*

Remember that classic Robert Frost poem *The Road Not Taken*? I do. My junior high school English teacher made me memorize it. Perhaps yours did too?

This poem holds particular meaning for me because I have always marched to my own beat. At times this beat has led me to take the more trodden path, such as sitting for the LSAT and going to law school. But more often than not, the siren song of the road less traveled has lured me down the mysterious path that “was grassy and wanted wear.” This was certainly true when I left the big city after law school to seek a judicial clerkship in bush Alaska, where the odds are good but the goods are odd. And wouldn’t you know that there, in the middle of nowhere, I met my husband, who was also marching to his own off kilter beat.

After two adventure-filled years clerking in Alaska, I accepted a job in Bellingham and then unexpectedly found myself out of that same job in less than a year. My life in that moment was like a bad country song: I lost my job; my man left for Alaska; and my bank account was in the red. It was only a matter of time before my house burned down and my dog got run over!

At the time of my precipitous unemployment, my field of law was hot. I distinctly recall twelve pages of job advertisements seeking immigration lawyers

throughout the U.S. Believe me, the ones in San Francisco certainly caught my eye. I had also received a phone call from a prominent Seattle immigration attorney inviting me to apply for a job at his well-respected firm.

But alas, by then I had fallen for Bellingham, with its snowcapped Baker and lush San Juan Islands. It didn’t hurt that Vancouver and Seattle were just a short jaunt away should the craving for city lights strike.

So what does a young lawyer do? With no job, few acquaintances, and a new town to conquer, I decided to set up shop as a boutique immigration lawyer. Hey, who cares if there were no other Asian lawyers in Bellingham!

To thine own self be true, but damn, did my path have to be so isolated and steep?

It turns out surprisingly, that a young lawyer setting up shop is actually the norm in modern day Washington. I learned this fact, along with a lot of other useful tidbits related to the practice of law, through my participation on the Board of Trustees for the *Washington Young Lawyers Division*, the WYLD ones.

I first learned about the WYLD through my predecessor, Michelle Hull. We were at a Whatcom Women Lawyers social where she announced she was moving and therefore her spot on the Board of Trustees was available. She remarked that while a three year volunteer commitment may seem interminable, the position was actually quite rewarding. I walked away that evening with three impressions of the WYLD: fun, travel the state of Washington, and meet young lawyers from the Eastside. *Why not*, I thought, *I’m all about having fun while traveling and meeting people.*

I stumbled onto the Board of Trustees in 2002. It's now 2005, and my three year term ends in September. Before I leave I would like to share what being on the Board has meant to me. In so doing I hope to generate awareness that volunteer bar service can be an enriching path toward professional development.

When I first joined the WYLD as the Northwest (Bellingham) Trustee, I had been out of law school for six years and in solo practice for two. My practice was on its feet and growing, but one good month did not guarantee another. My motto then, and now, is: Take nothing for granted; the buck stops here.

The life of the solo lawyer has many benefits. My greatest benefit is the ability to take time off for travel. This is as it should be since my love affair with travel is what inspired me to pursue immigration law.

Of course all things come at a price. In exchange for work flexibility and exploring the Dalmatian Coast, I paid the price of not knowing when the next paycheck would come. I also paid the price of learning things on my own and feeling isolated from the legal community. You see, as a solo transactional immigration lawyer, I never go to court nor argue with lawyers. Consequently, I have little reason to come into contact with judges and attorneys.

And that's where the Bar comes in.

Service as a trustee on the WYLD has been an unexpected gift because it has allowed

me to travel both roads and be one traveler. In many ways the WYLD has substituted as my big law firm. It has allowed me to work with peers from across the state to better the practice of law for young lawyers. It has sent me to state and national conferences so that I could attend CLEs, develop leadership skills, and learn what other bars are doing. It has allowed me to participate in the ABA's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reenactment of *Brown v. Board of Education*. It has exposed me to bar presidents, Supreme Court justices, and wildly successful lawyers practicing throughout the State of Washington. It has provided an avenue through which I could introduce myself to my local legal community. And of course, it has educated me on the actual services offered by the WSBA in exchange for mandatory membership.

In short my three-year tenure on the WYLD has allowed me to spread my professional wings and soar. No longer do I feel isolated from the legal community. No longer do I wish there were others with whom I could discuss ideas. I now have an extensive network of colleagues who are happy to take my call. Some of them would even call me friend. This is a privilege—one that I earned through service to the Bar.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one that money can't buy,  
And that has made all the difference.*

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