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LOOKING FOR VARIETY

Michael P. Chu always liked engineering and science. But during his freshman year in college he knew that engineering was not going to provide the variety he wanted in a long-term career.

“As a freshman, I met a couple of recent graduates who talked about their work as engineers,” says Chu. “One guy had a prestigious engineering position with a manufacturing company. His team investigated why diapers were leaking. They did all this engineering work to determine that the solution was to move the tape on the diapers a fraction of an inch. They then spent a year designing modifications to manufacturing machines to implement this change. I was curious as to what other projects he worked on, and he said, ‘Well, that was really it.’ I understood that that project undoubtedly involved a lot of effort and was likely very complex, but right then I knew that spending three years moving a piece of tape was not something I could do for the rest of my life,” Chu explains.

Hearing about the varied and exciting work of a patent lawyer, Chu knew he could apply his engineering background to a faster-paced career. “Patent law was booming when I was in college and it is just as exciting today as when I started 17 years ago. There’s something new and interesting coming across my desk every day.”

LAW SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Chu describes law school as a new way of studying and learning. “I was used to engineering where there were multiple quizzes, tests, and assignments. In law school, much of your grade was based on one assignment. I also had to learn how to write again,” says Chu. “As an engineer, I never had to take a substantive English or composition class in college.”

Chu credits a great professor and mentor, Rob Kaplan, with transforming his writing. “He would give me my papers back with red ink on each page,” Chu laughs. Does Chu have any advice for potential law students? “Write! If you’re in an undergraduate program with little writing, take a class that teaches good writing to refine your skills. It will serve you well in law school and your career,” he advises.

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

As a lawyer, Chu started volunteering in his local community in Chicago and began to understand that Asian Americans were underrepresented in the upper echelons of the legal community. “Take federal judges for example. Only eight of the over 800 active Article III federal judges in the US are Asian American and only three of those are outside California and Hawaii. Yet, Asian Americans make up a much larger proportion of the general population,” he states. As a member of the Asian American Bar Association and past president of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, Chu works to help raise awareness of this issue. “I want my kids to see more Asian American judges and partners in law firms. If young people don’t see Asian Americans with elevated positions in the law profession, they are less likely to pursue our profession, which would continue in turn to leave our communities underserved.”

BALANCE AND INSPIRATION

Even with a demanding career at a prestigious law firm, Chu insists on making time for his many other interests. Chu’s passions for running, music, and photography provide outlets for creativity and expression. “You can find the time for life beyond work: I run to and from work instead of taking the bus; I live in the city so I can drop my kids off and see them at school often; and I carry my camera around for photography opportunities. You have to find ways to make your time work for you and your interests.”