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# Fil-Am lawyer makes waves in Chicago

Aurora Austriaco, born and raised in the Philippines, traces her success to her parents' difficult decision to replant their family abroad in pursuit of better opportunities

Roger Pe

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ACHIEVER. Lawyer Aurora Austriaco became the first Asian president of the Chicago Bar Association in 2012. Photo courtesy of Roger Pe

MANILA, Philippine – Filipino American lawyer Aurora Austriaco’s parents migrated to the US because they realized that they would not be able to afford to send all of their 8 kids to college if they had stayed in the Philippines. It’s a common conflict many Filipinos face.

Looking back, Aurora Austriaco says: “I am sure this decision was very difficult for them. It took a lot of sacrifice for our parents to leave their kids with my aunts and grandparents so they can earn money and send back to us. My parents would come home every year and stay for one month so they can spend time with us. This went on for 10 years until we ultimately got reunited in 1983.”

Austriaco was born in Quezon City, Philippines. She went to Quezon City Science High School, spent one year in college at the University of Santo Tomas, graduated from DePaul University College of Law in the United States in 1990.

There were only a handful of Pinoy lawyers in the US at the time she started her legal career. “Today, the number has risen which is really great to see,” she says.

On June 21, 2012, Austriaco was installed as the 136th president of the Chicago Bar Association – the first Asian to head the prestigious organization – and served until 2013. She was also named among “100 Influential Women in Chicago” by *Today’s Chicago Woman* magazine, among her dozens of accolades.

Austriaco was 8 years old when her parents left the Philippines for the US. She was petitioned by her parents with her older siblings. The Austriaco kids headed off to the US on August 21, 1983.

Austriaco vividly remembers that date. On their way to the airport, news broke that returning former Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr had been shot at the airport.

Was it hard for a Filipino, much more a Filipino woman, to practice law in the US, given that it is a mainstream profession dominated by men? Austriaco says, “I don’t think so, particularly if you are a graduate of a US law school.”

Austriaco managed to finish law school in 3 years.

She began working in the accounting department of a law firm called “Attorneys’ Title” (where she worked while still in school). She returned as corporate counsel where she also served as one of the board directors.

Austriaco formed her own firm Austriaco and Associates in 2009. Her legal practice is on its 24th year.

## American Dream

“I think it’s like the American dream, to have your own business,” Austriaco says. In her own office in a posh building in Chicago, Austriaco handles everything from title insurance litigation to defense of mortgage foreclosure.

Austriaco was the second vice-president of the Chicago Bar Association and helped organize the Filipino-American Bar Association in Illinois.

US District Chief Judge James Holderman describes Austriaco as a "natural leader, a person who cares deeply about her community and profession."

But among her many achievements, Austriaco says that her greatest is the respect and confidence her peers have accorded her, specifically when she was elected as president of the Chicago Bar Association, one of the oldest and largest metropolitan bar associations in America with over 22,000 member-lawyers.

#### **Filipino community leader**

Austriaco never forgets her roots. In addition to her bar association involvement, she actively participates in civic projects of the Pinoy community in Chicago, which she describes as one of the largest and strongest Asian groups in the city comprised of many Filipino organizations.

To help future generations of lawyers and give something back to the community, Austriaco supports networks for women and minorities.

Asked what advice she would give Filipinos to become successful in the US, especially in practicing law, Austriaco says: "Be yourself, be heard, be seen, work hard, and give your 110% on any work you do. Embrace challenges, take risks and never give up."

Austriaco says while Americans love Filipinos for their loyalty, intelligence, warmth, talent, hard work, and dedication, there are also challenges, which she herself also faced.

#### **Political voice**

She says Filipinos don't have "the numbers that the Hispanics or African-Americans have so that our political strength and impact are not there to effectuate a strong voice."

In 2008, the year Barack Obama ran for president, Austriaco ran as state representative, the first Filipina to run for the position in Illinois. "The more Filipinos run for office, the more our presence in the political silo will be recognized," she says.

#### **Strong community**

"You will find Filipinos in almost any part of the world, some parts more than the others and some Filipino communities stronger than the others. They work, earn money, and send back to their families so they can have a better life, their kids can go to college and have good education. I think this is typical for most Filipinos in the US."

Austriaco is proud of the many Filipinos she had met in many places in the US and in other foreign countries. "It's always great to see fellow Filipinos, so whatever continent you are at, always be welcoming to a fellow Filipino. It's a beautiful gesture," she says. –

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*Advertising veteran and journalist Roger Pe has worked in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia as Executive Creative Director for multinational ad agencies. Has also written for Ad Age New York, Campaign Asia, Campaign Brief Asia, Adoi and Philippine Daily Inquirer for over 12 years*