



YuKiko "Kiko" Yee

General Counsel & Chief Operating Officer

Ohio Access to Justice Foundation

OWBF President 2019-2020

Ohio State University Moritz College of Law

Can you tell us about your professional journey and what led you to become involved with the OWBA/F?

Yukiko "Kiko" Yee is now General Counsel and Chief Operating Officer at Ohio Access to Justice Foundation formerly after joining in 2019. The Foundation was designated by the Ohio Supreme Court as Ohio's official access to justice entity, and it serves as the single largest funder of Ohio's civil legal aids. Most recently in 2022, Yee launched the Foundation's new Prime Partners Program, which has enabled greater collaboration with financial institutions to increase the critical funding available to support community economic development (CED) projects and direct legal aid services for Ohioans in need. Under her leadership the Foundation's bottom line has more than doubled. Foundation funding helps provide low-income Ohioans with civil legal attorneys so that they can attain stable housing, medical care, food, and job opportunities.

Kiko grew up in rural New York and is the first attorney in her family. Kiko went to law school at OSU on a merit scholarship with the intentional goal of going into public service. She chose public service to start her career and volunteer work. Kiko volunteered at the Public Defender's Office and graduated as a Public Service Fellow with Recognition from The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law. Her passion ignited her subsequent career as a criminal prosecutor where she sought justice and advocated for victims' rights.

Yee dedicated over 13 years as a public servant. She started her career in Arizona, where she fought to obtain justice for women and vulnerable adult victims of trafficking, violent crimes, and racketeering as a prosecutor in Phoenix Arizona. She served as a Deputy County Attorney of the Maricopa County Attorney's Office (MCAO)

and also an Assistant Attorney General of the Arizona Attorney General's Office, Fraud & Special Prosecutions Section.

In 2013, Kiko moved back to the Midwest and had to rebuild her network in a male dominated field. She joined the Office of the Ohio Attorney General, Economic Crimes Unit. At the time, Kiko felt there was no strong mechanism for women in government to uplift each other. This is when she was introduced to the Ohio Women's Bar Association and Foundation.

In 2015, Yee was selected to become a member of the 2015-2016 Ohio's Women's Bar Foundation (OWBF) Leadership Institute (LI) class, she seized the opportunity. This experience left a profound impression on Yee and led her to subsequently join the OWBF Board from 2017 to 2021 (Treasurer, Vice President, President [2019-2020], and Immediate Past President; respectively).

During her service with the Board, Kiko was instrumental in advocating for, and creating two scholarships – the LI Diversity Scholarship and Law Student Diversity Scholarship. A proponent for advancing women within the legal profession, Yee recognized that certain groups of qualified individuals from diverse backgrounds/experiences may not have the equal financial ability to access the substantial benefits that LI had to offer. Through Yee's initiative, the OWBF Board was successful in implementing and funding *both* scholarships in 2018 and 2019. In addition, recognizing the difficulties she had faced in paying the tuition for LI (because she did not work for a private firm that could serve as a sponsor), Kiko worked with the administration of the Ohio Attorney General's office (her then employer) to make tuition-reimbursement possible for other women assistant AGO employees who sought to participate in LI in both 2018 and 2019.

Kiko also spearheaded opportunities for women across the state to further sponsor other women in government. Between 2015 and 2017, Kiko founded and served as Principal Chair of the former Ohio Women's Bar Association (OWBA, to be distinguished from the OWBF) Government Subcommittee ("GS"). Recognizing a lack of diversity and limited opportunities offered to female government attorneys through current bar associations, she launched the non-partisan OWBA Government Subcommittee in 2015 as part of an aggressive, state-wide effort to promote advancement and leadership opportunities for women employed by federal, state, county, and municipal agencies within Ohio, as well as private sector attorneys practicing in Government Relations. Through smartly marrying the 'private' and 'public' sectors, the Government Subcommittee helped break down traditional barriers between government and non-government employees, enhanced diversity within the bar association, and vastly improved the quality of education and networking. For her efforts with the OWBA Government Subcommittee, Yee was awarded the OWBA President's Choice Award for 2015-2016.



During your presidency, what were your primary goals for the organization?

Drawing from her positive experiences with *both* the OWBA through the Government Subcommittee and as a board member of the OWBA, Yee embraced the opportunity to serve as OWBF President in 2019-2020. During her term, her primary goal was to reimagine the ways in which OWBA and OWBF could collaborate on fundraising and educational efforts. With a “together we are stronger” mentality, Yee worked together with OWBA President Lisa Whittaker, to reimagine new ways in which the two boards might work together, to maximize the effectiveness of their events and activities, while furthering their mutual mission to empower women in the legal profession.

What were some of the key initiatives or projects you introduced or supported during your presidency?

Kiko was pivotal to the effort to increase collaboration between the OWBA and OWBF. Under her guidance, the Foundation secured pro bono counsel necessary to help the Foundation navigate tax and other legal issues to ensure its 501c3 status was protected. As a result, the OWBA/OWBF was able to execute a cooperative memorandum of understanding (MOU) under which the two boards agreed to work together in new ways, which enabled them to further enhance the mutual success of both organizations.

Under her leadership, the OWBA/OWBF piloted a new, 5-year “joint sponsorship program” whereby both boards would work in unison to fundraise, organize and host what is now recognized annually as the joint OWBA/OWBF Annual CLE/Luncheon – one of its largest, most notable events. This had a substantial impact on the fundraising capacity of the event, and a basis to grow new synergies between the OWBA and OWBF which continue today.

How did you approach challenges faced by the organization during your leadership?

As with anything new, there were challenges to reimagining how an association (OWBA) and foundation (OWBF) could work jointly to achieve mutual benefits. Such a model was not common in other bar organizations at the time, and therefore external examples (of legal associations/foundations working so closely in tandem) were scarce. Yee approached these challenges by introducing joint meetings between the OWBA/OWBF boards. These meetings were held to increase meaningful dialogue between the two executive boards. They allowed the leaders of both organizations to actively listen to the goals/needs/desires of both; and work diligently to mutually further their fundraising efforts and mission: to empower and grow women leaders in the legal profession. The MOU executed during Yee’s Presidency, along with the pilot

joint sponsorship program, paved the way for new synergies – it increased cooperation, good will, and excitement between the OWBA/OWBF. This is still very much felt today.

How do you think the OWBA/F has evolved since your tenure?

Through Yee's leadership of both the OWBF and OWBA Government Subcommittee, the OWBA/F has become more sensitive to the need to advocate for educational and leadership opportunities for *a//* women in the legal professions. She has consistently worked to improve the processes and programs implemented by both the OWBA/OWBA, so that it can be more accessible to all types of attorneys, including government and pro-bono lawyers.

Additionally, Yee played a critical role in reshaping the collaborative relationship between the OWBA/OWBF. Since then, the two organizations have continued to evolve together by co-branding their materials/events – and working harmoniously wherever possible. It has resulted in both organizations flourishing and becoming stronger together.

What role do you think the OWBA/F plays in advancing women in the legal profession today?

The OWBA/F plays a critical role in advancing women in the legal profession. Having moved from Arizona to Ohio without a professional network, Yee attributes the CLE and training provided by the OWBA/F to be invaluable. In particular, she cites her experience in the OWBF's Leadership Institute (LI) as being critical to her development and career success. Yee has stated the following about the LI program:

"I was so genuinely impressed by the caliber of women who were selected for this program. LI gave me an opportunity to reach beyond my normal confines and connect with a group of equally successful, driven, dynamic, and highly intelligent women [...] I enjoyed the way that my classmates both supported and challenged each other. We consistently pushed each other to think differently, so that we could become better leaders than we previously were." (see attached OWBA Summer Newsletter for more).

What advice would you give to current and future OWBA/F leaders?

"Don't be afraid of being the catalyst for change. People need to remember that they must exercise the courage to take small, positive steps in the present, to build a bigger, and better future. "

"Always be forward-looking. We should not settle for how things are, but how things ought to be."

What are your hopes for the future of the OWBA/F and its members?



That the OWBA/OWBF can continue growing its mission through increased collaboration and partnership. Yee's hope is that, through the good work of OWBA/F, we can continue to grow leadership opportunities for all women in the law.

Closing:

Looking back on your time as president, how has the experience shaped your personal and professional growth?

Yee's experience as President has shaped her personal growth, and professional perspective. Through her experience in merging the efforts of both OWBA/OWBF boards and observing their success, she truly came to understand and believe that people and groups are truly stronger when they come together to adopt a collaborative model. Yee has since incorporated these concepts into her professional leadership roles. She continues to speak on, and advocates for, increased collaboration and compassionate leadership in the legal and business sectors. Annually, Yee continues to speak at the Leadership Institute through a panel discussion on "Compassionate Leadership: How To Do Hard Things In A Human Way." The presentation addresses the need for caring and authentic leadership within the legal profession.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your journey with the OWBA/F?

The relationships developed with other Board members are forever. They are truly "sisters in the law" who Yee is blessed and honored to call "friends." These are the women who Yee still finds herself turning to for support, years later.