

Joannie Chiung-Yueh Chang

Joannie Chiung-Yueh Chang, a longtime Bay Area resident and civil rights and labor advocate whose efforts helped lead to the passage of the nation's first paid family leave program and successful implementation of San Francisco's groundbreaking law requiring businesses to provide health insurance for their employees, died Saturday, July 31, 2010, in New York City. She was 41.

In a formidable legal career that spanned several years working at prominent local and national civil rights organizations, including Equal Rights Advocates, The Legal Aid Society-Employment Center, and Asian Law Caucus, Ms. Chang became known as a powerfully persuasive and extraordinarily committed champion for workers, particularly the most vulnerable.

"Joannie was an exceptionally gifted advocate for workers and their families," said Patricia A. Shiu, an employment rights advocate who first worked with Ms. Chang at The Legal Aid Society-Employment Law Center. Shiu, who is now Director of the United States Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, singled out in particular Ms. Chang's contributions to the passage of California's Paid Leave Law. The landmark law – the nation's first comprehensive paid family leave law – provides workers up to six weeks of partial pay each year to care for themselves, children, parents, spouses and registered domestic partners. "She was deeply committed to social justice and served thousands of workers with unwavering compassion and outstanding legal representation," Shiu said. In recognition of Ms. Chang's contributions to the law, which included lobbying and drafting portions of the legislation, she received a state commendation in 2002 from State Senator Sheila James Kuehl.

A smart and tough advocate whose legislative skills were bolstered by seasoned courtroom experience, Ms. Chang represented hundreds of women and minority workers in individual and class action cases. "Joannie was the quintessential advocate for justice and civil rights," said David Chiu, President of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, who once co-chaired the Asian American Bar Association Civil Rights Committee with Ms. Chang. "She inspired and motivated the rest of us."

"She was a very strong and effective attorney for her clients," said Judith Kurtz, a San Francisco attorney who represented numerous litigants alongside Ms. Chang as co-counsel. "She combined her passion for justice with a keen understanding of the legal system."

More recently, Ms. Chang was responsible for enforcing San Francisco's Health Care Security Ordinance, another trailblazing worker-friendly law. The first of its kind in the country, the ordinance provides access to health care for San Francisco's uninsured workers by requiring medium and large-sized employers to spend a minimum amount per hour on healthcare for employees who work in San Francisco. Ms. Chang directed education and outreach, rulemaking and enforcement of the law for the City's Office of Labor Standards Enforcement, periodically reporting to the Board of Supervisors and working with the City's Department of Public Health. Discussing the controversial law in 2008 after a number of unsuccessful challenges by its foes to its constitutionality, Ms. Chang explained to National Public Radio that the policy behind the ordinance was to address San Francisco's health care crisis, which affected an estimated 82,000 uninsured workers at the time. "It is a huge relief that there will be health care available to folks working in San Francisco," Ms. Chang said.

Friends, family and colleagues alike recalled an irresistible blend of grace and grit present in her legal achievements and personal accomplishments. Bill Tamayo, Regional Attorney at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, recalls how he met Ms. Chang when she first moved to San Francisco in the late '90s and completed an AIDS ride in 2001 at her suggestion. Ms. Chang was a regular rider and top fundraiser for cycling rides in Alaska, California and Hawai'i. "She introduced me to all her friends and helped me through the 400 miles," he said of his 2001 training. "I learned so much about the ostracism and isolation that HIV-affected individuals experienced, but I also learned about Joannie's deep caring for them and her warm friendship with the riders. It is an experience I will never forget."

A bridge builder with a special talent for nurturing community across issues and identity and for bringing a holistic view of justice and dignity to all parts of her life, Ms. Chang was well known for her warmth, generosity, humor, and unshakable commitment. Active in a number of community groups, she served on various boards for organizations including Sweatshop Watch, Asian Women United, Kearny Street Workshop and the Chinese Historical Society of America. "Joannie was about community," said Monty Agarwal, a partner at Arnold & Porter and former chair of the board of directors of Asian Law Caucus, where Ms. Chang directed employment and labor projects. "She came to the Caucus at a time when the organization was in trouble and needed her. I remember her telling me it was because she could not imagine the organization not being there in the future for people in need. Stepping in when needed was just what Joannie did," Agarwal said. "It was her natural way of being."

Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Ms. Chang grew up in Hazlet, New Jersey. She attended Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. After graduation from New York University School of Law, Ms. Chang served as a law clerk to the late federal District Judge Morris Lasker, of the Southern District of New York.

Ms. Chang is survived by her partner, Luna Yasui, and their daughters, Ayumi and Yuuki Chang-Yasui, of Brooklyn, New York; and by her parents, Sakae and Bilin Chang, her brothers, Steven and Thomas Chang, and her nieces and nephews, Alexander, Chloe, Colette and Andrew, all of Laguna Niguel, Calif.



Joannie



Little Elegy

by Keith Althaus

*Even the stars wear out.
Their great engines fail.
The unapproachable roar
and heat subside
as wind blows across
the hole in the sky
with a noise like a boy
playing on an empty bottle.
It is an owl, or a train.
You hear it underground.
Where the worms live
that can be cut in half
and start over
again and again.
Their heart must be
in two places at once, like mine.*

SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW *Angela Tolosa*
– Israel Kamakawiwo'ole

Wayne Lum

Chris Hwang & Judy Kurtz

Thomas Chang

Elaine Kim

Christina Chung

Robert Kim

Luna Yasui

TAIKO:

John Ko Kaoru Watanabe Rachel Ebora