

# IN-HOUSE AND IN THE COMMUNITY

## An interview with Marie Ma

By Mark Conrad,  
2014 Barristers Club  
President



Marie Ma (left),  
with Wilma Wallace,  
both of Gap Inc.

Each summer the Barristers Club's Diversity Committee hosts a reception to introduce new lawyers to the many minority and specialty bar organizations in the Bay Area. This event also provides an opportunity for the club to honor outstanding members of The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) who have contributed to the diversity of our club, both through the perspective they offer as attorneys of color and also through the work they have done to support BASF's diversity efforts, including its pipeline programs, such as Mock Trial, Lawyers in Schools, Law Academy, and Day in Court.

One of the members honored at this year's diversity reception was Marie Ma, corporate counsel at Gap Inc. For years, Ma has been a tireless volunteer at BASF. She has participated in and managed Gap Inc.'s relationship with the Barristers Club's Law Academy program, which mentors students at Mission High School. She has organized fundraisers for BASF's diversity pipeline programs. She has volunteered for more than six years with BASF's Destination Law School. And most recently, she has volunteered countless hours as the vice chair, and now as chair, of the Barristers Club's Mock Trial Committee. In her spare time outside of BASF, she has also helped Gap Inc. create and manage a new pro bono program for in-house counsel to assist U Visa applicants.

The Barristers Club is proud of and grateful for Ma's work. In this issue of *San Francisco Attorney*, I wanted to highlight Ma's many contributions to the Barristers Club and, through the following interview, introduce the entire BASF community to one of our most dedicated members.

**Mark Conrad (MC):** You worked for many years as a paralegal, first at Fenwick & West, and then at Gap Inc. How do your years of experience as a paralegal contribute to the work that you do now as a lawyer?

**Marie Ma (MM):** In addition to providing an incredible technical foundation for my career as an attorney, having that exposure to the profession before law school helped solidify my interest in becoming a lawyer. When I had setbacks along the way, knowing that this is what I was meant to do helped push me through challenges and obstacles. It also provided me a certain level of perspective that has helped me get where I am today, including a deep appreciation for the work that nonattorney staff, including paralegals, do.

**MC:** You worked your way through law school while you were working at Gap Inc. Do you have any advice for students who are following a similar path of simultaneously pursuing a law degree and holding a full-time job?

**MM:** I get asked this question a lot. I think people see my path and assume it's equivalent to attending a full-time law school program, and it's just not the case. It was the best option for me, but I always try and explore with them why the full-time route is not a viable option. Going to law school at night requires sacrificing certain aspects and experiences of the traditional full-time path. In short, it's not for everyone. But assuming it's the right path for someone, my advice is always the same: Make time for the fun stuff. Going to law school at night and working full-time is like running a marathon. It is not a sprint. The schedule can wear on you, so it's critically important that you take time at least once a week for yourself—a dinner, a night out with friends, and so on.

**MC:** You recently took on a new title as corporate counsel and director, Global Equity Administration. What sorts of challenges are you facing in your new position?

**MM:** I have two significant challenges in my new role. The first is managing others. This is the first time in my career where I'm responsible for the performance and development of others. The second is learning the landscape. While I've had peripheral exposure over the last few years to what the Global Equity Administration group does, including managing the company's stock-based programs, there's a ton that I haven't had exposure to—specifically, the more technical components of the group. It's the first time since I started at Fenwick & West right out of college where I was so aware of the learning curve in front of me. But I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity and the fact that people have enough faith in me to put me in this position, and I'm incredibly excited about having this new area of responsibility.

**MC:** Gap Inc. is well known for its involvement in BASF and many other programs in the San Francisco community. How has the company developed and maintained that kind of community spirit and involvement among its in-house lawyers?

**MM:** I think it all comes down to Gap Inc. General Counsel Michelle Banks. I'm able to get involved in BASF programs and other pro bono and pipeline programs because it is not only supported, but encouraged at the top of our organization. Michelle leads by example but also has put in place the structure to support this type of work. She formed a committee within the legal department specifically tasked with identifying pro bono and pipeline opportunities for the department members to participate in. And she's created a culture within the department that empowers attorneys and nonattorneys alike to actively participate in this space.

**MC:** I know that during your time at Gap Inc. you've been able to take on cases representing pro bono clients in immigration and other matters. How were you able to find those opportunities as an in-house lawyer?

**MM:** Gap Inc.'s legal department is constantly looking

for new pro bono and pipeline opportunities for the department members. In addition, we have a lot of attorneys at Gap Inc. who are active in various programs and with various organizations, and we're able to learn about new opportunities through them. For the immigration work you're referring to, back in 2010, my colleague Mary Ann Moran and I attended a dinner for the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) as a guest of Wilma Wallace, a current BASF board member who also chairs the CJA board. We heard amazing stories about the work CJA does and left incredibly inspired.

After the dinner, we did some research on various immigration-related pro bono work, and started talking to some of our law firm providers about their experiences in this space. In talking to DLA Piper, we learned that they had been taking on U Visa cases as pro bono work with some of their clients. When we delved into the details of what U Visa work involved, we thought it would be a great fit for Gap Inc. So we proposed it to Michelle and she gave us the green light to move it forward and roll the program out to the entire department. That work has now evolved into the San Francisco Pro Bono Alliance, with participants from four different corporate legal departments.

**MC:** I had the privilege of judging one of the rounds of this year's Mock Trial competition and came away inspired by the dedication of the students I watched. Can you tell me about the most inspiring moments you watched during the tournament?

**MM:** I met Kimberly Taylor of Charles Schwab, Inc. a few years ago when she was chair of the Mock Trial program. I didn't know much about the Mock Trial program, nor had I participated in a similar program when I was in high school. She invited me to come out and volunteer

as one of their All-Star-Round scorers—this is the round where the top two teams from San Francisco County compete for the spot to represent our county at the state finals. Needless to say, it's a very high-energy, high-intensity evening. And I was blown away by the performances that night, and by the passion exhibited by both the students and their coaches.

My favorite part of the Mock Trial program is watching the competition and seeing the students return year after year. You watch this gradual evolution and it's truly incredible. And it's what I'm most inspired by about the program. I believe in the impact this program has on everyone involved—the students, the coaches, the volunteers, and the committee members. When I watch the competitions each year, I'm filled to the brim with pride and hope. Lots and lots of hope for the amazing pipeline of students who will one day be joining our profession!

**MC:** When you talk to Mock Trial participants, what do you tell them it takes to be a good lawyer?

**MM:** Perspective, humility, and hard work. I tell them to remember to give back when they're in a position to do so—volunteer, mentor, whatever. To never lose sight of how it feels right now for them to participate, to succeed as a Mock Trial participant, and how that enthusiasm will make them better advocates, better colleagues, and better mentors . . . oh, and happier lawyers. That's important, too!

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