

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award

Presented to a nominee whose activities in Asian and Pacific Islander affairs significantly impact education and the achievement of equal opportunity for Asians and Pacific Islanders.



Stewart Kwoh
Non-Member, California

Stewart Kwoh is the founding President and Executive Director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC), now the largest legal aid and civil rights organization serving the Asian American and Pacific Islander community in the United States. APALC combines traditional legal services with civil rights advocacy and leadership development.

"To the larger society," Kwoh notes, "Asian Americans are either invisible, or forever foreign or honorary whites, or problems." As a UCLA-educated attorney, Kwoh has been fighting stereotypes by combining low-key, behind-the-scenes diplomacy with his steely determination to end discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. His approach is positively Pan-Asian. He has been told by well-meaning Asians, "Why don't you just do the Chinese American thing instead of talking about Asian Pacific Americans." But that is not Kwoh's vision. "Our history demands something else. It is important that newer Asian immigrants understand that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States, and the World War II internment of Japanese Americans are relevant to their lives now."

Kwoh attributes his social consciousness to his religious upbringing (his paternal grandfather was China's first Presbyterian minister) and to the American civil rights movement. He says that his involvement as a young person in the Brotherhood USA Camp of the National Conference of Christians and Jews was a formative experience for him because he was able to meet and get to know African American and Latino students.

After World War II, Kwoh's Chinese-born father, who had been a student in the United States for several years, and his U.S.-born American Chinese mother, decided to go to China to help to rebuild their ancestral land which had been ravaged by the Japanese. Hence, Stewart Kwoh was born in Nanjing. But the Chinese civil war cut his parent's dream short, and they returned to the United States, specifically to Los Angeles.

Today, Stewart Kwoh is considered one of Los Angeles' greatest assets. Everyone from Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce President Gary Toebben to T.S. Chung, a founding President of the Korean American Coalition, sing his praises. Chung notes that after the L.A. riots in 1991, following the police beating of Rodney King, the Kwoh-lead APALC "delivered a lot of services to riot victims, and provided leadership in a very broad way... Thank God for Stewart Kwoh and his Center." Kwoh has also spearheaded the Mandarin in Schools initiative whose mission is to advocate for the inclusion of Chinese history, culture, and language, in conjunction with Chinese American history, in the public school system of Los Angeles.

