

Justice for All

BY KAREN FELDSCHER

A

Stoughton couple's attempt to sell their home is interfered with by white neighbors who learn a black woman is a potential buyer.

Three men assault two men outside a bar in Boston because the two are gay.

A Boston landlord resists renting to people who qualify for federal rent subsidies because he says he loses money by doing so.

Such issues of prejudice, harassment and violence might cause some of us to cringe, feel helpless, want to change the subject.

But Virginia Lee deals with these issues every day.

Lee, L'75, who just finished her first year as chief of the civil rights division in the Massachusetts attorney general's office, welcomes the tough cases that come across her desk. The cases allow the state to test the potency of its eight-year-old civil rights law, and allow Lee to stand up for what she believes in.

"My mandate (in coming to the attorney general's office) was to do more than react to what we read about in the newspaper," says Lee, "and to take some time to reflect on what issues we should address in Massachusetts in civil rights."

Always one to stand up for what she believes in, Virginia Lee tackles issues of racism and discrimination as civil rights chief in the state attorney general's office

PHOTO BY RUSS SPARKMAN

Racism, homophobia, housing and employment discrimination, disability issues, police misconduct—these are the domain of the civil rights division, located in a plain, somewhat cramped office with linoleum floors and slightly-battered metal desks. Lee's staff consists of herself, four attorneys and two paralegals.

Lee, who worked since 1979 in the law firm she established with fellow Northeastern University graduate Harvey Salgo, L'77, admits that working in the attorney general's office is not "a plush environment" compared with private practice. She brought her Indian cotton couch with her from her old office to make things a little more comfortable.

But the view from her 19th-floor office is a broad one that looks out over the city, reflecting, in a sense, the vistas that this job opens up to her. "I think you get to see a lot more of what's going on in civil rights in this office than you do in private practice," she said. "I really encourage people to let us know when they have civil rights problems." She said she tries to, in a sense, "co-counsel cases...where there's significant public interest," putting the attorney general's office in an advocacy role.

As a private attorney, Lee achieved a name for herself in the civil rights arena in 1985 when she defended a Chinese immigrant named Long Guang Huang, arrested when he was 58 for allegedly soliciting a prostitute in Boston's Combat Zone. Many witnesses to the incident saw the arresting police detective punch Huang in the face. Huang, a restaurant worker, was hospitalized after the arrest with a concussion and missed three months of work.

Huang was found not guilty, and the detective who had arrested Huang was placed on suspension for a year.

The Huang case was a political one, strengthening the Asian community's opposition to the Combat Zone. "Because of the Combat Zone being right in (the Asian) community, they (the residents) have to deal on a regular basis with crime. In most neighborhoods you don't have prostitutes walking around, you don't have undercover police officers walking around...That case made people aware of the issue," Lee said. The case had "a profound impact on the Asian community," she said, and she commends community members for working to support Huang and oppose the presence of the zone.

A political job

For Lee, the move to the attorney general's office made sense because the civil rights division handles cases very similar to those she'd worked on as a private attorney. Often dealing with poor clients, Lee had experience in criminal defense, civil rights, medical malpractice, and Social Security disability. She had represented many Southeast Asian refugees. When the job offer came from the attorney general's office, Lee was pleased because it meant she could work on cases that interested her without having to worry about the client's ability to pay legal fees.

Because of the public nature of the attorney general's work and his ability to set a particular agenda, Lee's job is a political one, and she likes that. She's pleased that her politics mesh with those of her boss, Attorney General Jim Shannon, elected in November 1986.

"He's very progressive," she said. "He's not afraid to initiate actions...He absolutely backs our civil rights agenda. It's an ideal situation for someone like myself to work with him.

"He's not overly concerned about the politics," she added. "If somebody violates the law, they violate the law. It's very courageous."

Lee is proud of the progress her division has made so far in testing the strength of the Massachusetts Civil Rights Act, regarded as the most far-reaching statute for civil rights enforcement in the country. In the recent case in which two gay men were assaulted by a group of three men, the state got an injunction against the attackers, preventing them from returning to the gay bar where the incident occurred, from speaking to the two victims, and from assaulting any other gay people. The injunction, said Lee, was "based on the theory that gay people are entitled to protection under our state civil rights law...We're really excited about it—it's a landmark case."

In the Stoughton case, in which residents were meddling in the affairs of a neighboring family who had hoped to sell their house to a black woman, the attorney general's office succeeded in getting an injunction preventing the neighbors' interference. (As a result of the incident, however, the black woman decided not to buy the property.)

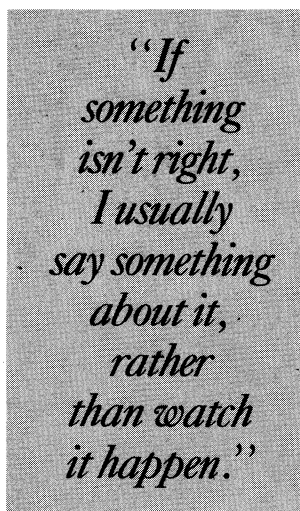
In the housing area, in addition to seeking court action against landlords who don't want to deal with applicants who qualify for federal subsidies, the civil rights division also works to prevent racial discrimination, and discrimination against

families with children. Lee explained that landlords often don't want to rent to families with kids because they don't want to be responsible if the kids get lead paint poisoning, and they don't want to pay for the expense of de-leading. But the attorney general's office position is that "landlords must de-lead in the event they have an otherwise qualified applicant who has children," said Lee. She noted that the state legislature recently enacted a statute making loans available to landlords for de-leading.

Lee hopes her division's work in the housing area will help "increase the housing stock available to families with children, which will then have a direct result in decreasing homelessness."

Another function of the attorney general's office is filing legislation. For example, Lee and her staff are currently working with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights to push for the enactment of a state equivalent to federal Title VI legislation. Title VI of the federal Civil Rights Act states that any institution or organization receiving federal funds may not discriminate. Although Massachusetts has a governor's executive order stating basically the same thing, it doesn't carry the same weight as a statute, Lee said.

Much of the work of the civil rights division has only just begun, and Lee is not allowed to comment on ongoing investigations because it could compromise their integrity. She has learned in her short tenure there that she and her staff must be extremely responsible, conducting very thorough investigations before making any public charges. "Having an action brought against you by the attorney general's office is, in the lives of most people, very major," she said. "You



"If something isn't right, I usually say something about it, rather than watch it happen."

have to be very careful.”

Speaking up for what's right

The oldest of seven children, Lee became interested in becoming a lawyer because she was used to being responsible for other people. “I thought I would be a good lawyer because I cared about things,” she said. “It was either that or a counselor, and I thought being a lawyer would be more challenging. I have this kind of personality that if something isn't right, I usually say something about it, rather than sit back and watch it happen.”

Lee, who entered the Northeastern University School of Law right out of college, speaks highly of the program for its non-competitiveness, the friendliness of the professors, the progressiveness of her fellow students, the co-op component, and the general politics of the place.

At age 22, Lee was one of the youngest in her class. “I thought it was a bit of a disadvantage,” she recalled. “On the other hand, because I graduated at 25, I have a lot of experience for somebody who's 37. I feel like I've done a lot of different things. I've seen many cases, I've seen lots of personalities.”

Lee's first co-op job led to an early and continuing interest in children's rights and criminal law. Working for the Boston Legal Assistance Project (now Greater Boston Legal Services), assigned to child advocacy work in South Boston, Lee got a sense of some of the racism in that community as well as some of the factors that lead to criminal behavior among juveniles.

“Spend a little time with delinquents,” she said, “and you get a very strong sense of what it was that contributed to them becoming delinquents.” Poor kids with family problems

wind up doing poorly in school, and “If you can't read, you tend to drop out of school,” she said. “If you drop out of school, you tend to become a criminal. It's not a mystery, but politicians tend to look for quick solutions, and don't see themselves in it for the long haul.”

Lee recalls one summer when she was working in South Boston when a new jobs program kept the kids off the streets. “The crime rate was drastically reduced,” she said. “Why would you have to steal something if you can make money by having a job?”

Lee's first job out of law school was with the Michigan Legal Services Office. Later she worked at the Center for Law and Education in Cambridge, a legal services backup center. In 1979 she went into private practice.

Lee has been active in Democratic politics—she is a committeewoman for the Democratic State Committee, and she has worked on many political campaigns, including Governor Michael Dukakis' current presidential bid. She's also a board member of the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union, a member of the Asian American Lawyers Association, and has been active in organizing Asian/Pacific Democrats on a national basis. She also was named the School of Law's alumna of the year this past spring.

For now, Lee is excited by the opportunities in the attorney general's office. “How often do you have a such a liberal attorney general?” she asked. “How often do you have such a liberal governor, and such liberal senators? The politics are right, because you have the support of most of the significant politicians in the state.”

She is also pleased to be in a position in which she can do exactly what she wants: stick up for what she believes in. “I'm getting paid,” she said, “for doing what I like to do.” **N**