

Small but Mighty and Making a Huge Difference: The South Asian Bar Association of Connecticut

By RACHNA KHANNA AND NANDITA RUCHANDANI

This bar year, the DEI column will highlight different affinity bar associations.

Born in the aftermath of 9/11, the South Asian Bar Association of Connecticut (SABAC) celebrated its 20th anniversary in September of 2024. In a memorable and celebratory 20th anniversary gala, we were reminded by keynote speaker U.S. EEOC Commissioner Kalpana Kotegal, of the difficult journeys and the many sacrifices of those who came before us when they first arrived in America. While the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 built upon the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and opened the door to immigrants of color, they still had to navigate a society where power and influence were predominantly held by people different than them.

The South Asian community has made enormous strides in the past century since the earliest South Asian immigrants came to the US. After 1965, a huge influx of highly educated and otherwise qualified South Asians struggled with an unfamiliar culture, and in a system that seemed to be stacked against them through hard work and dedication; however, many found success and became working professionals, business owners, doctors and a myriad of other professionals, the South Asian community needed leaders to advocate for it.

As the number of South Asian lawyers grew, there emerged a desire to have an organization that represented the particular interests of South Asian legal professionals. There were some local organizations, particularly in the big cities, but nothing in Connecticut until SABAC was established in 2004.

After 9/11 and spurred by the unprovoked attacks on South Asians and others, a group of lawyers got together and formed the South Asian Bar Association

of Connecticut. Initially, SABAC was a very small organization with very little in terms of cash. The boundless drive and determination of its founders, board members, and members ensured that this little engine most certainly could.

In addition to creating community, SABAC created a path to leadership that led to one of SABAC's first presidents, to be named the first South Asian president of the Connecticut Bar Association in 2021. Similarly, other former presidents and board members have led practice groups and have been elevated to the state and federal judiciary. Those members and the current board and members of SABAC continue to provide the guidance, training, and support to forge the future leaders of our profession and society.

Through the incredible support of SABAC's founders and allies, the SABAC Endowed Fund was established, allowing SABAC to award a scholarship years ahead of schedule. These funds are paid directly to the law school of the recipient. SABAC recently added a \$1,500 cash



award directly to the scholarship awardee to be used for books or other expenses related to their education.

In 2021, Asker Saeed established the Asker A. Saeed Founder's Award, given to a 501(c)(3) organization that serves the South Asian community. Additionally, SABAC presents its community service award to an individual who has served the South Asian community. This award's cash grant is provided to the 501(c)(3) organization that serves the South Asian community.

In 2025, SABAC will award a public interest grant to further its mission of serving the South Asian community.

SABAC came to life as a small South Asian legal organization and has grown in mission and influence over the past 20 years. SABAC's founders, directors, and members still remember



SABAC's Board at its 2024 Gala

when SABAC was first able to seat its full complement of 12 directors. That milestone accomplishment seems insignificant now, but it is emblematic of how a shared mission and vision, tireless work, and boundless enthusiasm can result in magic. As a small but mighty affinity bar association, SABAC is proud to be able to help the wider community not just with donations, but with legal help that is culturally sensitive and in a language familiar to the client. SABAC would like to acknowledge that the support of our sister bar associations is integral to SABAC's con-

tinued success, and to thank them as we all rise together.

SABAC is actively fostering the next generation of South Asian lawyers through mentorship and connection. Events such as the annual Holi dance party are creative ways to drive engagement with lawyers and students alike while also caring for their well-being.

Breaking through glass ceilings starts at home. SABAC continues to shatter such ceilings by not only bringing chairs to the table, but by instead building the table itself. The pantheon of leaders to whom SA-

BAC owes its success are too numerous to mention in a short article, but we are forever grateful to them for all that they have done and continue to do. □



Rachna Khanna is the president of SABAC. She practices Immigration, small business and real estate, and estate planning at RK Law Group.



Nandita Ruchandani is the immediate past president of SABAC. She practices immigration, corporate law, and real estate transactions at KPPB Law.