



# The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

## Asian American and Pacific Islanders Commission

### Unsung Heroes Awardees

#### **1. Connie Wong, Deputy Commissioner for Labor Relations, Boston Fire Department**

Connie Wong has led outstanding work as the Deputy Commissioner for Labor Relations, Human Resources, and Legal Affairs for the Boston Fire Department. Connie has been instrumental in diversifying the ranks at the Boston Fire Department, which historically had a dismal track record for diversity, particularly for women and from amongst the Asian American Pacific Islander community. Connie devised strategies and developed policies to increase outreach, recruitment, hiring, and retention of minority and women firefighters. Her multi-pronged approach included creating a Teen Academy summer program targeting Boston high school students from underrepresented communities, utilizing a unique language skill certification process within the civil service procedures, and creating a Fire Cadet program specifically for the Boston Fire Department to create an alternative non-veteran pathway for young Bostonians aged 18-25 years old. Under her leadership, the diversity of each recruiting class was near or exceeded 30%. She increased the number of AAPI firefighters fourfold, hiring the first Asian American female firefighter in the history of the Boston Fire Department. Connie's work has significantly impacted AAPI's representation within the BFD.

#### **2. Shaleen Sheth, Youth Activist**

Shaleen Sheth is a socially conscious young professional based in Boston who has been actively involved in community service since 12. She graduated with honors from Babson College, majoring in business and finance. She co-founded Women Who Win, a non-profit organization that amplifies women's voices worldwide through story-telling, skill-sharing, mentorship, and networking. As a Co-CEO, she scaled the organization to over 20k members in 80 countries, with support from institutions such as Bank of America, LinkedIn, and Akshaya Patra USA. She is an Advisory Council Member for Saheli Boston, supporting South Asian domestic violence survivors, and was appointed to the Young Professionals Leadership Council for Akshaya Patra in 2022. Shaleen received a citation from the Massachusetts State Government for her leadership in women's empowerment. Her mission is to use media and technology to uplift the voices of women and minorities globally.

#### **3. Master Nam and Sarah, Business people**

Master Nam and Ms. Sarah are nominated for their exceptional work in establishing several taekwondo schools as community centers in Western Massachusetts. Beyond providing martial arts instruction, they have created spaces for low-income families to access before and after-school care, meals, arts and crafts classes, homework assistance, and transportation through a voucher program. During the pandemic, they went above and beyond to celebrate their students'



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achievements by driving to their homes and creating supportive environments. Their transformative impact in Greenfield, Springfield, and Chicopee has been crucial for underserved communities, and they continue to focus on providing services for those who cannot typically afford them.

#### **4. Shaina Lu, Artist**

Shaina Lu is a passionate connector who profoundly cares about the AAPI community in the Greater Boston Area. Despite her humble nature, Shaina has made a significant impact through her various community art projects, including leading the creation and restoration of the Chinatown mural. She has also created posters and infographics for several public good organizations and helped start an Asian Food Pantry during the pandemic. Shaina is a natural community organizer and has been a driving force behind many successful initiatives, such as moderating the Malden Neighbors Helping Neighbors Facebook group and supporting the Red Oak After School and Summer Program at BCNC. Additionally, she has been a family liaison for the Chinese-speaking population at Eliot School. She helps young artists by providing guidance on college and art school applications and connecting them with various arts opportunities. Shaina is also an activist who has organized protests to call for the resignation of a Malden City Councilor who wore a costume mocking Asian women. Overall, Shaina is a glue that helps to pull all the pieces of a community together. Her invaluable insight and dedication have significantly impacted the AAPI community in the Greater Boston Area.

#### **5. Rev Dr. Ko Ko Lay, a pastor of Burmese Christian Church**

Rev Dr. Ko Ko Lay, a pastor of Burmese Christian Church in Lowell, Massachusetts, is an invaluable leader and servant of the community. Originally from Myanmar, he started serving the Burmese Christian community in 2014 while attending a theological seminary in Boston. Under his leadership, the church has become one of the liveliest community centers in Lowell, with various programs and activities targeting children and youth. Rev Dr. Ko Ko Lay provides the community with spiritual and emotional support and physical assistance. He volunteers to translate for non-English speaking families, liaises between Lowell public schools and Burmese parents, and advocates for tenants' and workers' rights. He provides not only spiritual and emotional support to the Burmese families but also offers physical support. He and his family live in the neighborhood where many Burmese families reside, and he makes himself available to anyone, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. He actively participates in more extensive community activities and is greatly loved and respected by Burmese community members.



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### 6. **Maria Isabela Campos, Youth Activist**

Maria Isabela Campos is a former member of the AAPI's commission first ever youth council. Born in the capital of the Philippines, Maria grew up with love for her Filipino heritage and an appreciation for the rich history of Asia. She immigrated to the United States, carrying over her passion for culture, and was shocked to see the discrimination and lack of diversity that plagued her county. After overcoming the adversity and the hatred she received, Maria relearned to love her identity as a Filipino and became determined to help other Asian youths reclaim their identities.

Going on to become a distinguished scholar of her high school and a community member, Maria was part of the AAPI commission's Youth Council, a group of high-achieving and dedicated leaders that worked to advocate for Asian representation and the problems Asian youth face today. She spoke at the AAPI Youth rally held last year at Boston Common to highlight the importance of Asian youth in their communities. Maria also performed at the previous Unity Dinner, helping celebrate the accomplishments of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders around Massachusetts. In the fall, she hopes to combine her academic interest in medicine and her devotion to representing minorities at UMASS Lowell, where she received a prestigious annual full tuition award.