

NYIC's strong past has made better present

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Body

For years, politicians in New York simply turned their backs to the needs and aspirations of powerless immigrants. Fortunately, things have changed - and they cannot afford such luxury any more.

The reason is a powerful one: New citizens have become new voters by the hundreds of thousands, and any politico that ignores them is bound to pay a price at the polls.

For that, the New York Immigration Coalition, an indispensable city institution that tomorrow celebrates its 25th year of existence, deserves much credit: It has registered to vote nearly 300,000 new Americans.

We asked Chung-Wha Hong, the NYIC executive director, if she thought their success in turning new citizens into voters was the **NYIC's** greatest accomplishment.

"I am most proud of the fact that the NYIC has become a vehicle to build power, unity and community in the diverse and vibrant immigrant community in New York," said Hong, who succeeded Margie McHugh, the first executive director, a true force in the immigration community, in 2005.

During her 15-year tenure, McHugh expanded the focus of the NYIC considerably. Over those years, the coalition's first federal advocacy day was organized, its Albany policy agenda began to be developed and the City Access Project was launched, bringing immigrant community leaders and city officials together to collaboratively address barriers that prevented city agencies from being accessible and responsive to immigrant communities. Hong has continued to build on McHugh's impressive legacy.

"We built power through expanding our membership to nearly 200 organizations statewide," Hong said. "We built power through registering and mobilizing over 280,000 new American citizens during the last two decades; we built power through actions that drew participation from tens of thousands of immigrants."

But she also said that power in itself is not the answer.

"There are three overarching themes that shape our work: power, unity, and community," Hong said. "We translated diversity into unity by bringing communities together to press for a justice and opportunity agenda as a unified voice."

"And we built community. Through the NYIC, the diverse communities have a chance to work together, have a dialogue together, learn from each other through leadership development and training programs. We've created a sense of community where everyone is welcomed and respected," she said.

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Justly proud of the work of the institution she leads, Hong is well aware that the road ahead is a rocky one.

She called it "shocking and unacceptable" that New York state will not pass the DREAM Act this session to give equal college financial aid access to immigrant students.

But her greatest frustration is the lack of leadership and the legislative gridlock in Washington that, she said, is undermining immigrants every single day.

"The status quo of 400,000 deportations every year, ripping apart our families and communities, is a travesty," she said.

After a quarter-century of fighting for a society that values the contributions of immigrants, Hong and the NYIC are clear on their priorities.

"We are focusing on passing the DREAM legislation on the state level, building parent engagement through community-based Family Resource Centers and calling for NYPD accountability in New York City," she said.

"(Also), pushing Washington to stop the massive deportations, and mobilizing the new American electorate through our 'Immigrants Vote!' campaign, so that we are **better** positioned to press for our policy changes."

A full agenda and one that, judging by the **past** 25 years, the NYIC will tackle with conviction and strength.

For more information on tomorrow's gala celebrating the **NYIC's** 25th anniversary, email events@thenyic.org or call (212) 627-2227, extension 221.

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