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Candidate wants to send message beyond City Hall

Jaime Castillo - Jaime Castillo

Forget, for a minute, about endorsements, platforms and political ads.

The people of City Council District 9 on San Antonio's North Side deserve to make up their own minds about who should represent them in next May's city elections.

But, win, lose or runoff, the candidacy of Elisa Chan is an immigrant story worth telling.

In business circles, Chan and her husband are the owners of Unintech Consulting Engineers. They are solid members of the chamber-of-commerce crowd.

Yet Chan wants to be known as more than a successful businesswoman who decided to run for office.

The Taiwan native also wants to demonstrate something to other recent Asian American immigrants who might have embraced every aspect of American life — except its politics.

“Most Asian American parents will tell their children not to go into politics,” Chan, 42, said. “In our culture, it's important to be humble. You don't go around talking about how good you are.”

But Chan, who has degrees in software engineering and computer science, said the cultural attitude, while completely understandable, winds up limiting the full participation of Asian residents in a city like San Antonio.

About 13 percent of the local population is foreign-born, according to census figures. Meanwhile, about 2 percent of San Antonians identify themselves as “Asian,” which includes Chinese, Japanese, Indian and numerous other nationalities and ethnic groups.

“We are small in terms of population, but this is our city,” Chan said. “We aren't going anywhere.

“We need to be as involved in our city as anybody else.”

For someone who never thought she would wind up in San Antonio, Chan's attitude is a revelation even to herself.

She arrived in Texas from mainland China in 1988 expecting to attend graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin. But after missing a registration deadline, a family friend urged her to apply at UTSA and then transfer after a year.

The rest, as they say, is history. She never left the Alamo City.

“I never thought I would stay in San Antonio, and I certainly never thought I would run for City Council,” she said, laughing at the thought.

Ten years ago, Chan epitomized the attitude of many Asian immigrants.

Work hard. Strive for every bit of education possible. And, by all means, don't draw attention to yourself.

“We tend to say, ‘Our thing is academia. We're good at technical jobs. We're good at science,’” Chan said. “Well, I don't think that's good enough.

“We should have more lawyers. We should have more politicians,” she added.

Chan, whose father is a retired doctor — an ear, nose and throat specialist, to be exact — said she hopes her candidacy will in some small way encourage other Asian Americans to get more involved in civic life.

“Every ethnic group has its own challenges,” she said. “(Asians) have no problem with education. We have no problem with hard work.

“We have a problem of not seeing ourselves a certain way.”

It's far too early to forecast what kind of candidate Chan will turn out to be, and how she will fare in a field that will likely include AT&T engineering design manager Weston Martinez and, possibly, incumbent Councilman Louis Rowe.

But, whether she's successful at the ballot box, Chan will send a well-meaning message to the rest of the city just by being on the ballot.

“Hopefully we can all continue the great America that all of us immigrants came here for,” she said.

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