

A Diplomat's Secret Weapon

A veteran diplomat spills the beans on the powerful wives' network that helped him do his job.

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IN 1984, I had served for a total of 13 years as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. I was ready for a new assignment. I was happy when informed that I would succeed my old teacher at the National University of Singapore Law School, Punch Coomaraswamy, as Singapore's fourth Ambassador to the United States.

I told my wife that although New York and Washington DC were only a few hundred miles apart, the nature of my old and new postings was different. The UN posting was a multilateral posting and my mission was to represent Singapore in the Parliament of the world. My job was to befriend and earn the goodwill of as many delegations as possible.

Washington was a bilateral posting and my job was to earn the friendship, goodwill and support of the government and people of the United States for Singapore.

American Expectations

I also told my wife that in Washington, I would need her involvement in and support for my work. The Americans expected the Ambassador and his wife to take an active part in the social, cultural and philanthropic life of the city. As the representatives of a small country, we had to work harder and smarter in order to gain visibility, relevance and access.

As my wife had a medical degree, I encouraged her to help two medical charities. There was a new hospital in Washington called The National Rehabilitation Hospital. It specialised in treating patients who had suffered strokes or spinal injuries as a result of accidents. The First Lady, Mrs Nancy Reagan, was the patron of the hospital. My wife accepted an invitation to serve on the hospital's board.

My wife also accepted an invitation to serve on the board of the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Multiple sclerosis is a disorder in which the nerves of the eye, brain and spinal cord lose patches of their protective insulation known as myelin.

The Society raised money to fund medical research into the disease and to find a cure for it.

My wife enjoyed working with the two medical charities and we tried, in our modest ways, to contribute to their work and finances. She introduced me to the many friends she made. This helped to expand my network in Washington to include thought leaders in medical research, health care and philanthropy.



Prof Tommy Koh and his wife Siew Aing at the Institute of Policy Studies' fifth anniversary dinner in 1995, when Prof Koh was IPS director. Photo: Prof Tommy Koh

Power Women in Washington

SOON after I arrived in Washington, I discovered that there were eight powerful women's clubs with the unassuming name of International Neighbour Clubs. Many of the powerful women of Washington belonged to these clubs. Admission was by invitation only. There was a rule that, in each club, there would be equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans.

The wife of an American friend got an invitation for my wife to join her club. I encouraged my wife to accept the invitation and to play an active role in it.

She did such a good job that, after a number of years, she was elected as the president of her club.

The members of my wife's club included the then only woman on the US Supreme Court, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. Other prominent members included the wife of the Attorney-General, Mrs Ed Meese; the wife of the US Trade Representative, Mrs Clayton Yeutter; the wife of the highly respected Republican senator, Mrs Alan Simpson; the wife of the veteran Democratic African-American congressman from New York, Mrs Charlie Rangel, and the wife of the President of the American University.

My wife became my secret weapon when I wanted to invite an American leader to come home to have dinner with a visiting minister.

I remember on one occasion, our then Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr S. Dhanabalan, was visiting Washington. I wanted to host a dinner in his honour. Instead of approaching Mr Clayton Yeutter's office, I asked my wife to phone his wife to find out whether they were available. Mrs

Yeutter said they were. My wife then requested she let her husband's staff know that they had accepted our invitation to dinner.

On another occasion, our then Attorney-General, Mr Tan Boon Teik, was visiting Washington. I wanted to host a dinner in his honour and to invite the then US Attorney-General, Mr Ed Meese, to the dinner. I also requested my wife to phone Mrs Meese to convey the invitation. The dinner was a great success as the guests included the then US Attorney-General as well as a former Attorney-General, Mr Elliot Richardson.

I remember on one occasion, an influential US congressman of the Democratic Party, who was a good friend of Singapore, had approached me to get an invitation for his wife to join my wife's club.

When a vacancy for a Democrat opened up in the club, my wife was able to persuade the Republican members not to veto her admission.

The congressman was very grateful when his wife was invited to join my wife's club.

As I took Asean solidarity seriously, I asked my wife to help ensure that all the wives of the Asean ambassadors were members of the different clubs. When she found out that the wife of the Brunei Ambassador was not in any of the clubs, she managed to persuade her club to invite her to join.

Makan Diplomacy

MY wife was kept very busy entertaining American guests during our six years in Washington. For lunch, it was acceptable to invite guests to a restaurant.

For dinner, however, Americans prefer to be invited to your home. They want to see how you furnish your home. They want to view your art collection and your library and taste your national cuisine. It is very important for all our ambassadors and their spouses to entertain at home.

The six Asean ambassadors in Washington were good friends and colleagues. We were united in pursuing our common objectives. We used to take turns hosting a monthly lunch in our respective homes. The host could invite an American guest to join us.

When it was my turn, I decided to invite the president of the most powerful trade union in America, the AFL-CIO. He was Mr Lane Kirkland. He came with two of his colleagues.

The lunch turned out to be a very contentious one. The Asean ambassadors tried, in vain, to persuade Mr Kirkland to support free trade. His counter-argument was that free trade was not fair trade and was bad for the workers of America. The lunch ended in a truce and we had to agree to disagree.

Mr Kirkland thanked me for hosting him and his colleagues to lunch. He said that the only thing we could agree on was that the food was excellent. He asked me who had prepared the meal. When I told him that my wife did, he couldn't believe it. I had to go to the kitchen to persuade my reluctant wife to come out to meet the guests.

I would like to end this essay by paying a tribute to all the wives of our ambassadors, past and present. Very often, as in my case, the wife had played an important role in the husband's diplomacy.

It is time for us to acknowledge their contributions and to thank them for their service to the nation.

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