

Carmille Lim

Common Cause Hawaii's new chief wants voters to not take good government for granted

By Vicki Viotti

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 01, 2013

LAST UPDATED: 01:38 a.m. HST, Mar 01, 2013



[Ads by Google](#)

[500 Business Cards \\$7.95](#) 500 high-quality cards just \$7.95. Satisfaction guarantee. 24hr ship.
www.123print.com/500_BizCardsUnder8

[Golden Nugget In Vegas](#) Get Swept Off Your Feet With Our Specials. Make Reservations Today!
www.goldennugget.com

[Regrowing Eyelashes?](#) We've Tested All Eyelash Enhancers. Here Are The Best Products of 2014.
consumersguides.com

Carmille Lim, the newly appointed executive director of Common Cause Hawaii, has jumped into the deep end of democracy, starting at her new post just about when the Legislature convened.

It can be a rough swim for most people in her age cohort — she'll confess to being in her 20s but doesn't want to pinpoint the number. But Lim is already a veteran of citizen advocacy through her volunteer involvement with Kanu Hawaii and her past position as development and advocacy manager for the YWCA of Oahu.

Plus, there's that thing about being a first-generation immigrant, having moved to America from the Philippines at age 9. Government access is not a commodity to be taken for granted, she said.

The Pearl City High School graduate earned her bachelor's degree in political science at the University of Hawaii; it took her a bit longer than usual, she said, because she changed majors from pre-dental. Working as a student and witnessing those root canals, she said, it became clear that peering over teeth and gums wouldn't be her passion.

Right now things are looking hopeful, she said, for three House bills her good-government nonprofit is following: House Bill 1147, for more transparency by political action committees; HB 1132, for more prompt disclosure of politicians' financial interests; and HB 321, for same-day voter registration.

Riding herd on all that takes energy, and the group's roster of 4,000 members and supporters is managed by only two paid staffers — the other is a volunteer coordinator. Lim has her physical fitness — a trained dancer, she still works in regular exercise or ballet class — to thank for her stamina.

"You know, really, dance, working out is non-negotiable for me," she said. "I have to do it to remain productive."

QUESTION: Is your interest in civic engagement something you picked up from your parents?

ANSWER: It's weird: I just had this sense of obligation. Once I moved to America, I just really felt grateful and wanted to find a way to get involved and get other people my age -- particularly low-income people, immigrant people -- involved.

It's really corny, but what really sparked my interest was in first grade, my teacher made us watch "We Are the World." And we had this long discussion about poverty and human rights and overpopulation. And then I used to go back home to the Philippines every summer, and my eyes were just opened. Wow. There's so much injustice going on. It's really up to us to give back. The Philippines, the political system, was so bad at the time. It just really opened my eyes.

Q: What was your introduction to Common Cause?

A: I started out really as a volunteer for Kanu Hawaii. I was involved in different projects that they had, but what really resonated with me was the civic engagement. Through that, Kanu had a specific partnership with Common Cause, and so that's how I met (former director) Nikki (Love), and I joined the League of Women Voters, and we all just started collaborating with each other.

Q: Seeing how much money is involved in politics, are you ever cynical about the possibilities for civic engagement?

A: I've had my cynical moments. But I really see myself as a pragmatic idealist. I see what's realistic, I see what goals to strive for, within reason.

Q: Do you have any examples of what it means to be pragmatic? What kind of compromises have been needed?

A: Well, I think it's more a matter of having big goals, but taking bite-sized steps to tackle them. You can't just say, "I want to accomplish this." You have to pinpoint what are the obstacles that we face ... and what can we tackle first.

Q: What would you say are Common Cause's principal areas of concern?

A: Nationally our issues surround legislative reform, electoral reform, having more transparency ... having better media pluralism, better representation of genders, race, whatnot in media. And of course campaign finance reform.

But what I see as my goal is how to express these issues in a tangible way to the public, so that they can learn what the process is and how to get involved, and how to get their voice heard.

Q: You've described some of what you do as "community organizing." What does that term mean to you?

A: I think it's one's ability to reach out to people and connect with them on a personal level and engage them through some type of call to action. Not just one person striving toward a goal, but people en masse.

Q: How do you think people your age relate to your brand of activism?

A: I think I'm very fortunate in that most of my peers and my close circle of friends are really involved in the community in some way. ... I think, like any generation, there's going to be people who are more involved than others. It really depends on their own personal mission.

Q: What are the key bills Common Cause is following this session?

A: Actually, what we're really interested in is the independent expenditure bill (HB 1147). Really, the main provision that's spelled out we're really advocating for is to have the top contributors from non-candidate committees be posted. So any election year, in communications or advertisements, you'd know who the top donors are.

Q: With the leadership change in the Legislature, do you have different expectations about the kind of legislation that gets passed?

A: Yeah, to a certain extent it helps, of course, when our supporters are in leadership positions on committees. But, despite the shift, the same people have the same views. So we still have a similar dynamic in who believes in what we do and who doesn't, who's willing to embrace our proposed changes.

Q: What are some of your other priorities?

A: We're asking for lobbyist disclosure regulation, to have lobbyists report their expenditures. ... We're asking that they specify the activities that they spend their money on -- any donations, fundraising activities, any special events of that kind.

We're also asking that the lobbyists disclose their clients. So it wouldn't say, "This law firm is doing this." It would say which of your clients are working to lobby.

Q: So right now the records don't always tell you who actually benefits from lobbying?

A: Yeah, they don't tell us enough, and in a timely way.

Another bill asks that (financial) disclosure deadlines for public officials be moved up to, say, January, rather than having to be filed in May, after the session is over. ... Really, it's aligned with what they do in the (City) Council; it's easier, filing-wise, too.

Q: Basically, is Common Cause about the connection between government and the governed?

A: Yes. We're mainly about keeping the process streamlined, easier, more transparent, so that the public can be more involved.

Q: People sometimes associate Common Cause with certain progressive issues, with land use, the environment. But that's not the agenda, right?

A: No. I mean, I can see why that mix-up exists, because a lot of the process issues we address affect other issues: environment, education, women's issues. So if something were to come up that's environmental-related, we would address it at the process point: This process, or filing, or oversight may not make sense, and may not be as transparent as it could be.

Q: How does Common Cause operate during session? Do you run around each day tracking the bills?

A: We have a small staff. ... Common Cause has a history of partnership with ADA -- Americans for Democratic Action -- League of Women Voters, Kanu. So, depending on our focus, we kind of share the load on tracking; that's very beneficial. ... We all have our niche, but it definitely overlaps.

For tracking, the Capitol has this great function where you could compile together reports and track them. ...

Q: You mean the Capitol website?

A: Yeah. ... They've done a tremendous job in making things easier for the public. ... You can put together lists of bills you are following, and it will generate a report on what the status of each bill is.

Q: What's your outreach to the voters, the people not at the Capitol?

A: In terms of keeping our members and donors updated, we do have our website and our mailing list that we can send email newsletters to. And we do twice-a-year mailings to our membership, that type of thing.

Q: If you're confronted by a cynic, what evidence can you offer them that government can work?

A: When civil unions was passed, that was a product of public pressure, of getting involved, right?

And when (former state Rep.) Marilyn Lee almost lost her re-election by a very narrow amount of votes —

Q: She did lose this time, right?

A: Yeah, well, in 2010, it was a squeaker.

Q: So your point is every vote does count?

A: It does. I come from the perspective of having a different type of government. Depending on the people inside and the people outside, there is a way to change things.

I see government as a kind of computer, right? Depending on the users, the people inside and outside.

Common Cause's tagline, if you will, is to hold power accountable. ... You can't just protest, you have to go in and talk to them — "Hey, this is how it's not working for us, this is why we need to make it better" — and then gauge what their receptiveness is.

Q: You were born in the Philippines, and you say that fueled your interest in U.S. government. Do your parents understand what you're doing?

A: Kind of. (Laughs.) They kind of understand. People who get involved in government, I'm not sure if that's what they're used to at home.

I think the thing that resonated with me is that in the Philippines, there are still election-related deaths. We are just taking for granted the ability to vote.

Copyright (c) Honolulu Star-Advertiser