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CLOSING STATEMENT

Chicago attorneys help create a new national Arab American bar association

A guiding light

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske

Donna Haddad, global senior counsel at IBM, wrote in her application to Northwestern Pritzker School of Law she wanted to become a lawyer to reflect the Arab American community as she knew them to be. More than 30 years later, Haddad continues to advocate for a more accurate representation of Arab Americans in the United States and hopes that the new National Arab American Bar Association (NAABA) will help lend greater visibility to the community.

"I'm incredibly excited," she said. "I think we are obligated to lift as we climb for the next generation of Arab Americans."

Haddad — who is NAABA's founding board member — was joined by other Chicago-based attorneys to help create and serve on the executive board of the NAABA, which officially launched in March. Haddad and the other attorneys — including Nura Yanaki and Sandra Frantzen — will lend the new national association its leadership experience from their work as members of the Arab American Bar Association of Illinois.

"The (Arab American Bar) Association has so much experience in how to form an organization (and how to) host an event, I feel it has been pretty fundamental," said Frantzen, who currently serves as vice president of NAABA, adding to her commitments to the state organization and as a partner with the intellectual property firm McAndrews.

Frantzen said the Arab American Bar Association served as a foundation for designing the bylaws of NAABA. While new, NAABA plans to provide networking, education and support for Arab Americans pursuing their studies in college and law school.

CREATING A VOICE

Dallas-based attorney Rami Jabara currently serves as NAABA president. He led the organization's establishment through several starts and stops.



Donna Haddad



The new National Arab American Bar Association hosted a kick-off event with its leaders. The organization aims to lead greater visibility for the Arab legal community. Photo courtesy of National Arab American Bar Association.

Born in Beirut, Jabara's family emigrated to the states in the 1980s and he grew up in Oklahoma. In the absence of a state and national organization in the past, Jabara said he tried to connect with other heritage-based organizations, only to find himself feeling like a minority amongst minorities.

The umbrella term of "Arab Americans" encompasses people from diverse backgrounds and countries to where they trace their heritage. Jabara is quick to point out NAABA isn't political or religious. It is designed for the professional development of lawyers, each of whom have their own story.

In April 2023, Haddad helped organize activities at IBM in recognition of National Arab American Heritage Month. They included a panel of Arab women working at IBM. One panelist was an immigrant, another was a first generation Arab American and a third woman was second generation.

"Each had different experiences and it was interesting to have this conversation among ourselves," Haddad said. "The experiences of a first and second generation and of an immigrant were all different."

Haddad added: "The Arab community is very diverse, but we can come together with shared language, shared similar cultures."

Arab Americans include those who are Lebanese, Jordanian, Syrian and Palestinian.

The ability to identify and present a voice for the Arab community strikes a chord with Frantzen. She noted that the White House Office of Management and Budget in March announced a new federal standard for collecting race and ethnicity data, which will include a new category for those of Middle Eastern and North African descent.

"We need to network to be present so other Arab Americans in the country have a voice," said Frantzen, who was born in Lebanon and immigrated as a child with her family.

Frantzen studied chemistry as an undergrad, hoping to fulfill her parents' wish to become a doctor. While studying, she became familiar with concepts of trademark and intellectual property.

"All Arabs want their kids to become a doctor," Frantzen said. Against her father's advice, she decided to enter law school. She recalled that there were few students with whom she shared a heritage at the University of Chicago Law School.

Now established in their own careers, Frantzen, Jabara and Haddad want the support of younger generations to be an important item to address in the state and national bar organizations.

Haddad knew she wanted to be an attorney from a young age, even if she didn't know anyone in the field who looked like her.

The daughter of Jordanian immigrants, Haddad's first language was Arabic. She said her father supported her dreams to go to Northwestern University, first for her undergraduate degree and later for law school.

"My immigrant father supported his daughter's education and the value of education for his daughter and sons, even though he had never gone to college. He realized the value in it," Haddad said.

Spreading the truth about the Arab community, fighting against misconceptions and racist attitudes is something Haddad takes to heart. She recalls the taunts from her

childhood classmates. As a mother, Haddad was upset when she saw her children endure racist comments.

"I want to advocate for the community," Haddad said. "I am really humbled, even more grateful that I am in the position (to) help represent my community in a way I know it can be."

From her highly educated and business-minded cousins in Jordan to her legal colleagues in Chicago and the United States, Haddad is excited to see generations of strong Arab women working to overcome stereotypes and misconceptions of what it means to be of that heritage.

"A national bar association for me, is a continuation of my 22-year-old self trying to do what I can to counter stereotypes," Haddad said.

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