

Georgia Yuan: General Counsel for Smith College

GCC Profile

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By Kenneth Davis

Georgia Yuan was working as a project geologist for the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco when she first considered a career in law. She said that the environmental lawyers with whom she worked piqued her interest in the legal field. However, it wasn't until she and her husband relocated to Pullman, WA, a few years later that she took action and entered law school.



Georgia Yuan

"I think I fell into law school," she said. "It wasn't really a burning desire, but I suddenly had time on my hands, and I was in a new location and just thought law school would be fun."

Yuan's seemingly impulsive decision turned out to be a great career move. She is now General Counsel for Smith College, the largest liberal arts college for women in the U.S. Yuan, who joined Smith College as its first general counsel in 2003, handles a wide array of matters.

"General counsel for colleges and universities are really jacks of all trades," she said. "The college is an employer-owned property that enters into complex contracting relationships. There's a whole body of law that goes with just

student relationships and particular employment relationships having to do with faculty. And then there's a full range of things, such as having a radio station, being an Internet service provider, having a health services; it's just extremely broad, and so my day-to-day is extraordinarily varied and interesting."

Yuan said one of her more interesting and "unusual" duties as general counsel is staffing the Trustees' Committee on Investor Responsibility.

"And as part of that, we delve into a lot of issues related to social investment, and most recently, I've learned a lot about the divestment movement in the Sudan," Yuan said. "So I end up, as counsel, having to research a lot of in-depth areas."

Q. Do you have any hobbies or interests?

A. I'm a musician. I sing in a very large choral society here in Northampton; I play the harpsichord. And I enjoy sewing—quilting, maybe more specifically—and hiking.

Q. What CD was most recently in your CD player?

A. Jacques Loussier playing Chopin etudes in a sort of jazz way.

Q. What's the last magazine you read?

A. Probably the *Sunday Times* magazine.

Q. What's your favorite TV show?

A. It was *The West Wing* [which has been cancelled]. I have not replaced it yet. I'm waiting for the next good show.

Yuan added that she has also done a lot of policy work for Smith.

"I think lawyers all over the country are grappling with new rules regarding records retention and electronic discovery, and being someone in that position to help the college respond to those changes in the law has been challenging

and rewarding.

Yuan discussed what she enjoys most about her job:

"Working as a general counsel for a college is a dream job for a lawyer," she said. "The people are interesting and are excellent critical thinkers; it's graduating students who are going to go out in the world, and as general counsel, you become part of a community that values learning. And I think for many of us, it doesn't get better."

Yuan received a B.A. in Geology from Oberlin College in 1975. After graduating, she entered Stanford University, from which she earned her M.S. in Applied Earth Science in 1979.

In 1978, Yuan began working as a project geologist for the Natural Resources Defense Counsel (NRDC) in San Francisco. As project geologist, she worked on environmental issues related to radioactive waste disposal. She left the NRDC in 1981 when her husband's job required them to move to Pullman, WA. Once there, she decided to go to law school and entered the University of Idaho College of Law in 1982; she earned her law degree in 1985.

After law school, Yuan joined Pullman-based law firm Irwin, Myklebust, Savage & Brown in 1986. There, her practice focused on domestic relations, insurance defense, and juvenile criminal defense.

In 1990, she left the firm and returned to the University of Idaho, where she worked as the assistant to the president. In 1994, she became general counsel for the university and remained in that position until she joined Smith College in

NORHAMPTON, MA, IN 2003.

About Smith College:

Since its founding in 1871, Smith College has provided women of high ability and promise educations of uncompromising quality. A world-class faculty of scholars is fully engaged with students' intellectual development, and an open curriculum encourages each student to explore many fields of knowledge. Mentors for scholarship, leadership, and service, across all spectrums of endeavor, allow Smith students to observe different models of achievement and then set their own courses with conviction. As the nation's largest liberal arts college for women, Smith offers a unique breadth of resources. Outstanding academic facilities on a New England campus noted for its beauty are complemented by a supportive housing system that fosters self-reliance and builds lifelong friendships.

Yuan explained why she decided to leave the University of Idaho to join Smith College:

"You know, the thing about working at a college or a university is that the nature of your client really shapes the job. It shapes what you work on day-to-day, and Smith is a very different client from the University of Idaho—a very different institution. I thought it would be, and it has turned out to be, very gratifying to represent a premier women's liberal arts college with the bottom line of educating and graduating women students for the world."

She said the person who has influenced her most in her career is Robert Hoover, the president of Albertson College of Idaho. Yuan worked with Hoover while employed by the University of Idaho when he was president of the institution.

"He was someone who really gave me many opportunities to grow in my job," she said.

Yuan had the following advice for law students interested in pursuing in-house careers:

"Representing clients is more than knowing the law," she said. "It is understanding what your client wants to accomplish and finding ways to achieve goals with the legal framework that exists. Know your client well and be part of the solution."

Yuan was born and raised in New York, NY. She has been married for 26 years and has two children: a daughter (22) and a son (19).

On the Net

Smith College

www.smith.edu

Natural Resources Defense Council

www.nrdc.org

Oberlin College

www.oberlin.edu