Introducing Kathy Chow, EWA's New Executive Director

Speakers

- Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio
- Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 00:09
This is EWARadio, the podcast of the Education Writers Association. I'm public editor and your host, Kavitha Cardoza. Usually on an episode we chat with education reporters. Not today. Today, I'm thrilled to introduce you to Kathy Chow, the new executive director of EWA. She takes over from Caroline Hendrie, who was at the helm for 12 years. Kathy will be responsible for an organization which represents nearly 2,000 members, and shall begin on April 3. Okay, that's as much as I know, so I'm looking forward to learning more. Kathy, welcome to EWARadio. I know you're on flood watch, so thank you for making the time.

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 00:52
Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 00:55
This feels a little bit odd. I'm interviewing my new boss. So, I'd like to start by asking you a little bit about your background: where you grew up and your education and a little bit about where you've worked?

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 01:09
Sure, sure. So, I come from an immigrant family. I was personally born in Hong Kong, but came to the United States when I was six months old. My family primarily has been in California most of my life. But we had a very short stint in Texas. And then we came back to California. I went to the University of Pacific where I got a Bachelors of Arts in English and pre-law. I was originally planning on going to law school, but I decided to take a year before I made that commitment. And during that year, I really got into working with nonprofits. And that's, kind of, how my career started working in nonprofits, and specifically working with nonprofits that serve immigrant communities, underrepresented communities around a number of different social services.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 02:19
You have a lot of experience managing nonprofits. What are you most proud of?

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 02:25
Oh, gosh, when I was updating my resume for EWA, I looked at the breadth of my career and, you know, I think I'm most proud of the projects where I've been able to provide impact for the missing voices, the marginalized, to really create policy and change to mobilize communities. I think, you know,

there's been a number of different projects I've worked on throughout my life, but the ones where I can have true impact is really what I'm most proud of.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 03:12
You were also executive director of the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), that many of our members are also a part of, for eight years.

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 03:22
Yes. So I came to AAJA -- I was actually recruited by an AAJA member who worked at the Sacramento Bee. At the time, I was working with HandsOn Sacramento, the volunteer action center here in Sacramento. And he came to me and said, 'Listen, I know you love working with media, and you love telling stories, and AAJA is looking for a new executive director.' So, I went to the association and probably during one of the toughest times in the media industry. I believe it was 2008. And, you know, more than 50,000 jobs were lost during, kind of, a national shrink of newsrooms. And we went from a membership that during its best times was about 2,000. And when I came on, the membership had dwindled down to 800. And, so, there was a lot of fear, stress, anxiety, about what does this mean for journalists and the skills -- and specifically for minority journalists in shrinking newsrooms? And, so, I spent the eight years rebuilding the membership.

When I left, AAJA had a membership close to about 1,700. And, really, we built our programs, we strengthened our base, we did a rebrand in the midst of my term there. And it was really from working with the members, my officers, the board, and all of the media partners and stakeholders. We were able to really do some innovative work, some included with the National Gay Lesbian Journalists Association (NLGJA), a project in Nebraska, called the Heartland Project. And then also another project with IRE teaching underserved journalists within the state of New Mexico great investigative reporting skills. We also looked across the work that we did, to say that it's not enough just to support the journalist, but it's also important to create the ties within the community, specifically within the AAPI community. And so, we looked at training folks who were in leadership positions to work better with media so that when national networks were looking for guest speakers, that they would turn to our community to seek those sources.

So, I think it deepened my love for storytelling, and really made me proud of the work that we did. The one comment that always stood out to me was from the NLGJA president at the time. She had -- we were in the state of Nebraska, meeting with the Lincoln Journal Star -- and after the meeting, she came up to me and she said, 'I just never knew that a journalism association could be more than just a journalism association.' And to me, that has been one of the best compliments of my life. Because I really can see a bigger view and picture for the amazing work that journalists can do in not just the storytelling, but the bridging and the connecting of the industry, and especially here at EWA, I'm excited. I'm excited for the work that I will be able to do with the members, our stakeholders, our staff, our board to reimagine more of what we can do as an association.

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 06:18

Kathy, before I ask you for some of your ideas about the organization, I wanted to ask: You haven't worked as an education journalist -- so what attracted you to this position where you are going to be representing education journalists?

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 08:25
Sure. Part of my background is I used to work for the Sacramento Bee. I was a public affairs representative for the organization for a number of years, and really had the pleasure of working with journalists and understanding their challenges, understanding their passion and their desire. And after AAJA, I took a break from the journalism world but in that time, I had a number of journalists colleagues reach out to me about different jobs that would bring me back into this world. And it just never was the right timing.

And when this position with EWA came about, I had two colleagues reach out to me again, to say, 'Kathy, I think you really need to consider this.' Knowing that I, as I said to the Board of Directors, I like to see myself as being a nerd at heart. I love to consume information. If I hit the lotto, I would probably go back to school and just get a number of different degrees. Education is very dear and near to my heart. And I think having the opportunity to help make a bigger impact with the work that EWA does, I think was something that aligned with my personal passions. And it also was really the right timing for this next chapter in my career, to take all the skills that I have had in my career, to really have a larger social impact in the industry of journalism, but also in education, building bridges, connecting communities. That's really what attracted me and what I'm excited about.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 10:46
Are there any differences that members will see right away? One of the things you had talked a little bit about it earlier, and I hope you will implement it here as well, where we really lift up and empower education journalists to tell the story of education ourselves. It always infuriates me when, you know, there's something going on and it's a non-education reporter talking about deep education topics. And now with the presidential elections coming up, I feel, 'oh, my gosh, education is such a huge issue every election.' And I always see only political reporters talk about it. So, I would love that. But what are the changes might our members see?

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 11:38
Well, there's two points I like to make on that comment. One, I totally agree with you. I think that I'm always about strengthening a brand or doing a fresh reset about the EWA story for those we work with and those who don't know who we are. And I think that there's a lot of opportunity to go back into large small newsrooms across America to tell the EWA story again and say, 'When you do this political story, why are you not leaning on your education journalists for a collaboration or lead in this story?' And, so, I really want to think about that in how we can develop that. I think my first 30-60-90 days is really about a listening tour to strengthen the membership value: What is the value for our members? What has been a missing opportunity? What challenges are they facing that we can bring to support them? No matter where you are in your career, I think that you should be leaning on your association for that support, whether you need a mentor, whether you need to figure out, you know, how to get to that next level in your career. That's what your association is here for. So, I think that there's a lot of different

opportunities and I'm excited to figure what those will be from working with the staff, the board, and listening to the membership.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 13:34
Kathy, what do you do outside work?

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 13:37
Oh, right now my number one priority is sleep. I am not a good sleeper, so I would say, you know, I'm not someone who has a lot of hobbies, but I love to cook and I love to bake. And I said to the board, "You know, I have been known to bake my specialty breads for board meetings." I make an amazing eggnog bread during the holiday. And I make a different types of banana bread. So, I know that doesn't sound fun for some people, but it's very relaxing for me when I'm very methodical about baking or cooking.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 14:31
Well, I don't like baking, Kathy, but love eating and so does the rest of the EWA stuff so feel free to bake all the types of banana bread anytime you want.

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 14:45
I will tell you that I make an amazing caramel corn and the staff where I'll be leaving my organization here at CivicWell, they have already requested the recipe for my caramel corn and I said, "Unfortunately, I don't share my recipe."

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 15:11
Yeah, this is like a reporter never reveals her sources.

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 15:15
exactly

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 15:19
Well, you start April 3 and members can meet you in person in June. This is a plug, of course, for the National Seminar, which is happening in Atlanta from the second to the fourth of June. Kathy, we're super excited to welcome you on board and you will see how fiercely protective and proud we are of EWA and we're really excited that you're going to be leading it.

Kathy Chow, EWA Executive Director 15:47
I'm very excited, too, and I can't wait!

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 16:27
Well, that wraps up this episode of EWARadio. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Do you want to introduce yourself to Kathy or welcome her, or if you have any questions, Kathy's handle is @KathyChow888. Let's continue the conversation on Twitter at @EdWriters.

Special thanks to Angelina Liu and Kristan Obeng from EWA and Raul Garcia for production assistance. The mission of the Education Writers Association is to strengthen the community of education journalists and improve the quality of education coverage. For more than 75 years, EWA has helped reporters get the story right. Thanks for listening and lifting up education journalism.