

Our Story –NATWA’s History

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North America Taiwanese Women’s Association (NATWA) was founded in March 1988 during an era when Taiwanese women worked behind the scenes and men led most of the overseas’ Taiwanese organizations. There were no independent Taiwanese women’s organizations. In 1987, Taiwanese American Association (TAA) had its first female president, Ms. Maysing Yang. Ms. Yang was considering setting up a women’s branch of the TAA. She entrusted Ms. Annette Lu to be in charge of the planning. Ms. Lu, the founder of the women’s movement in Taiwan and one of the outspoken leaders for Taiwan’s independence movement, was jailed for several years because of the famous “Kaoshung Incident” in December 1979. Through an endless rescue effort by Overseas’ Taiwanese and Amnesty International, she was finally released for medical treatment and allowed to come to the US in 1987. Ms. Lu, who was well respected by overseas Taiwanese who wanted to see their motherland liberated from KMT’s dictatorship, gladly accepted the task offered by Ms. Yang and called for a meeting. In March of 1988, a small group of 30 Taiwanese women from all over the United States and Canada had a two-day meeting in Los Angeles at the same location that TAA had its annual meeting.

Under Annette Lu’s guidance and leadership, the majority of the attendees came to realize that North American Taiwanese women needed an independent organization and overwhelmingly voted to form NATWA. This historic date was March 13, 1988. These founding members elected Fu-Mei Chang from San Jose as the first President and Grace Chou from Cleveland as the Vice President and president elect. Seven by-law board members were also elected to assist the President and Vice President in drafting NATWA’s by-laws. In July 1988, 45 NATWA members voted to approve the official by-laws. After completing their duties, these seven by-law board members became seven regional board members: US East, US West, US South, US Great Plains, US Midwest, US South East, and Canada. The regional board’s term was two years except for the first three regional boards, US Southeast, US Midwest, and Canada, who all had one-year terms. Both the President and Vice President had one-year terms. After one year, NATWA members had to elect three or four regional board members and a Vice President. The elected Vice President would become the next year’s President. She would have one year to assist the President and familiarize herself with the operations of the organization. This kind of by-law is different from any other Overseas’ Taiwanese Organization and has been proven very effective.

It took six years to build a solid foundation for NATWA: a logo was selected; a membership directory was published annually; a NATWA magazine was distributed twice a year to members; it was registered as a corporation and then obtained 501 (C) (3) non-profit organization status. In order to publicize NATWA and to recruit more members, NATWA’s regional board held seminars at the annual overseas Taiwanese summer camps. Membership grew to more than 300 in June 1991. The first chapter from Northern California was formed in October 1991. Elena Ling, the fourth president from Southern California, had introduced an all-day leadership training program at her annual meeting held in New Orleans in March 1992 and received a very positive response. Li-

Ying Lee, the sixth president from Topeka, Kansas, who had leadership training from the managerial position she held at the American Medical Society, set out to broaden NATWA's structure. She created different committees: public relations, constitution, membership, nomination, calendar, historian, etc. And she gave each committee chair, chapter president, regional board member, vice president, and president, a definite job description. To facilitate NATWA's operations she also initiated the first mid-year board meeting and leadership training camp in October 1993.

NATWA's financial status well exceeded surplus and has been one of the reasons for its growth. Almost all of the members who put their time and effort into this organization are volunteers. But the main reason for its financial strength came from the publication of the NATWA calendar. Therefore, it is important to tell the story of calendar. Grace Chou, the 2nd president, invited Mr. Ing-Ke Kao from Japan and Ms. Annette Lu from Taiwan to attend her annual meeting in Dallas in March 1990. Ms. Lu, who went back to Taiwan after NATWA was founded, suggested to the new President Dorothy Hung from Oklahoma that NATWA publish a special kind of calendar. Every important date relating to Taiwan's democratic and independent movement would be posted. Every year would have a different theme to introduce Taiwan's culture and beautiful sceneries. One or two pages with a brief introduction about Taiwan in English would be inserted. This NATWA calendar would be a nice gift to our international friends to promote Taiwan. Dorothy liked this idea. In order to get funding for this project Dorothy was accompanied by Elena Ling, Vice President; Grace Chou, immediate past president; and Annette Lu to meet with Mr. Kao. Mr. Kao was a well-established businessman as well as a physician in Japan and very generously donated \$10,000 to NATWA.

With this seed money, NATWA's first calendar was published in November 1991. Vivian Fu was in charge of this project. She stayed on as the calendar's chairperson until 1996 when she was elected as vice president. Susan Chang took over the responsibility and oversaw the operation until 2004 when Sophia Lee took over. NATWA's calendar has received very high praise and has been bringing in steady income since its inception. Mr. Kao passed away in 1998, but his contribution to NATWA will never be forgotten. His wife served as NATWA's 4th honorary President. She is a permanent member.

NATWA's "Women Mailbox" first appeared on March 25, 1991 in the *Taiwan Tribune*, a Taiwanese-American newspaper. Mei Tsai from Boston used "A-Hsiang" (meaning aroma) as her pen name and acted as a kind of "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abby" to solve problems for Taiwanese Americans. Her great sense of humor and quick wit lifted many who suffered from emotional and other troubling life burdens. A-Hsiang and her "mailbox" became very popular, and NATWA also became well known in the overseas Taiwanese community. After two years, A-Hsiang was affected by an eye disease and had to quit. Lanny Chen and several other members took over this task. To further serve the Taiwanese Community, Li-Ying Lee asked A-Hsiang to select articles from "the Mailbox" in order to publish a book. It was published in June 1993. The "Women's Mailbox" was closed in 2001 and replaced by another column called "Snack Bar" for overseas Taiwanese to express their life experiences.

NATWA's growth has exceeded everyone's expectations. We can attribute its growth to the members' teamwork, spirit, and discipline to abide by the NATWA constitution. Every President has followed her predecessor's footsteps and tried even harder to strengthen this organization.

Gin Ru Lee, the 7th president, had set up the NATWA Fund system and openly discussed women and sex in her annual meeting in Houston, Texas. The 8th President Sophia Lee was the first to bring English-speaking speakers to discuss EQ in her annual meeting in San Francisco. Vivian Fu, the 9th President from Philadelphia, had set up "Fundraising," "Networking," and "Speaker's Bureau" committees and also approved a NATWA anthem. 10th president Mei Tsai from Boston had enacted the rules for election and removal by impeachment of the President and President-elect. Another committee, "NATWA Scholarship" was also established. Lanny Chen, the 11th President from Huntsville, Alabama set up NATWA's web site and encouraged each chapter to do their own community service project. 12th president Jean Fang from New York started mailing a newsletter between the two issues of NATWA's magazine to promote member's communication. She also activated the "Networking" Committee by collaborating with the Wan-Ru foundation in Taiwan to jointly hold a conference. The conference was postponed due to the September 21 earthquake and finally took place in 2000 during Ingrid Liu's term. Ingrid Liu, the 13th president from Columbus, Ohio set up a "921" earthquake fund to help school children in Taiwan whose families were victims of the earthquake. She also produced useful and nice-looking NATWA shoulder bags. The 14th President Susan Chang, also from Ohio, collaborated with several Taiwanese women's organizations in other countries and formed the Federation of Overseas Taiwanese Women's Association (FOTWA); she also formed the "Culture Committee." Amy Lai, president number 15 from San Jose produced beautiful NATWA scarves and led NATWA delegates to Washington D.C. for grassroots activities. Nora Tsay, the 16th president from Dallas added "Team Taiwan" and "NATWA II" to the networking committees. Along with many Taiwanese American Organizations, Nora organized "Team Taiwan" to participate in "Race for the Cure" as one of our major charity events of the year. President number 17, Mei-Li Yang from Overland Park, Kansas, built the NATWA web membership directory and led a WHO delegation to Geneva to join the world Taiwanese organizations to promote Taiwan to be admitted to WHO. Cecelia Tsai from Houston, the immediate past president, activated "NATWA II" by setting up a "NATWA II" internship program and deliberately incorporated programs relevant to all the generations (first, one and half, and second) in her annual meeting. For the first time there were 20 plus NATWA II members attending.

In the summer of 2005, many members' families in New Orleans were severely hit by Hurricane Katrina. Cecelia Tsai brought funds donated by NATWA members to our New Orleans sisters to show our deepest concern, support, and love.

NATWA has also made great efforts to reach out to the global community. In July 1992, when martial law was still enforced in Taiwan, 5th President Helen Wong led a small group of delegates to visit Taiwan. In her annual meeting she chose "Women & Politics" as her theme in order to try to change the general public's biased opinion that women

didn't care about politics. In 1994, Li-Ying led a delegation to Taiwan to assist in the "Global Summit of Women," of which Annette Lu was in charge. Gin Ru along with another NATWA sister Sophia Lee represented NATWA with observer status at the Fourth "World Conference on Women" in Peiking, China in 1995. NATWA was invited to attend the workshops and follow-up meetings offered by the UN over the next several years. During Lanny Chen's term in 1999, NATWA applied for official observer status but was denied due to China's boycott. In response, Ingrid Liu collaborated with the Wan-Ru Foundation in Taiwan and jointly held a "Taiwan-US Forum" in August 2000. Four times acting as NATWA's representative, Susan Chang was in charge of FOTWA's annual meeting in Japan, the UK, Australia, and Costa Rica. In 2000 and 2004, during Taiwan's presidential election, both Jean Fang and Nora Tsay led the NATWA delegation to actively participate in campaign activities. In December 2000, the WTC (World Taiwanese Congress) was founded. NATWA was elected as one of the five permanent collaborating members. Overseas Taiwanese communities have finally recognized NATWA as one of its leaders.

For 18 years, membership has grown from 40 to over 1,000, and more than 100 volunteers participate in the operation yearly. NATWA has become a very sound and solid organization. From its rich history, you can sense that because of their self-awareness and identity, Taiwanese women in the North America have formed a very special bond to care and encourage one another for personal growth and unlimited possibilities. Many leaders have developed throughout the years. NATWA have made special contributions to homeland Taiwan, as well as to North American society.

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