

Making Seattle Home, One Cold Call at a Time - Bar Bulletin Online

HOME | PUBLICATIONS

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1**

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Making Seattle Home, One Cold Call at a Time

By Mei Shih

My name is Mei Shih, a cooperative and collaborative family law attorney. Even in Seattle, known for the Seattle Freeze, showing up with curiosity, care, and a positive attitude has helped me form meaningful connections.

Resources

[Classified
Ads](#)

[Bar
Bulletin
Archives](#)

[Style
Sheet &
Submissions](#)

[Editorial
Guidelines](#)

[Advertising
Media Kit](#)

[60th
Anniversary
Issue](#)

I recently counted the number of cities I've lived in as an adult: nine. California was my home base: I grew up in the Bay Area, studied at UC Davis, and attended California Western School of Law in San Diego. My life and network were anchored there, and for a long time I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. Yet here I am, in Seattle, more than 15 years removed from law school, practicing in my third jurisdiction (and, yikes, I sat for three bar exams along the way!).

Each move has pushed me to rethink how I need to grow and establish (or "plant") myself, both personally and professionally. Making friends came easily in university and law school, but it became more and more challenging as I got older, married, and became a parent.

According to Myers-Briggs, I'm an INTP – a type I suspect many lawyers share: naturally drawn to solving complex problems with creativity and logic, and inclined toward introversion. I embrace my "ambivert" tendencies, a word I only recently learned, balancing introspection with genuine enjoyment of connecting with others. I need quiet time and thoughtful planning to feel grounded, but I also gain energy from meaningful conversations and shared experiences.

That balance has been essential in building new communities. With every relocation, I've had to rethink how to show up in unfamiliar spaces, stretching myself in ways that have tested my resilience, patience, and adaptability. Understanding my ambivert nature has helped me navigate new environments with more self-awareness, allowing me to enjoy solitude yet still

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Bulletin
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(General
Inquires &
Advertising)

This Month

Issue
Homepage

Court
Strengthens
Gun
Surrender
Enforcement

Transform
Your Legal
Team With a
PM Mindset

Why Every
Company
Needs a
Turnaround

From the
Presiding
Judge:

engaging meaningfully with others. This awareness enables me to approach connections intentionally, rather than defaulting to one mode or another.

Moving to Seattle presented a unique challenge. I had heard of the so-called “Seattle Freeze,” the perception that locals are polite but socially distant, making it harder for newcomers to break in. It sounds like, “Hey, we should get together sometime...” and that sometime never happens. Experiencing it firsthand, I realized I had to put in the work, be brave, and make that first move with concrete plans. I was determined not to become another Seattle Freeze statistic.

Adding to the challenge, I thought about Dunbar’s Number, the idea that humans can comfortably maintain roughly 150 stable relationships, 50 friends and only 15 close ones. Building meaningful connections requires focus, effort, and prioritizing quality over quantity.

My first piece of advice is to take initiative. For me, this meant reaching out to professional contacts via cold calls or emails, and proposing specific dates and times to meet. Most people won’t respond, but the ones who did made it worthwhile.

One experience brought this lesson to life shortly after we arrived in Seattle in 2018, when my oldest was entering kindergarten. I met a few parents during school drop-off, and one offered to introduce me to the only lawyer she knew. I thanked her but did not think much of it. Months later, on a whim, I sent an email to that attorney without expecting anything. That small step led to coffee meetings that continued over time. Nearly eight years later, we’re still in touch and even celebrated our

Introducing
the New
Presiding
Judge of King
County
Superior
Court

Making
Seattle
Home, One
Cold Call at a
Time

Bar Talk:
January 2026

KCBA Board
Builds
Momentum
Heading Into
2026

Two New
Thai Options
North of the
Ship Canal,
Each With a
Distinct Feel

Help the
Family Law
Forms
Drafting Lab
at KCLL

shared love of the law together at the 2025 Law Day event at the University of Washington. That small effort can yield long-lasting relationships.

When I started my solo practice, I unabashedly (well ... a bit abashedly) sent an email with my photo to all the local legal groups I belonged to. I included a short bio of myself, my practice area and style, and an action item inviting people to check out my website and offer feedback. The responses were overwhelming. I scheduled virtual coffee chats, phone calls, and met many new colleagues. Later, when I attended events and socials, people recognized me because of my photo, making it easier to break the ice and have meaningful conversations.

But initiative alone isn't always enough. My second piece of advice is to be consistent. Whether attending school events, community gatherings, or professional meetups, simply showing up helps you become a known and reliable presence.

During my early months in Seattle, I attended events even when I didn't know anyone. At first, it seemed like not much was happening. I made small talk with one or two people but always left feeling a bit bummed because it felt like everyone already had their circles, and I was just orbiting on the outside. Over time, repeated appearances made me a familiar face, and I moved from the periphery into the mix. I built connections and began breaking through the social distance that Seattle transplants often encounter because I kept showing up.

Joining and eventually leading various groups proved invaluable. By attending meetings, volunteering for committees, or helping organize events, I became a

Job
Searching Is
a Strategy
Game. Learn
How to Win

Valuing
Cases in an
Era of Rising
Nuclear
Verdicts

always
Appealing:
Are
Statements
of Additional
Authority
Under RAP
10.8 Too
Much of a
Good Thing?
The Supreme
Court Doesn't
Think So

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Held the
Floor at 2025
Bench Bar
Conference

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trusted, recognizable presence. Stepping into leadership let me create opportunities instead of waiting for them. Over time, these groups became more than professional networks; they grew into communities of people who shared my values and goals. Staying active, and taking the lead, expanded my circle and deepened the relationships within it.

Recently, I was introduced to a Facebook group of mom entrepreneurs who met regularly for coffee in my neighborhood. Most of these women had stepped away from firm jobs and high-demand executive roles to build lives with more balance and intention. Showing up consistently didn't just broaden my network beyond the legal world, it connected me with a community of women who were honest, supportive, and willing to offer real feedback. We celebrated each other's wins, challenged blind spots, and shared the kind of practical wisdom that only comes from people you genuinely trust. Those conversations broadened my perspective, strengthened my confidence, and, most importantly, enriched my life in ways I never expected.

That same willingness to show up led to another opportunity: being invited to join a local nonprofit, Family Law CASA, as a board member in 2021. Accepting that invitation deepened my involvement in the community and opened doors I hadn't anticipated. Today, I serve as vice president of the Board of Directors and will soon step into the president role. Whether building a network of supportive peers or contributing to meaningful community work, saying yes, even when it feels unfamiliar, has consistently led to connection, growth, and impact beyond what I could have imagined. Even as I was writing this article, I received an email

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Conference

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Assistance
Now
Available for
Immigrant
Families

2025
Retrospective:
KCBA In the
Appellate
Courts

2025 Year in
Review:
Powered by
Our Members
and Staff

Profile /
Danijela
Krecar:
Championing
Foreign-
Trained
Lawyers in
Washington

How You Feel
Is More
Important
Than What

invitation to be part of a panel discussion over the summer. Although I'll likely be out of town, I didn't immediately turn it down. Instead, I opened the door to a conversation, recognizing that opportunities often appear when you're willing to show up.

My last piece of advice is to be yourself because authentic connections are ones that endure. Not every connection will become a friendship or professional alliance, and that's okay. Focusing on meaningful, reciprocal connections makes networking more sustainable and fulfilling, aligning with the idea behind Dunbar's Number. Prioritizing quality over quantity ensures your energy goes into relationships that matter most.

I can't write about building connections in Seattle without sharing one of my first friendships here. It started because we worked at the same law firm, but what really sparked our first conversation was discovering we shared a mutual connection on LinkedIn. We spent time trying to figure out whether any of our timelines overlapped with that friend. They didn't. But that tiny discovery opened the door. It gave me something familiar to hold onto in a new place. While that LinkedIn connection wasn't what ultimately made us friends, it broke the ice just enough for us to see who the other person really was. From there, the friendship grew naturally. Over time, we realized we shared similar values, humor, and a desire to find genuine community. Even though we no longer work at the same firm, we've stayed close. We often joke that our true calling might be running a successful plant nursery instead of practicing law.

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Meaningful friendships and relationships often begin with the smallest points of overlap. A shared connection doesn't guarantee a bond, but it can open the conversation that allows one to take shape. Whenever I meet someone new, I carry that lesson with me: Start with common ground, and let the rest unfold from there. My ambivert nature helped me navigate these relationships, knowing when to engage actively and when to step back and reflect.

Even in a city with a reputation for social distance, it is possible to create a thriving network by approaching relationships with intention. Take initiative, be present and consistent, focus on authentic connections, and embrace unexpected opportunities – from cold calls and listserv introductions to Facebook groups, networking events, and board service. You control the Seattle Freeze, not the other way around.

So warm up those hands, because if I'm being true to myself, I have an action item for you. Step out of your comfort zone, take that first step, start small, and send me an email at mei@shihlegal.com. Let's connect.

Mei Shih, a family law attorney, has lived on both coasts and abroad in adulthood, and practiced in three jurisdictions. Moving often has pushed her to rethink how to build connections and taught her the importance of showing up, taking initiative, and nurturing meaningful relationships.

