It was “Everything Everywhere All at ABASD” on May 19 at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront, complete with hundreds of plastic googly eyes, toy raccoons on hats and disproportionately long hot dog fingers.

More than 400 people, some dressed like characters from the multiple-2022 Oscar-winning movie “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” attended the event in support of the Asian Business Association of San Diego and the Asian American Pacifist Islander community. The event’s theme — Everything Everywhere All at ASASD — comes from the genre-defying film.

The event was ABASD’s 30th gala, its first soiree since 2019, and it drew some top leaders in California, including State Treasurer Fiona Ma, San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria and, of course, Jason Paguio, the president and CEO of ABASD and the Asian Business Association Foundation.

“Supporting small businesses is what we’re about,” said Paguio, who was appointed one year ago by Gov. Gavin Newsom to be a commissioner with the California Commission on Asian Pacific Islander American Affairs.

“Thanks to Jason’s leadership, the organization has not just survived, it has thrived,” said ABASD gala emcee Lee Ann Kim, a former television anchor and emcee.

The mayor recounted a story about how he wouldn’t miss his family’s lawn mowing. “I was necessary. What he was doing was protecting himself and providing for his family. And in just two generations, you go from someone scarred by racism, of mowing that lawn in the heat, to his grandson being able to become the mayor of this great city.”

Gloria also said that the city and ABASD partnered to provide more than 1,500 grants to local Asian-owned businesses to make sure they could keep their doors open, keep employees on the payroll “and continue to build the generational wealth that changes lives every single day.”

The gala also was the place to be for the reveal of the colorful, uniquely vertical “CONVOY” neighborhood gateway sign going up in the Convoy district, along with its designer, Bennett Peji, president of the Filipino-American Chamber of Commerce and former chairman at SDABA.

It was “Supporting small businesses is what we’re about,” Mayor Fiona Ma, San Diego County Supervisor Vivian Moreno, and others who passed out prizes. “Give back, and you’ll enjoy it.”

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“Everything Everywhere All at ABASD” was attended by Mayor Todd Gloria, San Diego Mayor Fiona Ma, San Diego District 6 City Councilman Ben-
Being a small business owner can be filled with challenges, expected and unexpected. As Bank Senior Vice President/Manager of Business Jeni Burgess knows that well. The Board Chair of the Asian Business Association of San Diego owned two small businesses in San Diego in the 1980s, an office furniture/office equipment store and a sheet metal company. Running those companies meant facing myriad challenges, said Burgess, who immigrated with her family from the Philippines to San Diego when she was 10 years old.

Especially going back 40 years ago, running companies wasn’t always easy for a Filipino American woman business owner.

She said those hard times are some of what drives her now for ABASD, which honored her as Board Chair of the Multiverse at the May 19 gala at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront.

Founded in 1990, ABASD represents the interests of more than 30,000 Asian Pacific Islander-owned businesses in San Diego County.

“The Asian Business Association of San Diego is extremely important,” said Burgess, 61, who first joined its ranks in 1990, left because of other responsibilities, then came back again seven years ago, pulled back – as what she terms “a retreat” – by fellow ABASD board member and Small Business Champion of the Year award. Burgess said she returned to the board fold with the ABASD to support its staff that continued to work to do “great things for the Asian business community.”

“I have a passion to affect change,” she said. “And the ABASD has a good team. Oh my gosh, the hardest working staff. They are everywhere all the time. They’re the best.”

Burgess said she continues to use her passion and experience as an advocate to champion underrepresented businesses and communities.

That passion was brought to the forefront during the Covid-19 pandemic when Asian American Pacific Islander small businesses in San Diego County faced countless hurdles.

“Jeni Burgess has served as board chair during one of the most difficult times of the organization,” said ABASD gala host and emcee Lee Ann Kim.

Burgess years earlier had laid down the groundwork for preparing business owners, when she worked at Wells Fargo Bank. At Wells Fargo for more than 20 years, Burgess was able to get an initial $50,000 buy-in from the bank to help fund the ABASD’s Small Business Development Center in 2017.

Then, once the SBDC was up and running with robust programs “teaching marketing and so much more,” Burgess said, and bringing in new hires like Wesly Quach as director, Wells Fargo kicked in another $50,000.

She was also board chair when ABASD needed a new president and CEO – and that’s when the group hired Jason Paguio, just months before COVID-19 changed the world.

“By 2019, we were able to hire Jason Paguio and when the pandemic hit, we had a full blown SBDC,” Burgess recalled. “We had created an alliance with the Black and Hispanic chambers of commerce so when the pandemic hit, with Wes and a few other people on staff, were able to deliver much needed PPP (Paycheck Protection Program, a government fund) to a lot of these small businesses that was so important.

“We were the facilitators through different financial institutions to help them and if their bank couldn’t do it, we were able to connect them with institutions where they could.”

Burgess said at the point, ABASD had reached a level of “significance, where the city of San Diego saw us as an organization that can deliver programs and help us through the pandemic.”

Those weren’t the only times Burgess made a big difference.

In the 1990s, with the Small Business Economic Development Corporation behind her, Burgess created and led 33 banks in a coalition where members pooled their money with the idea of targeting funds for underrepresented businesses and organizations.

The effort began by Burgess became a model program, recognized nationally, and in 1995, she was named the Small Business Financial Services Advocate of the Year.
Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery may not have received the coveted Michelin Star yet, but Golden Hill neighborhood favorite is deeply steeped in the history and culture of Vietnam and is a nod to the family's Vietnamese roots, her childhood in Vietnam and is a nod to their parents' take-out restaurant that used to be on Broadway in El Cajon.

Phan and her parents moved from Vietnam to the United States in 1994, when she was 11 and Ky was 5, first heading for Houston before making their way to San Diego. Her parents' restaurant was called Panda Rice, and opened in the late 1990s before selling it in 2009.

Kingfisher has three sister restaurants, all called Crab Hut, also founded by the Phan sisters, in San Diego. The Crab Huts – on Convoy Street (the original, opened since 2007), Fifth Avenue and Mira Mesa Boulevard – helped finance Kingfisher.

Phan said that while Crab Hut is facing a little decrease in clientele because of people's concern about a recession and watching their finances, Kingfisher is doing steady business.

"Crab Hut's clientele is more family-oriented and Kingfisher is more geared to people coming from all over," she said. "Sometimes we see guests from Los Angeles and other out of town places."

Phan called the award from ABA "a little bit overwhelming."

"We feel honored and appreciative to be Industry of the Year," she said. "We like these big shoes to fill and I'm not sure we deserve it but I can tell you that I feel like we will try even harder not to disappoint the community."

Phan said the Asian Pacific Islander community supported by ABASD is important to her and her family, and that the API culture should be preserved.

"Both of my sons were born here and I want them to always have the connection and to understand where they have come from," she said. "Food is a big part of our culture. I believe that if you don't understand the culture, you won't understand the food."

She said she's been asked why Kingfisher doesn't offer items like Korean barbecue, which Kim Phan herself is a big fan of.

"Even though I love it, I don't understand the culture as well as I do the Vietnamese," she said. "I don't want to be disrespectful. I don't know the depths of it to put it on the menu it's important to connect with others. It's important to appreciate each other live peacefully with one another.

By KAREN PEARLMAN

Shell Singal is deeply steeped in a business that is showing no signs of slowing in its brewing success.

In five years’ time, Tea Bazaar has flourished, from initially offering 10 different types of health-focused loose-leaf teas in 2018 to selling 10 times that amount today to a growing stream of customers.

Navigating through and emerging from the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic successfully – currently with eight employees and a brick-and-mortar spot in Little Italy – Singal’s Tea Bazaar was recently honored as the Asian Business Association of San Diego’s Small Business of the Year.

Founded in 1990, ABASD represents the interests of more than 30,000 Asian Pacific Islander-owned businesses in San Diego County.

A first-generation American, descended from natives of India, Singal is originally from suburban Chicago and earned a finance degree from Indiana University as well as a CPA license. She moved to San Diego in 1992 after living and working in an ashram in Virginia learning and teaching yoga and ayurvedic medicine and natural healing, with the hopes of continuing her practice of Ashtanga yoga locally.

But after landing in San Diego and quickly noticing a lack of availability of what she calls “functional teas” in the region, Singal pivoted her career calling and started selling different types of teas at yoga festivals and other pop-up spots around the county.

Tea runs deep in Singal’s heritage and her roots, and she has a profound understanding of its part in sacred and healthy rituals meant to heal and promote good health.

“Tea has a special place in my heart,” said Singal, 40. “I love coffee, too, but it’s tea that I drink every day. I grew up with tea but I didn’t realize it wasn’t commonplace in India. In Indian culture, it’s very much a thing. In India, a lot of times your day is scheduled around tea. And the same in Britain.”

Now she sells 100 different types of loose-leaf teas made with leaves, flowers, fruits and herbs, and tea-related merchandise at more than a dozen farmers markets as well as the Tea Bazaar beer quarters on Kettner Boulevard.

“I started doing something that I loved and knew something about but I had no idea what I was in store for,” Singal said. “I knew I wanted to do something good, something that brought more good to the world.”

Singal who has worked in advertising and marketing, traveling the world to London, Australia and India, and spent time in the nonprofit world as well, says she remains inspired by customers' needs and her own background.

Singal said Tea Bazaar works toward a goal of healing, restoring and rejuvenating minds, bodies and spirits naturally, and believes “delicious, high-quality tea should be available and accessible to everyone.”

The teas focus on helping different challenges -- from stress, immune, focus and anxiety to headaches, low energy, toxicity and insomnia.

The company also supplies wholesale teas to local restaurants, cafes, coffee shops and local colleges and universities.

“We really care about our community and making our tea accessible to many people as much as Crab Hut,” Singal said. “Because I truly believe that being able to heal our body naturally and have an alternative to big pharma, and have access to alternatives is so important to our community in general.”

Helping customers old and young create unique infusions of the venerable drink which archaeologists have discovered in tombs that are 2,100 years old, Singal was honored at the ABASD gala earlier on May 19 at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront.

Singal said she wasn’t sure she would make it through the pandemic, and praised the group for its support, “telling me it’s going to be OK, and presenting me with opportunities that I didn’t know were available to me.”
ABASD Bestows ‘Excellence in Equity’ Award:
T-Mobile Extending Services into the AAPI Community

By KAREN PEARLMAN

T-Mobile U.S. has been fighting the good fight for equity as part of the company’s nationally recognized diversity initiatives, initiatives T-Mobile stepped up after its acquisition of Sprint in 2020.

Early on, after the merger allowed T-Mobile to become the country’s second-largest wireless carrier in the United States, the company filed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal Communications Commission with plans to create initiatives to improve diversity.

Included in those plans for diversity were the areas of corporate governance, workforce recruitment and retention, and procurement and entrepreneurship.

Within a year – and during the height of the pandemic – the Asian Business Association of San Diego partnered with T-Mobile in 2021 to fully fund a study by the ABASD that examined the Asian American Pacific Islander business community in the San Diego region and the impact the pandemic was having on their well-being.

ABASD gala host and emcee Lee Ann Kim said that the results from that study are helping “to better shape how ABA is able to deliver its services as a small business development center.”

For T-Mobile’s part in working toward a better future for businesses in the AAPI community in the San Diego region, ABASD awarded its Excellence in Equity award to T-Mobile.

Founded in 1990, ABASD represents the interests of more than 30,000 Asian Pacific Islander-owned businesses in San Diego County.

The award was presented to T-Mobile and accepted by California Hispanic Chambers of Commerce President and CEO Julian Canete – the former director of public policy and strategic partnerships for the California Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce and who serves on T-Mobile’s California Diversity Council – at the ABASD’s gala on May 19 at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront.

“One thing as chairman of CDC we are proud of the work that T-Mobile has done,” Canete said. “And they have only been successful in supporting organizations like ABA because of what ABA and (ABASD President and CEO Jason Paguio), who sits on our council, gives back to them. And T-Mobile’s achievements have all been because of the input that we receive from ABASD through Jason and others on that council.”

Kim said that the T-Mobile-funded study discovered that 1 in 10 AAPI businesses in 2021 reported dealing with discrimination or hate. It showed a need for education for business owners to learn how to report incidents of hate and how to reach out to resources that would be culturally tailored to them.

“The study was so successful that not only has T-Mobile committed to statewide study for AAPI-owned businesses and committed to doing this over three years but ABA is now working with API data to dig even deeper to produce the study,” Kim said.

Canete said that T-Mobile does more than “walk the walk.”

“Now over the past couple of years as they moved in and purchased Sprint throughout the nation, they are not only helping small businesses, but creating jobs for our diverse communities throughout California as well.”

Kim said, “I’m proud to be able to chair our council as well as serve there with Jason. On behalf of T-Mobile, they are very proud of the ABA and support their efforts.”

Paguio referred to the survey and said that it was done to better understand the impact of AAPI businesses on the region and to find out what their biggest needs are.

He said there are more than 9,100 Asian and Pacific Islander businesses in the San Diego region as well as more than 24,000 self-employed AAPI residents in San Diego County. The study showed that the businesses create more than 90,000 jobs and have a $5 billion impact to the region.

T-Mobile itself produced a corporate responsibility report in 2021 that tackled the subject of diversity, equity and inclusion.

The corporate report said that the company’s workforce – heralding 60% of T-Mobile employees as people of color – reflects the communities it serves and positions T-Mobile to deliver incredible experiences for its customers. Following its merger with Sprint, T-Mobile launched a five-year Equity In Action plan.

A Cinematic Celebration for Asian Business Leaders

The wild and colorful costumes told you this was no typical San Diego gala. “Everything Everywhere All at ABASD” brought San Diego’s pan-Asian business community together on May 19 at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront. Produced by the Asian Business Association San Diego, the event was a nod to the Oscar-winning film “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” a celebration of San Diego’s vital Asian business community and a hopeful look ahead to the pan-Asian cultural district centered on Convoy Street, complete with a new sign. Celluloid never looked so good.
2023 Best Board Chair of the Multiverse: Jeni Burgess [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

Mr. and Mrs. Paguio [Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography]

The evening’s dress code was anything but conventional [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

ABA Gala Poster [Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography]

ABA President & CEO Jason Paguio and Emcee Lee Ann Kim [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

ABA Board Chair Jeni Burgess; Sarah Yang, Bank of America; ABA Board Member Winitreda Chang [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

Team SDG&E [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

Team Rincon Band of Luiseno Indians [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

Team MyPoint Credit Union [Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography]

Raccoonie! [Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography]

2023 Small Business of the Year: Tea Bazaar, Founder/Owner Shell Singal [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

Francis Barraza, Kaylie Sadlon, Marcella Escobar-Cox [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

Shell Singal, 2023 Small Business of the Year Awarded and Jessica Austin [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]

2023 Chairman Emeritus Award: Dan Hom [Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs]
EVENT PHOTOS

Alex Villafuerte, PacArts Movement; Michael Hadland, Charter Communications; ABA Board Member Allen Young, Cox Communications; Albert Velasquez, Cox Communications (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

2023 Community Legacy Award: Hon. Chris Cate (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

Team ABA: Everything, Everywhere, All at Once! (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

2023 Industry Leader of the Year: Kingfisher, Kim Phan and Quan Le (Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography)

ABA Board Member Elvin Lai, Nan Lai, Kim Phan and Quan Le (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

Team T-Mobile (Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography)

ABA Board Member Ben Trieu with Team Bank of America (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

2023 Small Business Champion of the Year: CA State Treasurer Fiona Ma, CPA (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

ABA Board Members past and present (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

ABA Board member Allen Young, Team Cox Communications, Council President Pro Tem Monica Montgomery and Councilmember Raul Campillo (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

Team Bank of America (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

Traditional Filipino Martial Arts School - Orihinal Doce Pares (Photo credit: Joseph Paguio Photography)

2023 ABA Best Costume Winners (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)

Scholarship recipient Madalyn Nguyen with Michael Hadland of Charter Communications; San Diego City Councilmember Kent Lee and Emcee Lee Ann Kim (Photo credit: Melissa Jacobs)