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across Michigan
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Bing Goei Builds a Welcoming Culture

Spokesman for immigrants across Michigan takes on state role with passion, pride

BY KAREN DYBIS

For Bing Goei, Jan. 9 holds a special kind of significance. It is the day that changed his life — twice.

The first time was Jan. 9, 1960, when he and his family arrived in the United States. Goei was an 11-year-old boy whose only experience with this nation was through television, watching cowboy movies with his brothers. The trip from Indonesia by way of the Netherlands would bring Goei to Michigan's West side, setting him up for a successful professional and personal life in Grand Rapids.

It also is the day that he heard about an opportunity to change the way the state of Michigan viewed immigration within its borders. Goei traveled to Lansing Jan. 9, 2014, to talk to his friend from the campaign trail, Gov. Rick Snyder, about a job in Lansing. It would be a position that would take Goei from a relatively quiet life as a business owner to a public figure and

spokesman for immigrants across the state.

Goei began his new role as director of the Office for New Americans within weeks of that conversation with Gov. Snyder. The governor had established the Michigan Office for New Americans through Executive Order 2014-2, fulfilling a pledge he made in his State of the State address on Jan. 16, 2014. In this unprecedented role, Goei is chief adviser to the governor and state departments on the formulation and implementation of Michigan's immigration policies, programs and procedures.

It is more than a job for Goei. It is a passion. It is a calling. It is his destiny. That may sound like an exaggeration, but when you hear Goei talk about his life story, his family and his devotion to immigration issues, you quickly realize

how deep his commitment to this post truly is.

"The position wasn't even on my radar," Goei said, laughing at the suggestion that he might have sought out such a job. "When I got the call between Christmas and New Year's, I thought it was a joke. I knew Gov. Snyder from when I was running for a state House of Representatives seat; we connected as entrepreneurs and business owners. We kept in touch from there. When I received the call from his chief of staff, I said yes to a meeting.

"I will tell you, I'm a Christian and I don't believe anything happens by accident. Jan. 9 was the day that we arrived in Grand Rapids as immigrants in 1960. We were on the front page of the newspaper because we were the first Chinese immigrants to arrive in the area" via a church-exchange program,

Above: Bing Goei, an entrepreneur who knows and understands first-hand the challenges of an immigrant, has taken on a role that champions that cause. PHOTO BY ROSH SILLARS

said Goei, who is of Chinese heritage but was born in Indonesia. “I took a copy of that front page and brought it with me. I said, ‘Governor, I don’t know what your plans are; I don’t even know why you chose me. I just wanted you to know that the day we’re meeting, here’s what happened all of those years ago.’ He used that article to announce my appointment on Jan. 31.”

It’s a position that seems tailored for Goei. The Michigan Office for New Americans will coordinate the state’s efforts to welcome immigrants and their entrepreneurship; to lead efforts to encourage foreign students getting advanced degrees to stay in Michigan, build companies here and employ Michiganders; and to ensure that needed agricultural and tourism workers come to the state. The office will also help coordinate existing services to immigrants and facilitate partnerships with non-profits, foundations and the private sector in the areas of licensing, workforce training, education, housing, health care and quality of life.

Goei is a poster child for an immigrant who fulfills the American Dream of building a business from the ground up. With hard work and dedication, he took his role as a summer staffer at Eastern Floral and turned it into a thriving enterprise. After he bought the company, he grew the floral retailer into a giant with multiple locations, more than 60 year-round employees and an estimated \$5 million in annual revenue.

He also is an advocate for mentorship and support for young entrepreneurs, having created the International Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence, a business incubator that offers low cost space to young, minority and women entrepreneurs in Grand Rapids.

Goei has also been a key driving force in the Coalition for Racial and Ethnic Diversity and the Multiracial Association of Professionals at the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce.

That program has caught the attention of the Kellogg Foundation, GROW, MEDC and other local organizations.

Goei’s leadership also extends to community causes, including the

Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce where he serves as a board member.

APACC Executive Director Van Nguyen said Goei’s dedication to fostering diversity and improving cultural competency “makes him a trailblazer, not only in the Asian Pacific Americans community, but new Americans in general.”

Challenges and inspiration

Goei’s all-American story starts with his mother and father, who traveled thousands of miles and survived tremendous challenges to better their lives and those of their children.

“My parents are tremendous role models for me. They left Indonesia when it gained its independence from the Netherlands and the first president became a Communist-influenced president. My father, who was an educator in Indonesia, was being told what to teach. And he felt that was a very dangerous precedent. So my mother and father decided to flee because they felt it was not good for the children,” Goei said. “They were allowed to leave at that time upon the condition that they had to leave everything they had behind. They literally left Indonesia with a suitcase. There were six boys and my mother was pregnant with a seventh child.

“When he arrived in the Netherlands, my father was offered a position in the Dutch school system. We ended up staying there for about five and a half years, from 1954 to the end of 1959. At the time, the influx of Indonesian political refugees was huge,” Goei explained. “So Queen Juliana asked President Eisenhower for special immigration quotas for Indonesian refugees to come to the United States. He granted her request, and we were lucky enough to get sponsored [by Fuller Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids].”

Interestingly, Goei said his family could speak fluent Dutch, something that wasn’t as prevalent in Grand Rapids. The kindness of teachers and students helped him make the transition and a church deacon, Frank DeVos,

Key Stats:

- Bing Goei and his family immigrated to Michigan from Indonesia via the Netherlands in 1960.
- He serves as CEO to the Eastern Floral company, a Top 50 Teleflora florist with seven West Michigan locations. His family, including his son and sister, are now running the business while he serves as director of the Michigan Office for New Americans.
- Goei created the International Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence, a business incubator offering low-cost space to young, minority and female entrepreneurs in Grand Rapids.
- He has received numerous honors as an Asian-American entrepreneur, and has been involved with many community organizations, including current service on the TAL-ENT 2025 leadership council and the West Michigan Asian American Association board of directors, and past service with the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce.
- Goei received many awards and recognition for his achievements as an entrepreneur, which include: Corp! Diversity Business Leader – 2012; Junior Achievement West Michigan Business Hall of Fame- 2008; Michigan Floral Association Retailer of the Year – 2008; Top 50 Teleflora Florist in U.S. and Canada and Best Florist Awards by various publications– 2002-2007; 2005 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year for West Michigan – Retail Division; 2001 Minority Business Person and 2000 Small Business of the Year.

Source: Corp! research

owner and founder of Eastern Floral, also was instrumental in getting Goei's father his first job as janitor at the floral company. Goei and his brothers worked their way through high school and college there.

"In 1972, I decided to go into business for myself. A year later, I bought out the company that I used to work for. At that point, I began my professional career as a business owner and entrepreneur in the floral industry, first as a wholesaler and later on as a retailer," Goei said.

While his story seems perfect on paper, there were heartaches along the way. It is a story that Goei hesitates to tell, mostly because of his love for his family. But the issues his father faced as an immigrant serve as a reminder to Goei on how his new role at the Office for New Americans has the power to change lives, communities and the state's economy.

"The reason that I'm so passionate about this is his experience," said Goei of his father, who had to return to college to become certified as a teacher in Michigan. When his father received a position as a teacher, the district compensated him as if he were new college graduate, ignoring decades of work and seniority he had earned while in Indonesia and his nearly five years of teaching in the Netherlands.

"His 20 years of experience didn't count. All of his degrees didn't count, even though every family in that school district wanted their child to be taught by my dad and be in his classroom," recalled Goei, his voice clearly reflecting the heartache of what his father experienced those years ago.

Eventually, through the help of friends and a young U.S. Congressman named Gerald Ford, Goei's father received acknowledgement of his teaching years and gained the proper compensation. Still, the sting remains.

"It's part of my story," Goei said. "No person should be humiliated like my father was. I told him until I die I'll never stop advocating for justice. But it's more than a justice issue. He would



Eastern Floral has been a significant part of the Grand Rapids community for more than 60 years. In 1950, founder Frank DeVos saw an ad in Grand Rapids Press "Business opportunity-floral shop for sale." In 1998, DeVos sold Eastern Floral to a national company in Fort Lauderdale, and in 2001, the business was acquired by Bing Goei.

have been unable to touch the lives of children because (of human error or prejudice). That is what I think is important about this work.

"The work is about making sure that we have a structure, a system that allows people to be able to contribute to the enrichment of other people's lives. That's what I hope I can bring to this office," Goei added. "Forget everything you've heard about immigration. Yes, we've had painful experiences as a country in the past. But what can we do in the future? Many immigrants can tell horrible stories about the struggle to come here. Yet they are willing to accept that and they're also willing to move forward. They want to enrich the community and the neighborhood that they're living in. That's the story, that's the message that this office and this government is trying to say: Immigration is good for all of us. It's not a zero sum game where I win and you lose. Gov. Snyder wants to use immigration as a way to enhance the life of every person who lives in the state of Michigan."

Changing perceptions

In his role as an immigrant himself and as a business owner, Goei said he sees clear evidence that Michigan needs to embrace immigration as a solution to

its employment deficits.

Goei can cite statistic after statistic about how immigration has a powerful effect on both the local and national economy. For example, 28 percent of small businesses in 2011 were founded by immigrants, and seven out of 10 of the most valuable brands in the world were created by U.S. immigrants or their children.

Within Michigan, household names such as Dow, Meijer and Masco were founded by immigrants, Goei said. During the past decade, immigrants created one-third of the high-tech businesses in the state, and at a rate six times the rest of the population. Realistically, immigrants are proven job creators, and Goei believes that Michigan can benefit from their entrepreneurial spirit by welcoming them.

"We are working very hard in our office to bring a different picture to immigration," Goei said. "It's a conversation that changes a great deal with the culture and with the economy. If the economy is bad, then people tend to blame immigrants, perceiving them to be at fault."

But for Goei, being vulnerable to diversity has enriched his life beyond measure. He believes that his business experiences are good lessons for how

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ROSH SILLARS



Goei says Gov. Rick Snyder understands that immigration is an asset that brings tremendous value to the state.

government should approach immigration issues.

“My international experiences and different cultural experiences have allowed me to understand a market that’s very diverse culturally,” Goei said. “When we purchased Eastern Floral, we made an intentional change on what kind of inventory we’d have in our store. Maybe 20 or 30 years ago, our predominant customer base was white, Dutch Europeans. That’s not true today. Today, we carry Santas and angels for products that have brown or black skin, not just those with white skin with blue eyes. The importance of knowing your customer base and their cultural values was very instrumental for us to have the success that we’ve had.”

Goei recalls multiple occasions where Eastern Floral was better able to work with its customers because of its decision to embrace cultural differences within Michigan.

“Some years ago, a family that was Native American came into our stores and said their father had passed away.

They wanted us to design the floral tributes for his funeral. They brought in things that were relevant to their culture. Luckily, we have on our staff – which is also diverse – a Native American designer who understood what they wanted. If we didn’t have her, we would have been in the dark as to what that family wanted. The family appreciated that the things that they brought that were meaningful to them and their culture were integrated into their floral tributes.”

Goei said having these cross-cultural experiences and growing up in integrated neighborhoods has given him some of the best lessons to bring to his new position as director of the Office for New Americans.

“They’re not liabilities. They’re wonderful assets. And these are the things that make this a great nation. I don’t always believe in the melting pot theory but I do believe in the salad bowl. Each one of us brings experience and knowledge that when we sit down and listen to each other and learn from each other we all become enriched. We

become better individuals by utilizing the expanded skills that we all have,” Goei said.

Gov. Snyder is on the same page, Goei added.

“I believe that Gov. Snyder has a tremendous vision of the utilization of immigrants to help rebuild not only the state of Michigan but also Detroit and other cities in the state of Michigan. He has a tremendous grasp of history and he understands in his public appearances and in his speeches, he talks about the contribution that immigrants have made not only in the state of Michigan but in the United States. He talks about Meijer, Dow and Masco,” Goei said.

“He understands that immigration is an asset and a tool he wanted to have in his so-called toolbox. Alongside that, he wanted to make sure it wasn’t viewed only (as) I want to help us win. He wanted it to be more than just as economic growth, but he wanted people to be welcomed and feel welcomed to live, work and play in Michigan,” Goei added. “When he shared that vision with me, I immediately asked, ‘What can I do?’ I couldn’t say no because that’s my vision and that’s my desire and plans. I want my children and grandchildren to live, work and play in Michigan and enjoy the wonderful assets in terms of natural resources, cultural diversity and a strong educational system. I want them to be here.”

In what other country, Goei asked, could a Chinese immigrant meet city mayors, work with state governors and hang out with U.S. presidents? These are all experiences he has enjoyed because his parents took a chance on immigration.

“Hopefully the experiences I’ve had will help me change the conversation about immigration and immigrants. It will help me change the picture about the benefits that we have to increase our quality of life when we take advantage of the many wonderful strengths, abilities and skills that everyone has whether you’re a recent immigrant or

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someone who has lived here for many, many years,” Goei said.

“When we listen and learn from each other, that’s when we can become a stronger people. I tell my staff that we don’t want people who think and act like us. We want people sharing their perspectives without fear of criticism and take the best of everyone’s perspectives and make our company stronger. I think that’s what Gov. Snyder wants to do,” Goei added.

A welcoming culture

Within Michigan, Goei said his first months in the Office for New Americans has been focused on finding out what the state’s needs are, what issues need to be addressed first and how to proceed from there. For example, he regularly meets with the state’s farmers and growers, trying to help the state’s significant agricultural industry find the workers they need.

“We know they are having a challenging time bringing in enough people to pick the crops. They’ve told us that if they cannot get them, they’ll have to plant fewer crops or close up their farm and sell their land for development,” Goei said. “What we are trying to do is change the conversation – there is no such thing as high skill or low skill. There are only specialized skills. I was recently speaking in front of a group of Michigan State University alumnae who are engineers. They are very successful individuals. I was kidding with them. I said you’re a very impressive group of people. But I want you to know that with other groups I speak to, they wouldn’t want you as employees. They want someone who knows when to pick the apples at the right time.”

He also is focusing a great deal of his efforts toward talent retention. For example, studies show that Michigan will need nearly 275,000 jobs within

the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields by 2018. So his office is work-



ing on ways to retain more international students who are at Michigan universities, keeping those potential STEM workers here in Michigan.

Goei also wants to create a “welcoming culture” in the state, making sure people, organizations and businesses know that Michigan is open to immigration. And he is excited about new programs and businesses settling in Michigan because of its openness to immigrants. For example, Upwardly Global, a national nonprofit organization which opened its fourth office in June in Detroit (its other locations are in Chicago, New York and San Francisco), will provide new Americans with face-to-face customized training to help them integrate into Michigan’s workforce. Upwardly Global will be located in Michigan State University’s Detroit Center on Woodward Avenue.

“No matter what our policies are – and we could have the best policies in the world – if these talented immigrants don’t feel welcome in our state, they will find another state. They don’t have to come to Michigan,” Goei said. “Gov. Snyder’s efforts to reach out to immigrants is going to generate for the state of Michigan many, many more opportunities to benefit from the talents and the investments of people from around the world. We are now being viewed as this very welcoming state. I think a part of our responsibility is to make sure that



COURTESY EASTERN FLORAL

Now overseeing Eastern Floral’s seven locations in Grand Rapids, Grand Haven, Holland, and Spring Lake, Goei and his children are committed to offering only the finest floral designs, plants, and gift items backed by service that is friendly and prompt.

we address any kind of potential barriers to continue to have that image that we are a welcoming state for everyone and anyone in the world.

“The immigrants that are coming here today are no different than the immigrants that came during my time. We are all looking for the opportunity to take care of our families. What we need to realize is that none of these individuals who come here are coming here to harm you as an individual, as a family or as a community. The goal I think of every immigrant is first and foremost to support their family but also to be a contributing member of society. If given that opportunity, I think every immigrant, every person who comes to the United States wants to be that type of individual.” ■



Check out our interview with Bing Goei online.