

Gordon Quan: *A Paragon of Houston Diversity*

By Olivia Wall



Gordon Quan visits the White House Cabinet Room during the Clinton administration.

All photos courtesy of Gordon Quan, unless otherwise noted.

I look to a future where people of all backgrounds in Houston succeed.¹

—Gordon Quan

Houstonian Gordon Quan, who moved to the United States from China as a child in 1950, has worked to better his community through teaching and practicing law throughout his career. As an immigration attorney, he assists people wanting to emigrate to the United States negotiate the difficulties they face. Thus, Quan helps to bridge a gap between their homeland and America. Quan's childhood experiences enabled him to understand the value of family and the struggles immigrants faced, including being the odd one out in

their neighborhood. Gordon Quan's inspiring story illustrates the contributions he has made to creating a Houston where people of all backgrounds can succeed.

Born in Guangzhou, China, to American parents, Quan moved to Houston with his family in 1951, following the Chinese Civil War when the Chinese Communist Party came to power. Quan grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in the East End, where his family was one of the few Chinese American families in the neighborhood.

Quan's family bought a grocery store on Avenue E and 78th Street near the Houston Ship Channel, where they could run the store and live in the back. They called it the Eastern Food Market. The store created a close connection for the family to the community and sense of security, as Quan recalled, "Everybody knew each other's name, and we didn't lock our doors." Residing in the East End, which was largely Latino, meant Quan and his family stood out amongst the other community members. Unfortunately, and inevitably in the 1950s, children teased Quan because of his ethnicity;



The Quan family at their East End grocery store, shown left to right, include Quan's brother David, his grandfather Bong Quan, Gordon, his mother Esther, his sisters Beverly and Wanda, his brother Richard, and his father Bill Quan.

however, he remembered this diminishing as they got to know him. Nevertheless, he reflected, “People will recognize you more for being different as opposed to just blending in like everyone else.”¹

Honoring their Chinese culture, the Quans connected with nearby Chinese American families. Quan’s family is part of the Lung Kong Family, an association that began about three thousand years ago in China and includes the Liu, Quan, Jeu and Cheung. His parents were part of local Chinese organizations, including the Chinese American Citizens Alliance and the Chinese Baptist Church, where the children attended Sunday School and socialized with their Chinese peers on weekends. Despite being Americanized living in Houston’s East End, Quan always appreciated his Chinese roots. He and his family consistently paid respect to their culture and ancestry, which included celebrating Chinese holidays and traditions such as Lunar New Year.²

The Quan family developed a strong, tight-knit relationship as they lived and worked together in the family grocery store. This closeness played a significant role in the person Quan became during his school years and beyond. His parents expected him and his siblings to do well in school, and his academic success at Franklin Elementary School led him to become the chief of patrol for his class. Placed in advanced classes due to his grades, Quan excelled compared to other students. At Edison Junior High School, he participated in the speech club, traveling to different schools to do extemporaneous speeches and perform poetry readings. This pushed him out of his comfort zone to become more vocal. Additionally, Quan received a nomination for the American Legion Awards as an outstanding student.³

In the 1960 presidential election, Democrat John F. Kennedy defeated Republican Richard Nixon by just .02 percent of the popular vote. Quan admired Kennedy even though his father’s political ideas leaned conservative. He recounted, “I remember having a Kennedy/Johnson bumper sticker, and in my English class, my teacher threatened to pop me for every letter on that if I didn’t put it away.” Seeing how people’s opinions differed taught him that he could make a difference and to stay strong in his beliefs.⁴



Gordon Quan – shown here with his younger siblings, Beverly, Wanda, and Richard – took pride in being a patrol in elementary school and wearing the signature belt and badge used to designate patrols in Houston schools.

Gordon Quan’s senior class photo at Milby.

Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, Milby High School yearbook, 1966.



Quan heard President Kennedy deliver his “Going to the Moon” speech at Rice Stadium in September 1962 and credited it with inspiring him to consider politics. JFK encouraged Americans to support the space race, saying, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.”⁵

When Quan started at Milby High School, he was introduced to new students and to a new level of difficulty than he faced at Edison. Higher-income white students from surrounding schools enrolled at Milby, introducing Quan to people from different family backgrounds and expanding his knowledge of other cultures.

Being at school most of the weekday, working in the family grocery store, and finishing homework in the evenings left Quan with little time for extracurricular activities or school competitions. Despite his busy schedule, Quan managed to have time for Youth for Christ and the French Club at school. By the time his younger siblings enrolled at Milby, they could participate in more activities because their father had expanded the family business.

Although high school sometimes presented challenges, Quan enjoyed some of his classes, including history and English, but one class strongly piqued his interest: economics. The teacher told his students, “You never know. You could become a millionaire if you make these right choices.” Quan recalled, “He talked about some companies that people bought stock in, and they later blossomed, [those investors] became pretty wealthy.” The possibility of being economically successful one day appealed to Quan, given his childhood working in the family grocery store.⁶

Upon admission to the University of Texas at Austin, Quan initially majored in economics based on his high school teacher’s influence, but later switched to history and government, receiving bachelor’s degrees in both fields.⁷

After college, Quan taught history at E. O. Smith Junior High School in Houston’s predominantly Black Fifth Ward. During this time, he gained a better perspective on how other people led their lives and how that differed from his childhood. Quan observed that his students had a tougher time in school due to their external circumstances, the district’s troubles implementing desegregation, and a lack of

respect for teachers. To be a positive influence on his students, he sponsored several organizations, including a Boy Scouts troop, the Human Relations Club, and the History Club. He recalled, "I was just usually the last person to leave school every day because I was working on some projects with the students."⁸

Seeing his students, especially the boys, struggle in school, Quan decided to pursue his M.Ed. in guidance and counseling at the University of Houston to transform his career while continuing to teach full time in HISD. Soon after the completion of his master of education, he pursued his J.D. at South Texas College of Law. His schedule became even busier, as he continued teaching full-time at E. O. Smith Junior High School.

Initially, Quan did not plan to practice immigration law. However, after having to prove his own citizenship and meeting his wife Sylvia, who is from Hong Kong, he saw how the system can break down the individuals within it and shifted towards immigration law. In 1980, he cofounded the firm Quan, Burdette, & Perez, PC. He later cofounded FosterQuan, LLP and is now a managing partner for the Quan Law Group, PLLC, where he helps families and individuals hoping for a future in the United States.⁹

Entering politics in 1999, Quan ran for Houston City Council on the slogan "Gordon Quan: Key to Houston's Future." Elected for at-large Position 2, he became the first Asian American to win an at-large seat in Houston. In 2002, Mayor Lee P. Brown and the city council chose Quan for the position of mayor pro tempore. The *Houston Chronicle* supported Quan and highlighted his experience and strengths, asserting, "The Chronicle believes Quan will bring to the City Council two traits too often lacking among those in

our civic life—maturity and common sense."¹⁰ After being elected, he demonstrated that to be true.

During his time as a council member, Quan continued to advocate for children. One event, the Building Our Future conference, hosted by the Filipino

Gordon Quan received the Impact Award for the Asian American Bar Association of Houston in 2006 for his service.



Gordon Quan and his wife Sylvia were the first to greet basketball star Yao Ming when he arrived in Houston to play for the Rockets in 2002. Yao, a 7'6" tall center, became the first Chinese national to play in the NBA, first chosen number one in the NBA draft, and first inducted into the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame.

American Council of South Texas Youth Committee, sought to ensure a bright future for Asian youth. In an effort to uplift the homeless population in Houston, Quan chaired the city council's Housing and Community Development Committee and the Blue Ribbon

Commission to End Chronic Homelessness, developing a framework that was replicated by other U.S. cities. Quan also supported the concept of SROs, or single-room occupancy apartments, which he believed were "the way to get out of [homelessness], to have your own place. It's just a room, but it's your room." In 2004, Quan addressed the housing crisis, speaking at a workshop in the East End where residents could voice concerns as the city sought a solution.¹¹

Growing up in the East End and attending Milby High School influenced Quan to become the person he is today: a working professional with high hopes and goals for himself, his family, and his community. If Quan had not been raised in the East End, he believes he would not have gotten to know different cultures, including his Hispanic friends in the neighborhood. He reminisced about his childhood when he sold Mexican candy on his bike and played basketball with his friends, saying, "I think it led to an openness about different cultures and that I wasn't just focused on being Asian." On being a Milby alumnus, he reflected, "What a badge of honor, that it's kind of a blue-collar school, that it represents the average guy. And that there's a pride of having gone to Milby."¹² Had he grown up in a privileged environment, he would not have learned the same life lessons, and the neighborhood and Milby played a vital role in that.

When asked what advice Quan has for someone looking to pursue a similar career path, he replied, "Don't be afraid to try. Don't be afraid of rejection. Go with a positive attitude." He tells his clients who are nervous about being rejected and being deported to "go in there like you own the place." Needless to say, Quan's expertise in education, politics, and law shines brightly, and he has made an everlasting impact on Harrisburg, Houston, and the state of Texas. 🇺🇸

Olivia Wall is a junior history major at the University of Houston. She plans to teach United States and ancient world history to students from kindergarten through high school upon graduation.