

# WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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### KASHOUA KRISTY YANG

1980

City: Madison, Milwaukee, Sheboygan

County: Dane, Milwaukee, Sheboygan

**Kashoua Kristy Yang is the first Hmong person to be elected without appointment as a judge in the U.S. and the first Asian American judge elected without appointment in Wisconsin.**

Kashoua Kristy Yang was born in 1980 in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. Her parents were born in Laos but fled to Thailand in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Yang and her family lived in the refugee camp for the first six years of her life. The conditions were poor, and they often did not have enough money for necessities like food or shoes. Her family left Thailand for the United States in 1987. They lived in Georgia briefly before relocating to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where some of their extended family lived. Life in Sheboygan had positives and negatives for Yang, her parents, and her ten siblings. Her parents found factory jobs, and the children focused on learning English. Unfortunately, the family faced prejudice - some people called her parents racial slurs, and classmates bullied Yang.

Yang was a high achiever in school and a talented painter. She was admitted to the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design after high school, but did not attend. Instead, she got married at age 18 and had a daughter. In 2003, Yang graduated from Lakeland College with the highest academic honors and a degree in computer science. She worked at Kohler Company as a student, and after she graduated, she continued to work there for six more years.

Yang's life changed when her younger brother was injured by a car while crossing the street. She served as an interpreter for her parents while interacting with hospital staff and lawyers. Her family's hardships inspired Yang to attend law school to help others in similar situations. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 2009. She worked for Non-Profit Legal Services of Southeastern Wisconsin for six months, then joined the Milwaukee law firm Hawks Quindel. In 2014, she began a solo practice. Her firm, Kashoua Yang LLC, worked on cases involving family law and mediation, disability, social security, and workers' compensation.

In 2017, she was elected judge of Branch 47 of the Milwaukee County Circuit Court. Her win was historic on many fronts: she was the first Asian American female judge in Wisconsin and the first elected without appointment Hmong judge in the country. She was also the first Hmong person to hold public office in Milwaukee, despite the large Hmong population of the city. As a judge, she seeks to make the judicial system fairer by removing language barriers and inadequate representation affecting low-income people and people of color. Unfortunately, only months after being elected, Yang's husband was killed in a car accident.

Outside of her career, Yang also dedicates time to helping her community. She has volunteered with the Legal Clinic for Hmong Speakers, Legal Options for Trafficked and Underserved Survivors, and the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic. She has been recognized by the Milwaukee Bar Association and Association of Women Lawyers for her pro bono work (work done for free), and in 2015, *Milwaukee Magazine* named her one of Milwaukee's Leading Lawyers. She was re-elected as a circuit judge in 2023.

To learn more, visit [womeninwisconsin.org/profile/kashoua-kristy-yang/](http://womeninwisconsin.org/profile/kashoua-kristy-yang/)