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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Client Connection

Based in a former auto repair garage, Ideal Legal Group Inc. caters to nearby 'mom-and-pop' shops.

By Kylie Reynolds
Daily Journal Staff Writer

ALHAMBRA — Ideal Legal Group Inc.'s new office here, which opened in December, used to be a dilapidated car repair shop. Firm founder and managing partner Evie P. Jeang worked extensively to turn the trash-strewn building into a modern law office.

Now the firm's stylish metal exterior and outdoor patio contrast with some of the chipped-paint facades of its neighbors, but Jeang doesn't mind. She wanted to be within reach of the small businesses — the car garages, restaurants, nail salons — that make up the majority of Ideal's client base.

Downtown Los Angeles just wouldn't cut it.

"I'm just down the street, I'm down the block, so if they have anything, they can just walk or drive over," Jeang said. "A lot of times that's exactly what happens."

Jeang set out in 2006 to launch a firm that caters to "mom-and-pop" shops. The five-attorney boutique primarily tackles family law, labor and employment, immigration and workers' compensation matters. For clients that can't afford an in-house attorney, Ideal serves as general counsel.

The firm has additional, satellite offices in San Francisco and New York, though all the firm's attorneys are based in Alhambra.

"I wanted to create something that a mom-and-pop business can afford, because I feel like my firm is also a mom-and-pop business," Jeang said. "I understand where they're coming from. I know the hardship, I know the cash flow."

One way the firm has done so is by requiring all of its attorneys to speak another language. It can prove a difficult task when recruiting, Jeang said, but it's essential for the firm's many clients who



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From left, Ideal Legal Group attorneys Jie Lian, Ginger Wang and Evie P. Jeang

are non-English speakers.

Associates Jie Lian and Ginger Wang are both fluent in Mandarin. Wang came to Ideal in July because she wanted to put her Mandarin skills to use in her legal practice, she said. Since then, she's handled a broad range of workers' compensation, labor and employment, immigration and landlord-tenant matters.

"I know that especially my community, the Chinese clients were underrepresented in terms of being educated

about their rights, especially in the workplace," Wang said. "Working here has really opened my eyes about how true that is."

The firm also isn't opposed to offering alternative fee arrangements — or even informal bartering of sorts — for clients who may need legal advice but cannot afford to pay for the billable hour. Ideal recently had a broken file cabinet in need of fixing. Rather than searching for a handyman, Jeang called up a client.

He gladly took on the task in exchange for the firm answering a few legal questions.

The strategy has proved successful for the firm. Beyond growing clients' small businesses, Ideal has represented both employers and employees in large workers' compensation and labor and employment suits. In one case, Ideal obtained a million-dollar settlement on behalf of its client, a Chinese restaurant worker who claimed he was receiving

below minimum wage and was physically assaulted by employees.

But perhaps most notably, through working with immigrant clients Ideal has carved out a niche as an international family law firm.

"You can talk to everybody in the world so much easier now ... of course there are going to be times when relationships develop," Jeang said. "It makes sense, but somehow [attorneys] never tapped into it."

The firm has taken on some of the trickier issues around transnational relationships, such as drafting a prenuptial agreement that protects properties abroad or a custody agreement for divorced parents who live in different countries, Jeang said.

When Jeang's not talking with international clients over Skype or the phone, she's taking 48- to 72-hour trips abroad. Learning the cultural norms about family matters in different countries has kept the practice exciting, she said, but the travel can get tiring.

To lessen her load, Jeang, the only attorney at the firm who has a New York bar license, said she's considering shuttering Ideal's East Coast office. In turn, she said, she might open a location in the Inland Empire, where she can tap into Palm Springs' growing same-sex couple retirement community. Ideal already handles same-sex marriage and marriage dissolution in its San Francisco office.

The new outpost may be Ideal's next project, Jeang said, but for the time being, the firm will focus on helping its many clients who regularly drop by the Alhambra office with food for the firm's attorneys and a legal question.

"I never planned to hire a bunch of staff, I never planned to have offices everywhere," Jeang said. "It just started as something that I enjoyed and wanted to do."

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