

Cecil P. Staton

AAHOA

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It's a story that many in this industry know well: A man and a woman, neither of whom went to college—the man never graduated high school—but both are small-business entrepreneurs. In his case, he owns a shoe repair shop in their hometown of Greenville, SC, while she helps start what eventually becomes a pretty significant mortgage banking company, a business she doesn't sell until she retires at the age of 82. Despite their successes, both want more for their son.

Certainly, it's a story that members of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) know well. It also happens to be the story of the organization's new president/CEO Cecil P. Staton and his family.

"Both of my parents made sure I had opportunities they didn't have when they were growing up," Staton explained. "They worked hard to make sure I could be that first-generation college student."

That post-high school education included Furman University in his hometown all the way to doctoral work at the University of Oxford in the U.K. "I am really a product of the American dream in that sense," Staton said. "I can tell you it's a long way from a shoe shop on Main St. in Greenville to the halls of Oxford. I lived that dream."

After Oxford, Staton worked as a college professor and administrator for a number of years—roles he built on in his most recent position as chancellor emeritus at East Carolina University, where he launched several initiatives to elevate the university's national and international profile, increased enrollment in the Brody School of Medicine, and created a \$500-million capital campaign.

But, like his parents, that entrepreneurial bug was in him. "My wife and I started several small businesses in the publishing and broadcasting industries that were successful," he said. "In an interesting turn of events, that actually led me to get involved in the political world. I was, like many new business

owners and operators, out there trying to grow a business and create jobs, be successful, have an impact on the economy, and I had certain frustrations with government, regulations, tax policies, with things that I thought inhibited our ability to be as successful as we could be, so I ran for elected office."

Staton served five terms in the Georgia State Senate where he rose to the position of Majority Whip.

The parallels between his life experience and the experiences of AAHOA's 19,000-plus members aren't lost on Staton. "AAHOA is a story that touches me and moves me because it's the story of entrepreneurs, of people, many first-generation, some second- and third-generation Americans, who came here to live the American dream, and they have," he said. "Their story is my story in a different way, but it resonates with me."

AAHOA's story is what ultimately drew Staton to the position. "What impresses me the most is the story of this organization, starting 30 years ago with our earliest members and founders who experienced a lot of obstacles to success," he said. "Some of them took the form of discrimination. In other ways, there were regulations or other hurdles that got in the way of their success, and so they banded together, believing there was strength in numbers. This organization grew to become what it is today, but it is still, at the heart, the story of individuals living the American dream. I can't think of a better thing to do as an investment of my time and talent and energy than to attempt to support our more than 19,000 members, who are out there growing businesses, impacting our economy and growing jobs," he said.

How does he plan on doing that? "I've got to learn more about this particular industry segment, but I'm a lifelong learner and I'm diving in. There's a lot of support," he said. "One of the things I'm doing in the early days is just making sure I fully understand all that AAHOA does. This is a significant organization today, and we provide so much support for our members, so I'm working with the members of our team



here to really immerse myself in everything that AAHOA is involved in.

"I will be moving out in the new year very quickly to engage our membership," he added. "AAHOA does almost 200 events a year. I won't be able to be at all 200 next year, but I do plan to travel as much as I can to get to know our members, to be at regional meetings across the country, to be at town halls where I can engage our members. I want to know their stories; I want to be able to tell their stories and be an advocate for their stories and their needs. It's important that I know them and know what they're facing. Beyond that, I am certainly looking forward to a number of meetings being set up in the next few months where I can meet with brand representatives and industry professionals across the country to learn from them, hear from them and allow them to know more about AAHOA, our vision and where we're going."

It's all part of Staton's goals for the association's future.

"I want to make sure that I'm in a position to advance AAHOA, and make sure as we move into the next stage of this organization's life, we are prepared

to deal with the speed of change, the innovation taking place in our industry, that we're prepared to be innovators ourselves as an association," Staton added. "I'm proud that I'm joining AAHOA at a time when there is a very steep upward trajectory for this organization. I have to thank those who have gone before for that. I'll be standing on the shoulders of those who have led this organization for the last 30 years."

It's a task Staton believes he is up to. "I am in the early days of this work but I'm looking forward to getting to a point where I can tell our members' stories and advance the mission of AAHOA, which is to be the voice of America's hotel owners, to advocate on behalf of our members and to support what is in their best interest through our advocacy, education efforts, and the other benefits we provide to members," he said. "I want to make sure they can be as successful as possible because in doing so I believe we are impacting this nation for good and we are helping to preserve the American dream and provide opportunities for more people to be able to do what our members have done." **HB**