Born in Columbus and raised in Cleveland, Ohio by Chinese immigrant parents, Christina “Tina” Tchen had the values of public service and community involvement instilled in her from a very young age. Although she had no lawyer role models in her family, she cites her mother’s determination to remain an active parent and hard-working volunteer—despite having a serious illness—as one of her main career inspirations.

In 1978, Tchen graduated from Radcliffe College at Harvard University. Rather than launch directly into graduate school, she took two years off to join the working world and solidify her true goals. During that time, Tchen worked for the Illinois Bureau of the Budget, doing the budget analyst work for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), joined the National Organization for Women (NOW), and worked on the campaign to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, which was centered in Springfield, Illinois at that time. She noticed the far-reaching positive impact lawyers could make on public policy. With this experience still fresh in her mind, she enrolled in Northwestern University School of Law. Tchen continued her advocacy throughout law school, becoming the vice president of the Illinois chapter of NOW and coauthoring the Illinois Criminal Sexual Assault Act of 1983, a bill that helped modernize Illinois rape laws to include sexual assault and other abuses. Before graduating from Northwestern in 1984, Tchen served as a summer associate at Kirkland & Ellis, where she found her calling in litigation.

After completing her studies, Tchen clerked for U.S. District Court Judge John F. Grady, and then joined the Chicago office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher, & Flom LLP, where she would go on to practice complex civil litigation, class actions, corporate investigations and securities law, among other areas, for twenty-three years. While Tchen typically represented Fortune 500 corporations, she also assisted public sector clients such as the Illinois Department of Public Aid, the Chicago Housing Authority and DCFS. It was on behalf of DCFS that in 1991, while still an associate, she had the memorable opportunity to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court, adding her name to a remarkably short list of women of color who had done so. The partner on the case, former District Judge Susan Getzendanner, recommended that Tchen make the argument because she was the most well-versed in the underlying facts of the case. She ultimately won that case and was elevated to partner in 1992.

Despite her illustrious career at Skadden, Tchen was not immune to negative stereotypes about Asian-American attorneys, such as jurors commenting that they were impressed she spoke English so well, despite English being Tchen’s first and only language. Undeterred, Tchen devoted time throughout her career to tap into her roots as an advocate for women’s rights, including serving as a mentor to young women lawyers at her firm and leading numerous grass roots and philanthropic organizations. She also helped grow Personal PAC to promote abortion rights, served as a leader in the ABA Section of Litigation, and heavily supported candidates for office who were proponents of gender equity.

In 2009, she was asked to join the Obama administration where she first served as Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement; in 2011, she became an Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff to the First Lady. Throughout her eight years with the administration, she was also the Executive Director of the White House Council on Women and Girls, created by President Obama in March 2009 to oversee policies throughout the federal government concerning women and girls. Some of the initiatives included agendas to support women and minorities succeeding in the workplace and combat violence against women, as well as ‘Let Girls Learn,’ the administration’s effort to support the education of adolescent girls around the world.

After leaving the White House in 2017, Tchen returned to Chicago before joining the local office of Buckley Sandler LLP as a partner. In September 2017, she started the firm’s Workplace Cultural Compliance practice. She also leads the charge for women’s equality as one of the founders of the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund, housed at the National Women’s Law Center, to provide legal support to those who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.

Tchen believes that it is her responsibility to “pay it forward” after she received valuable mentorship, powerful lessons from her parents, and the unique call to serve a president of the United States. Both her work as a litigator and her passion for community involvement continue to fulfill that responsibility. It is this passion for service, both to her legal community and the community of women as a whole, that makes Tina Tchen the definition of a Margaret Brent honoree.