As a young teenager, Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye accompanied her mother to hear a speech by Gloria Ochoa, a Filipina woman lawyer. Although she does not recall exactly what Ms. Ochoa said, Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye does remember that in Ms. Ochoa she saw what she herself could achieve some day. This first exposure to a woman lawyer who looked like her impressed upon the chief justice the importance of having women of color role models to inspire other young women. Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye has never forgotten that lesson from long ago and strives to be a consistent supporter, role model, encourager, and mentor to women of all ages.

A second-generation Filipino American, she grew up in Sacramento with a Filipina mother who worked as a farm worker and a Filipino/Portuguese father who worked in the fields of Hawaii before moving to Sacramento. Through hard work and saving money, her parents were able to educate their four children. However, having enough money for school meant that the children went without basic material goods. Through her parents’ struggles, Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye was made aware of discrimination. Her personal experience of growing up in the only Asian American family in her neighborhood made her keenly aware of the struggles that people of color faced.

She received her B.A. from the University of California, Davis in 1980 and her J.D. from the UC Davis School of Law in 1984. Upon graduation from law school, she worked as a deputy district attorney for the Sacramento County District Attorney, and in 1988 she served on the senior staff of California Governor George Deukmejian as deputy legal affairs secretary and as a deputy legislative secretary.

In 1990, she embarked on her judicial career when Governor Deukmejian appointed her to the Sacramento Municipal Court; at 31, she became the youngest judge to sit on the bench in California. Two years later, Governor Peter Wilson elevated her to the Superior Court of Sacramento County. Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye established and presided over the first court in Sacramento dedicated solely to domestic violence issues in 1997. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger nominated her for the Court of Appeal, Third Appellate District, in 2005 and nominated her for California’s highest judicial office in July, 2010.

Upon election to that position four months later—at only 51—Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye became the first Asian Pacific American female chief justice of California, the first non-Caucasian chief justice of the Supreme Court of California, and the first and only Asian Pacific American female chief justice of any state supreme court. She is the second woman to serve as the state’s chief justice and presides over the first majority of women on the Supreme Court of California. She also chairs the Judicial Council of California, the administrative policymakers body of state courts, and the Commission on Judicial Appointments.

Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye has been instrumental in pushing for diversity in any position she has held, and upon moving on to the next level, she has left behind a more gender- and ethnically-diverse bench. Throughout her career, she has supported efforts at law schools to add women and minorities to the legal profession. She has retained close ties with law schools to add women and minorities to the legal profession. She has retained close ties with the UC Davis School of Law and is an active supporter of the King Hall Outreach Program, an intensive multi-summer program for socioeconomically disadvantaged undergraduate students that seeks to provide them with the skills necessary to compete in the law school admissions process. As chief justice, she travels to bar associations and other events across California to extol the need to diversify the legal profession. She serves as a role model for all law students but particularly women and minorities. “Diversity” is not an empty word to Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye.

Once appointed to the trial court, she was a source of advice and counsel to female and minority attorneys who appeared before her, as well as to other female judges. She has served as president of the Anthony M. Kennedy American Inn of Court and sponsored young Asian female attorneys into that organization.

From the beginning of her legal career, Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye has been a persistent voice for diversity and opening doors for women and people of color. She strongly believes that it was her mentors and supporters who blazed the trail so that she could achieve success in her career. In the tradition of Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award honorees, she does the same for the next generation of women lawyers.