

The Quiet Life

County Supervisor Works Beneath the Radar

by Keith Gleason (of Alameda Magazine, December 2005)

Photography by: Phyllis Christopher

If you want to know Alameda County Supervisor Alice Lai-Bitker's biggest accomplishments in the last five years, don't ask her. Ask someone else. "I'm not very good about tooting my own horn," she says. Lai-Bitker's modesty and non-aggressive nature is a breath of fresh air in a business filled with egos and exaggeration. But as she prepares for a re-election primary in June, the question remains: can she remain a public servant without becoming a politician?

"I don't know if I could call her a politician," says Carl Chan, president of the Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce Foundation. "I ask her why she doesn't tell people more about what she's done. She says, 'This is my job. This is what I'm supposed to do.'"



Lai-Bitker says she doesn't see herself as a politician, either. "The reason why I'm here is to represent people, to be able to make a difference. What inspires me every day is the possibility of doing something good. It's easy to say, but very hard to do," she says.

Appointed to the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in 2000 to represent District 3, Lai-Bitker won election to the office in November 2002. She represents San Leandro, San Lorenzo, portions of Oakland, including Chinatown, and Alameda, where she lives with her husband, KCBS sports anchor Steve Bitker, and daughters Mei-Ling and Janelle. A Democrat who holds a nonpartisan office, Lai-Bitker has accomplished many things in her five years as a supervisor, but her main focus has been getting the county's uninsured residents access to health care and social services in faster and more efficient ways.

On a Tuesday morning in late August, Lai-Bitker, 47, sits behind the desk in her small office on the top floor of the Alameda County Administration Building. Just 5 feet tall, she speaks softly but rapidly in her Chinese-accented English. She smiles easily but is serious. Her small suite of offices is very familiar to her. She's spent her days there

since 1995, when she first came to work for Wilma Chan, her former boss, mentor and predecessor in the job. Chan left for Sacramento when she won election to the State Assembly in 2000. Lai-Bitker now shares the suite with her staff of six, but has moved into the largest office with the view. She and the county's other four supervisors set policy, supervise operations of all departments and approve the county's annual budget, which is \$1.76 billion for fiscal year 2005-06.

Lai-Bitker has learned you can't be everything to everyone. It's hard to balance the needs of her diverse constituency, which numbers 290,000, and the county's population of 1.4 million. "It's a zero-sum game. If you take something away here, you have to put it back over there. Every decision has an impact on someone," says Lai-Bitker.

The county's diverse population is reflected in the composition of the board, which consists of a white man, a white woman, two black men and Lai-Bitker. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 20 percent of the county's population is Asian. In her district, the Asian population is much greater, including Alameda's, where Asian residents account for 26 percent of the city's population.

Shawn Wilson, Lai-Bitker's chief of staff, first joined her office as an aide in January 2001. A 10-year veteran as a legislative aide, Wilson had worked for an assemblyman and had his own campaign-consulting firm before he joined Lai-Bitker's staff.

"Working for her is extremely refreshing. She wants to better the lives of people in the community. She's not running for higher office," he says. Wilson says her thorough preparation for the board's weekly meeting includes taking work home in a large binder. "She's pretty small, and the binder gets quite big, so a staff member has to help her take it to and from her car," he says. "She's compassionate and effective. Her style is one of a quiet leader. She's not going to pound the desk and be vocal," he says.

Lai-Bitker admits her quiet style is detrimental to her political career, and she's reminded of it periodically, including by her own staff. "At retreats, my staff says we should be doing press releases on the long list of things we've done," she says.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Lai-Bitker received her bachelor's degree in sociology from ShueYan College in 1981. She came to the U.S. in 1983 to get an advanced degree, but also to be with Bitker. The couple met in Hong Kong when she was working as a tour guide and he was on a vacation there from his job in Japan, where he taught English and did broadcast news on the only English-language TV station in Tokyo. They met because Bitker talked his two friends into a two-week trip instead of their planned one-week trip to China. Lai-Bitker thinks she and Bitker were meant to meet. "I believe in fate and he doesn't. I think it must be cultural," she says. After her arrival in the Bay

Area, she began to volunteer at Asian Community Mental Health Services in Oakland's Chinatown.

While in graduate school at San Francisco State for her master's in social work, she did an internship at ACMHS. The degree seemed a natural fit for her personality. "I have this tendency to want to help people. It's there all the time. I don't like to see injustice," she says. After graduation Lai-Bitker worked there for 10 years as a social worker and clinical supervisor. She served people who had disabilities, mental illness and depression and immigrants who were struggling to adapt to a new country. During her tenure, she cofounded the Association of Chinese Families of the Disabled and the East Bay Chinese Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

Lai-Bitker first became aware of Wilma Chan when Chan ran for school board in 1990. "She was going to be the first Asian-American woman on the school board. And then when she ran for the supervisor's seat, she was the first to do that, too," says Lai-Bitker.

Lai-Bitker decided to work for Chan's campaign for supervisor in 1994, her first venture into politics. "I first volunteered as a campaign worker. I was a precinct captain. I walked my precinct and called my neighbors. I hosted my first house party for her," says Lai-Bitker.

She told the newly elected Chan that she was looking to make some changes in her life. Lai-Bitker also wanted to try and reform a social service system she thought had too many barriers and systemic problems. Chan offered Lai-Bitker a job as a staff aide.

For the next six years, Lai-Bitker worked on big issues such as social services, health care and welfare reform. She also worked to educate legal immigrants so that they wouldn't be denied benefits.

After Chan won a seat in the Assembly, she encouraged Lai-Bitker to apply for the supervisor's job. "It was very competitive. Fifteen people applied for the job. I was one of the few who didn't have public office experience. But what I had that some people didn't have was knowledge of the county's issues." After an intense interview process, the board appointed Lai-Bitker as the new supervisor. "I never planned to be in politics. It just happened; the timing was right," she says.

But that first year was a baptism by fire, she says.

One of her early political fights was over the board's mandatory redrawing of districts' boundaries in 2001 to reflect the county's 12 percent population growth between 1990

and 2000. Her fellow supervisors, Nate Miley and Keith Carson, divided up five heavily immigrant census tracts among themselves rather than give them to Lai-Bitker, an act that angered her and the Latino and Asian communities, some of whom called the two men's actions racist. "The redrawing was a necessary thing, a technical thing, but, unfortunately, the emotion that came with it played out in a racial way," she says.

The controversy over the necessity, size and location of the county's new \$175 million juvenile hall in San Leandro was another early political lesson. Youth advocates and community groups lobbied her for a 330-bed facility, but she supported a 420-bed facility, maintaining a larger one had to be built to accommodate the demand and provide for the safety of detainees and staff. The youth advocates brought her to tears during the debates. They also chanted in the hallway outside her office, distributed fliers with the word "liar" pasted across a picture of her face and clogged her office with faxes and e-mail messages for two days. "It was very painful for me. I tried hard not to take it personally," she says.

Fellow supervisor Gail Steele, who has been on the board since 1992, sees Lai-Bitker as a conscientious member of the board who faced an uphill battle when she was appointed to the job. "It's been hard for her. It's a big learning curve. It's easier when you serve on other boards as Wilma [Chan] did on the school board or I did on the Hayward City Council. [Lai-Bitker] works very hard and tries to be equally knowledgeable in many areas." Steele calls Lai-Bitker open, congenial and very low-key. "Government really takes consensus building and the patience to change things over the long haul, qualities which she has," says Steele.

Lai-Bitker chairs the board's Health Committee, serves on the board's Social Service Committee with Steele and is a member of the Alameda County Interagency Children's Policy Council. Within District 3, she serves as co-chair of the Alameda Collaborative for Children, Youth and Their Families. She also sits on other county boards that address transportation, economic development, mental health and conservation issues.

Since 2001, Lai-Bitker has led a county initiative to expand health care access through the Children and Families Health Insurance Task Force. In 2002, Lai-Bitker spearheaded the county's No Wrong Door pilot program, where social service multilingual employees navigated the application and enrollment process for uninsured county residents who wanted to register for Medi-Cal or Healthy Families health insurance.

More than 80 percent of the 18,000 individuals screened using this process have been approved for coverage in record time—an average of seven to 10 days instead of 45

days. The program's success allowed it to go countywide. In 2004, No Wrong Door received a national award from the National Association of County Governments.

But despite her efforts, there are still many residents without health care in Alameda County. As of May 2004, estimates show 164,000 residents of Alameda County don't have health insurance, and 17,000 of those are children.

Lai-Bitker is constantly trying new, practical ways to get the uninsured health insurance, especially children. Her newest idea, called the Express Lane Eligibility program, debuted in five Oakland schools in September 2005. ELE aims to reach the more than 4,000 school-aged children in Alameda County who are eligible but not enrolled in Medi-Cal. Under ELE, children may be enrolled in Medi-Cal on the basis of information already contained on their school lunch application. Uninsured people have overloaded the county's health system, says Lai-Bitker. "It's just a huge issue in terms of how we meet the needs with limited resources."

She worked hard to get Measure A passed in 2004, which kept Highland Hospital—the county's safety net for the uninsured—afloat. The half-cent sales tax will raise about \$65 million a year for the medical center and other county nonprofit health care agencies for the next 15 years. She also supported the 2002 parcel tax that kept Alameda Hospital's doors open.

While she's accomplished a lot in health care and social services, she's also helped businesses, including ones in Chinatown. Carl Chan met Lai-Bitker 20 years ago when they were both involved in fund-raisers for Chinatown nonprofits. "Many of us knew her because of her involvement in the community, but we were skeptical about her knowledge of county business," he says.

When the SARS scare occurred, and Chinatown restaurants and owners of food handling businesses were hurt by it, Chan and others called Lai-Bitker and asked if she could help. Lai-Bitker, working with the health department, came up with a certificate program so businesses would be in compliance with county health regulations.

"People were able to come and learn how to prevent SARS and prepare food in a better and safer manner, including how to wash their hands properly. We awarded certificates to people at the completion of the class. It was a very successful program, which Alice helped us do," says Chan.

As a social worker, Lai-Bitker dealt with domestic violence cases all the time. As a supervisor, Lai-Bitker has taken up the problem of domestic violence and raise the public's awareness of its victims.

She worked to create the new Family Justice Center in Oakland, which brings all the county's services for domestic violence victims under one roof. Alameda County was one of just 15 counties in the country selected to receive the President's Family Justice Center Initiative grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, which gave the center the \$1.3 million it needed to open its doors last July.

Nancy O'Malley, Alameda County chief assistant district attorney, has high praise for Lai-Bitker's role in the founding of the center. "It was with her leadership that we got all the county agencies to come to the table. She was committed from the beginning and followed through on helping make the center a reality."

To help the center with its annual operating expenses, Lai-Bitker authored a domestic violence awareness bill in 2004, AB2010, which Assemblywoman Lonnie Hancock sponsored. The bill provides part of the money for the center's operating expenses by raising the vital records fees, including marriage license fees, in Alameda County. In October, billboards and bus shelter ads debuted, which advertise the center. "Alice found the money for these," says O'Malley.

Since 2003, Lai-Bitker's office has commemorated Domestic Violence Awareness Month with A Day of Remembrance in the plaza of the Alameda County Administration Building each October. The event features personal stories of survivors and 26 wood-carved silhouettes, complete with the victims' personal stories, painted on them. "It's very dramatic, very powerful," says Lai-Bitker, who adds the event's attendance has grown each year.

O'Malley, whose brother-in-law and nephew carved the silhouettes, says Lai-Bitker gave her own time to help prepare the artwork for the event. "Alice and I painted them all on a very hot day at my house," says O'Malley. "It's an honor to work with a politician who's so humble, kind and committed," she says.

Alameda Mayor Beverly Johnson says Lai-Bitker is a good advocate for her adopted hometown. She says Lai-Bitker has helped expedite many of the city's projects, including the declassification of Webster Street as a state highway and the Posey Tube's renovation. Lai-Bitker's office is also handling the disposition of the Fruitvale Street Bridge, which needs a \$25 million retrofit. It doesn't hurt to have the county supervisor living in Alameda, according to Johnson. "She and her husband are active in the community and know Alameda. Many of our elected officials don't even know where Alameda is," Johnson says.

In October 2003, Lai-Bitker saw many county nonprofit organizations were desperate for funding during a state budget crisis, so she opened her own wallet to help them. She donated 10 percent of her \$100,000 salary to start the Alice Lai- Bitker Community Fund.

To date, the fund has given \$9,000 to the Davis Street Family Resource Center, Asian Immigrant Women Advocates and George Mark Children's House, the only stand-alone hospice for terminally ill children in the country.

As a former social worker, Lai-Bitker always frames issues in terms of the people they impact. When the Koi Indian Nation proposed a casino near the Oakland airport in 2004, some worried about the increased traffic it would cause, but Lai-Bitker fought it based on the social ills she believed it would bring. Lai-Bitker and her fellow supervisors and the Alameda and San Leandro city councils all passed resolutions against it. In June 2005, the casino proposal was withdrawn.

As she prepares to run for re-election in 2006, Lai-Bitker remembers the drama of the 2002 campaign vividly. In the March primary, Alameda Mayor Ralph Appezzato got 46.3 percent of the vote to Lai-Bitker's 42.6 percent. He was the front-runner going into November's run-off election.

"Ralph was a very popular mayor and I was pretty much unknown, even though I was the incumbent. I was brand new," Lai-Bitker says. But in September, Appezzato committed suicide after struggling with prostate cancer that had spread. A two-term mayor, the ex- Marine colonel was a popular figure both on and off the Island. His funeral service drew more than 1,000 people to the USS Hornet. Appezzato's death stunned the community and his opponent. "It was hard. I was very shocked," Lai-Bitker says. She went on to win her seat back, getting 71 percent of the vote to 28 percent for Appezzato, whose name remained on the ballot.

Her 2006 re-election bid has already had its own twist. Controversy erupted in February of this year when Wilma Chan decided to run for her old supervisor's seat since she was going to be termed out of the Assembly in 2006. It divided the two former colleagues, who also happened to be the most high-profile Asian-American women in East Bay politics. Chan was also publicly critical of Lai-Bitker's performance, calling it "weak."

Lai-Bitker calls Chan's actions and comments difficult. "Her criticism was very hurtful. It was very unfortunate that we would get to that point of running for the same seat," says Lai-Bitker. But in August, Chan announced she would not run for supervisor, but will

instead run in November 2008 for the District 9 state senate seat occupied by Don Perata, who will be termed out of office.

Chan's decision to drop out of the race resolved an awkward situation. "I was very relieved," says Lai-Bitker. "She was my boss, my mentor. We were friends. I was totally devoted to her and the job when I was working for her. I hope we can rebuild our relationship," says Lai-Bitker of Chan. Lai-Bitker still faces opponents such as San Leandro Mayor Shelia Young and businessman Jim Price to retain her seat next year.

Chan did not return phone calls for this story.

Lai-Bitker and her husband have been married since 1984. They moved to Alameda in 1988 and settled in their present house in 1991 in a quiet Harbor Bay neighborhood, just a few blocks from Amelia Earhart School, where both of their daughters attended elementary school. Their eldest daughter, Mei-Ling, 19, is a graduate of Alameda High School, and now attends UC Davis. Their youngest daughter, Janelle, 14, is a freshman at Alameda High School.

Bitker, 52, has been a full-time sports radio broadcaster for KCBS News 74 since 1991. He loves sports and has a particular affinity for baseball. He's the author of a book about the Giants' first season in San Francisco in 1958. He's also been the backup radio announcer for the Oakland A's games since 2001.

Lai-Bitker says she couldn't have met the demands and long hours of her job without Bitker's support and early morning work schedule, which allowed him to pick up the girls after school. He's coached Alameda girls' soccer for eight seasons, and this year, he's a coach for Janelle's soccer team.

Lai-Bitker says her job is a challenge and it doesn't end at 5 p.m. "It's very demanding. Sometimes there are three and four events in one night." She doesn't get weekends off, either. On a recent Saturday in October, she spent several hours at a health fair at Alameda Hospital, then squeezed in Janelle's soccer game and attended a dinner in Hayward where a staffer was honored.

When asked if her job has taken her away from the children more than she would have liked, she balks. Bitker answers for her. "The most important thing to Alice is that the girls are well taken care of. It didn't matter which family member was doing it, including their grandparents," says Bitker.

"If the roles were reversed, and I was the supervisor, I couldn't handle it. I have to be there and be involved in the girls' daily lives. But for Alice, for Chinese culture, a

different culture, as long as someone in the family is there for the kids, and the kids' needs are being met, she's fine with that," he says.

When asked if she'd want one of her daughters to pursue a career in politics, Lai-Bitker's answer is emphatic. "No politics. I'm trying to interest Mei-Ling to take up child psychology," says Lai-Bitker. She has no plans to run for a higher office currently, but she doesn't rule it out after Janelle graduates from high school in four years.

Lai-Bitker feels very good about the work she's done as a supervisor. "There are a lot of challenges. There have been some hard lessons, too. I feel that I'm able to make a difference."