



*of* **OW**

# PRIDE MEMBERSHIP

ALUMNI PROFILE

**BY S. L. GUTHRIE**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUANE ZEHR**

🕒 5 MIN.

Symbols of success: 2003 classmates Mills Clement and Choi standing tall on the DuSable Street Bridge in downtown Chicago.

***Numerous studies show role models and mentors provide a positive influence, especially for people of color. Finding these role models, and examples of inclusion and representation, can be difficult. Two Bradley grads, Michelle Mills Clement '03 and Tommy Choi '03 are paving the way to inclusion in Chicago's real-estate industry, which has had an unfortunate history of discrimination.***

Mills Clement is the first African-American CEO of the 136-year-old, 15,500-member Chicago Association of Realtors and one of the university's newest trustees. Choi is the first Korean-American president of the association, as well as co-founder of the thriving Keller Williams Chicago – Lincoln Park, which is home to his team, Weinberg Choi Residential, started with **Josh Weinberg '04**. Choi also serves on the advisory council for the Foster College of Business. Both active in community service, the two have learned from their experiences and now look to help others reach their goals.

**How has coming from a diverse background affected your career(s) and how do you hope to increase diversity within the industry?**

**Tommy:** You know, that's a really great question. I think it has made me determined to find happiness. Much of that has been about being a servant leader. I want to open doors for other Realtors like myself. I remember growing up, there was an NHL hockey player named Jim Paek who was the very first Korean-American to play in the NHL. I knew nothing about hockey, I was a basketball guy. But I had his hockey card framed up on my corkboard in my bedroom, I looked at him because it was inspirational to me that someone that looked like me was a professional athlete. I hope that I can be that kind of inspiration for someone in real estate who looks like me and comes from a similar background.

**Michelle:** The Chicago Association of Realtors didn't even let African-Americans join until 1974. I started this job in the same month as the 50th anniversary of the Fair Housing Act. It has really hit home for me what it means to be the CEO of an organization that once would have denied access to me. The other side is hearing people who look like me say how proud they are to see me sitting here, or how I've inspired them to do more in their careers. It shows that representation really does matter. So, I look at my career a little bit differently now. Instead of what's the next goal, I think about who I can bring forward, who can I help advance, or who needs some barriers removed?



**Michelle, how does the association plan to advocate for underserved communities? Can you share some examples?**

**Michelle:** Well to start, we begin by enhancing our services to our members who work in those underserved communities. Through expanded member offerings, such as member orientations and continuing education and trainings at satellite locations, like at the Frank J. Williams Education Center on the South Side, we are able to make it easier for people to maintain their license by removing the barrier of having to come downtown. Through a new strategic priority, we've hired a director of external affairs whose job is to get out into the community and meet with members, community partners, and consumers to explore and implement opportunities for collaboration through community engagement, advocacy, and economic development. We want to make sure we're truly the voice of real estate for all 77 communities represented in Chicago.



### How would you say the economy affects real estate these days? Are more people buying homes or staying put and making do?

Tommy: I truly believe real estate is the nucleus of economic growth. When people own homes or have a roof over their heads, they're going to pour money into the local economy and the community, such as small businesses and restaurants. In the last five years, it's been a really booming real estate market in Chicago.

Michelle: I think real estate is always going to be a good investment. There are good times and bad times, but more often than not, you can come out (on top). When I bought my first house, it was right after the market crashed, so I got a great deal on a home. The value dropped, and I wasn't able to sell it, so I turned it into a rental property when I moved to Seattle. My first renter had to file for bankruptcy as a result of the crash. It meant a lot to me to be able to give back to someone who was having a tough time.

### How did you get involved in real estate, and what was it that intrigued you?

Michelle: When I relocated to Seattle about five years ago, I served as executive director for a commercial real estate development association. Real estate intersects with so much of your life. A lot of us have gone through the process of either buying a house, or renting an apartment, and that touches so much of who you are. Where you live is such an important piece of what you can do in the world.

Tommy: My grandfather, who immigrated here in the '70s with my parents, was the one who led me to real estate. He reminded me at a very young age that home ownership was never a right for U.S. citizens, it was a privilege that he had to work hard to achieve and work even harder to maintain. It wasn't real estate itself that made me happy, it was building relationships with people and helping them achieve their goal of home ownership.

### Tommy, how do you think residential real estate has changed in the past decade?

Tommy: There are so many more tools now, such as digital signatures instead of faxes and scans. And the internet has brought a lot more information to the consumer's fingertips. What's good is that it has made Realtors a value proposition. We understand how that data is compiled and what it means. Working with a Realtor guides you through navigating one of the largest purchases or sales of your life.

### One last question, just for fun. If you could have any superpower, what would it be?

Tommy: This could be a blessing and a curse, but I would love to be able to read people, or read what they're thinking. I'm all about transparency and there are times where I wonder, "I hear the words coming out of your mouth, but your facial expression doesn't match what you're saying." I'd also really love to know what my kids are thinking!

Michelle: I think I'd want to be able to teleport, to be able to just close my eyes and be in Florida where my dad is now, or Virginia where my mom and brother, niece and nephews live, or L.A., where my youngest brother is, or Seattle where my family's friend tribe is, all at a moment's notice. I could appear there and just as easily get back, and not have to deal with traffic and airports. **E**