

# In Wake of Election, Wilmer's Bill Lee Reveals Troubling Incident

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By Susan Beck



Bill Lee. (Photo by Ken Richardson)

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At a time of political upheaval in this country and uncertainty over the future of civil rights, William Lee, the former co-managing partner of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, has a chilling story to tell.

On a Tuesday night in August, Lee stopped at a gas station near his home outside Boston in Wellesley, Massachusetts, to fill up his Mercedes-Benz SUV. Lee—a graduate of Harvard College and one of the nation’s [most accomplished](#) intellectual property litigators—was wearing a suit and tie, having finished a long day at work.

As Lee tells it, a man wearing a “Wellesley Hockey Parent” shirt walked up to him.

“Where does a guy like you get a car like that?” the man said to Lee, looking at the litigator’s vehicle.

Lee, whose parents came to this country from China in 1948, tried to defuse the situation. “From Herb Chambers,” he said, referring to a [local car dealer](#).

“Why don’t you go back to your own country,” the man said, according to Lee.

“I don’t understand you,” Lee said.

“You mean, you don’t understand English,” the man said.

“I don’t understand ignorance,” Lee replied.

The Wilmer partner drove away, but the man followed in his car. When Lee pulled into a nearby police station, the man vanished.

“In the bluest of Blue States, Massachusetts, a mile from Wellesley College, if someone tells you to go back to your own country, this can happen anywhere,” Lee said. “If this can happen to the managing partner of an Am Law 200 firm, what’s happening to the rest of the country?”

Lee said he hadn’t heard a comment like this for 40 years. He attributes the encounter to the political environment that has encouraged hostility to immigrants. “He felt he could say it,” Lee said.

Lee told several of his partners, and the younger ones were the most shocked. One in particular, broker-dealer compliance and regulation chair Yoon-Young Lee, encouraged him to go public with the story.

“I grew up in the fifties when we were the only Chinese family in our school district,” Lee recalled. “It was not a great time to be Asian. In many ways this brought back things that I thought we had put behind us.”

The day after Donald Trump won the presidency, Lee and other prominent law firm leaders [spoke to The American Lawyer](#) about the need for lawyers to stand up in the U.S. and protect the rule of law.

“Given the election and its many implications, there has been no moment in recent memory when it has been more important for lawyers to fulfill their professional responsibilities,” said Lee at the time. “As a profession, we must ensure that the rule of law that is our fundamental core value is our highest priority and applicable and available to everyone.”

Although the incident in August upset him, Lee said he doesn’t feel afraid.

“I’m concerned that if this can happen in Wellesley, it’s indicative of people having similar views, whether expressed or unexpressed,” he said. “It’s something we have to address as a country and as lawyers. Who knows what’s going to happen? Maybe it will be better than we hope. If not, it’s important for lawyers to be heard and stand up.”