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MOVERS & SHAKERS

Mailee Yang and Suzanne Oh, BrandLab

By TODD NELSON

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Mailee Yang and Suzanne Oh are bringing new leadership to expand programs at BrandLab, a Minneapolis nonprofit organization that seeks to help Twin Cities marketing and advertising agencies diversify their workforces.

Yang manages BrandLab's classroom program, in which professionals from top agencies and big corporations assist high school students of diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in creating full-scale campaigns. Yang manages a team, teaches in classrooms, creates curriculum and leads industry volunteers.

Oh is manager of the Fearless program, which offers support for inclusive workplace cultures through consulting services, workshops, reports and events, including Fearless Conversations, a yearly dialogue with industry leaders about race and bias.

BrandLab served 720 students, placed 67 in summer internships, recruited more than 250 industry volunteers and partnered with 46 agencies, according to its latest annual report.

People of color accounted for 7.8 percent of those working in the Twin Cities advertising industry in 2016, up from 6.3 percent in 2014, according to a BrandLab report.

For Yang, a daughter of Hmong immigrants who grew up in Oshkosh, Wis., the classroom program offers access to mentors and advice she wished she had before going to college with the goal of being a graphic designer.

Working at BrandLab aligns with Oh's passion for social justice, which she traces to her experiences growing up with South Korean immigrant parents in a white suburb, going to her father's beauty supply store in Milwaukee, which served mostly black customers, and attending a Korean church.

Q: What brought you to BrandLab?

Yang: What I love about **the BrandLab** is that it's so mission-driven. The students who are in the program are their priority, and they're always advocating for them. There's so much innovation going on as well within **the BrandLab** and with the partners, they're looking to improve and change and that's refreshing.

Q: What are your goals at BrandLab?

Oh: I look most forward to working with people who see a need for diversity and inclusion and helping create a better workplace for those who are underrepresented as well as making a space where everyone

feels safe and can have honest conversations. I would love to expand those conversations and be more action-oriented.

Q: What does having 7.8 percent people of color mean for the local ad industry?

Oh: That demonstrates that something is going on. We're not getting enough people in the industry or we're not able to retain them. Either one is a huge concern as the consumer population becomes more and more diverse.

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