Standing Up Against Anti-Asian Racism

Calling out anti-Asian violence is interconnected to NMAC's fight to lead with race to end HIV.

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Too often, Asian Americans are incorrectly labeled as the "model minority." The label minimizes our pain and the challenges we face living in America. Some of us could assimilate, but too many continue to live in poverty, especially people with limited English-speaking skills.

The rise in violence and discrimination against Asians was just another example of the world going crazy. How much more stress, recriminations, and loss can America endure? We are all living on the edge waiting for the next shoe to drop. Would Asians fight back? Would our friends stand with us? Would the President stand in solidarity or blame us for the virus? Please watch this video of an older non-English speaking Chinese American who fought back.

Don't mess with "Grandma." Under similar circumstances, I'm not sure I would have her courage. I definitely understood her pain. It is the pain that too many Asians and too many people of color carry. "Why do people hate us just because of the color of our skin, our accent, or where we were born?" These are not things I can or want to change, but they make so many people angry and define how many Asians show up in the world.

I am the executive director of the National Minority AIDS Council, yet I am still asked to get people's drinks or hang their coats. Part of why I dress so outrageously is so guests understand that I am not the help. Even at the United States Conference on HIV/AIDS, I'm still asked to get coffee for a table during plenary sessions. It's taken a long time for me to learn to speak back and now you can't stop me. Too many Asians cannot speak up. My parents were interred for nothing more than being Japanese. They taught their children the hard lessons they learned from that experience. Keep your head down, try to blend-in, and never speak up.

That's why I am so inspired by the Asians who are fighting back and the people who are standing in solidarity. People of all races, genders, gender identifies, sexual orientations are standing with the Asian community like never before. Thank you to everyone who posts on Facebook, makes a donation to an Asian nonprofit, attends a vigil, or just talks with their friends. You know your real friends when the s*** the fan (that is so Japanese).

This experience taught me that leadership matters. The President matters. The Vice President matters. I am so proud of the Asian American elected officials who are speaking out. For too many this is their first time on the national stage. Watching the tears of Representative Grace Meng (D-

NY) as she called out a member of Congress for hijacking the hearing was an incredible moment. Her words were both heartbreaking and empowering. Her courage to stand up to power and take back the hearing reminded me of warriors like Maxine Waters and Nancy Pelosi.

This is the legacy of racism that is breaking the fabric of our society. How many people have todie? Unfortunately, the answer continues to be that our lives don’t matter. Calling out anti-Asian violence is interconnected to NMAC’s fight to lead with race to end HIV. None of us can do it alone and we’ve got to figure out how to work together. Divisions are killing us and our communities.

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata

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