

CAMBODIAN AMERICAN LITERARY ARTS ASSOCIATION



March 5, 2021

Dear CALAA Family and all,

It is with a heavy heart that I write this letter. The rise in hate crimes recently against Asians and Asian Americans in the US has been devastating. The reality is that it has been happening for a long time.

As a child growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts, I remember the disgusted faces of our neighbors in the Centerville neighborhood as they told us to “Go back to China!” I remember playing at the playground at Armory Park in the Lower Highlands where some of the children would shout out racial slurs at me out of nowhere- because I looked differently than they did and simply because I existed. It boggled my mind because I could not understand why they would say that or where they even learned it from. During another instance, my brother and I and a couple of friends decided to walk home from Lowell High School. As we were walking down Dutton Street, police cars started to surround us. I was walking behind everyone else, so the police did not make me throw my hands up like a criminal as they did my brother and my friends. I remember crying and pleading with the police that we did not do anything wrong! I remember the smirk and laughter on the officer’s face as he told me to stay back or I would be in trouble as well. “Trouble for what? Leave my brother alone!” I shouted. It turned out someone supposedly called the police and said there were kids in hoodies walking down the street with knives in our hands. No, we did not have knives- we had textbooks and notebooks in our hands.

In my twenties, my family moved to the upper Highlands neighborhood. On a simple walk with a friend around Callery Park, a group of people had stuck their heads out of the car and started mocking the Asian language and shouting out racial slurs. I could not believe it. I just stared at them stunned. I was so angry that I became motionless.

My experiences do not compare to what is going on today, but it is clear proof to me that racism exists. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the rhetoric being used in the executive office of the federal government contributed to the rise in anti-Asian hate. In response, CALAA participated in the Racism is a Virus campaign empowering Asian Americans to speak up against anti-Asian racism and to show solidarity within the Asian community. I was so worried during that time that I even told my father to not go fishing by himself for fear of something bad happening to him.

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In July 2020, when many of the City of Lowell councilors chose to dismiss the declaration that racism is a public health crisis after hearing distressing stories of racism from their residents, it was devastating. You cannot start making real change if you do not declare what the problem is. We do not need fake solutions. We need genuine and profound change to make our communities safer, better, and equitable for all.

Across the nation in San Francisco when stories of 84-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee being attacked and murdered surfaced, the sadness and anger came back to me. More and more stories kept coming on anti-Asian hate. Video after video of our elders and our community members being pushed and attacked became unbearable to watch. It reminded me of the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man who was killed during his bachelor party in Michigan in 1982. The two men that murdered him were ordered to pay only \$3,000 and served a couple of years probation with no jail time at all. This caused an uproar in the Asian American community. We will never forget what happened then. We will never forget what is happening today.

Please be vigilant.

Please be careful.

Please watch out for one another- watch out for our elders.

Please speak up.

Please stand together.

The Cambodian American Literary Arts Association condemns racism and anti-Asian hate crimes. Please go to the following resources to learn more about how you can be a part of the change.

stopaapihate.org

hateisavirus.org

advancingjustice-aajc.org

<https://www.aacommission.org/resources/anti-asian-hate-resources>

Sincerely,

Joan Chun

Deputy Director