

Detroit Blues: "Because of You Motherfuckers"



I arrived in Detroit in 1976 with little more than my beat-up Chevy Vega, a suitcase, a few boxes, and about a hundred dollars. My first order of business was to find a job, preferably at an auto factory. I was on a mission, a grand adventure, to learn what it meant to be an American in America's heartland. I was finally doing what we had talked about endlessly in college—going to the grass roots, the workplaces and neighborhoods where we could learn from the people who were the real makers of history. This was not the road my ancestors had planned for me.

Like many Asian American immigrant parents, mine had instilled in me the virtues of education and scholarship. But our family's tiny baby novelty business offered little exposure to possible careers. My parents had few ideas of where my studies might take me. I was so unsure of what to do in my life beyond college

*Historic rally by Asian Americans in Detroit's Kennedy Square on May 9, 1983
(Victor J. Yang)*

that I did what any good Asian American child would do: I applied to medical school. Though I majored in public and international affairs, and minored in East Asian Studies and student activism, I also took a few pre-med courses—just to be safe. I even got accepted, and within days of starting on my M.D. I began to realize I had made a terrible mistake. But my filial obligation to my parents—and my entire line of ancestors—was a core part of my Chinese heritage, so I stayed on.

After struggling for two years, I finally mustered the courage to ruin forever my parents' dream—and that of nearly every Asian immigrant parent—to have an offspring who is a doctor, who will care for them in their old age. I quit medical school, spurning my path to respectability, wealth, and filial nirvana. But I was clueless about what to pursue instead. I still wanted to be part of the big social changes I discovered during the student protest years. My equally idealistic friends encouraged me to move to Detroit, which they viewed as the real America. My parents saw this as further evidence that I had lost my mind.

Almost immediately, I landed a job as a large-press operator at a Chrysler stamping plant, making car hoods, fenders, and other parts. I joined the United Auto Workers union. In a factory of several thousand workers, I was one of perhaps three Asian faces; I definitely stood out. I was a rarity on the streets of Detroit as well, with its 60 percent African American population and the rest mostly working-class whites, many from the South. At the time, Detroit had only 7,614 Asian Americans in a population of 1.2 million—not even one percent of the city.

I didn't go to Detroit to find a large Asian American population, but I had hoped to find some palatable Chinese food. I was unhappy with the restaurants in the diminutive and decaying Chinatown, whose residents seemed too old and fragile to move elsewhere. Desperate, I asked my co-workers at the stamping plant where to go.

"Stanley's is the happening place for Chinese food," the African American autoworkers unanimously told me. I wouldn't have been so trusting had I recalled that any dish more exotic than sweet and sour pork unnerved many of my black friends. At Stanley's, I wasn't surprised to find that the cocktails wore pink umbrellas. But I was stunned by the gigantic, flaky dinner rolls that accompanied my order. Rice was optional, and everything was smothered in heavy brown gravy. I didn't fault Stanley's—like Chinese everywhere in the diaspora, they had to survive and adapt to the environment. But if culinary influence was an indication of political status in Detroit, Asian Americans weren't even on the map.

Two years later, I was no longer a press operator. As easily as I found my job at the auto plant, I lost it, along with some 300,000 other autoworkers in the devastating collapse of the auto industry. I was learning more about "real Americans" than I ever imagined; my biggest lesson was that we were not so different. There was the occasional racial confrontation—like the drunken worker who pointed her finger in my face and said, "I don't care if you're from Jap-pan, the Philipp-eenes or Ha-wah-yeh, you're on my turf," but she was the rare exception. Standing together on the assembly line and the unemployment line, we shared our lives and recognized our common humanity.

In the midst of that social upheaval, I discovered journalism. I began writing for the *Detroit Metro Times* and other "alternative" news publications. I wrote about the auto industry and the labor movement for *Monthly Detroit* magazine, then joined the staff of a new city magazine, *Metropolitan Detroit*. I spent my days reporting on the life and trends that made Detroit dynamic. Asian American issues were not among them.

The last thing I expected to find in Detroit was an Asian American mandate that would compel the scattered groups across the nation into a broad-based pan-Asian movement. I was in for a big surprise.

In the years leading up to the summer of 1982, Detroit was a city in crisis. Long lines of despair snaked around unemployment offices, union halls, welfare offices, soup kitchens. Men and women lost homes, cars, recreational vehicles, summer cottages, and possessions accumulated from a lifetime of hard work in a once-thriving industry. They were named the "new poor." For many, gloom turned to anger as they searched for the cause of their miseries.

At first, the companies blamed the workers for incompetence and malaise, for wanting too much in exchange for too little. The workers, in turn, pointed to decrepit factories and machines that hadn't been upgraded since World War II, profits that had been squandered and not reinvested in plants and people. The government was faulted for the usual reasons. Before long, however, they all found a common enemy to blame: the Japanese.

While Detroit had once scoffed at the threat of oil shortages, Japan's automakers were busily meeting the demand for inexpensive, fuel-efficient

cars. In 1978, a new oil crisis and subsequent price hikes at the gas pumps killed the market for the heavy, eight-cylinder dinosaurs made in Detroit, precipitating the massive layoffs and a crisis throughout the industrial Midwest. The Japanese auto imports were everything the gas-guzzlers were not—cheap to buy, cheap to run, well made and dependable. They were easy to hate.

Anything Japanese, or presumed to be Japanese, became a potential target. Japanese cars were easy pickings. Local unions sponsored sledgehammer events giving frustrated workers a chance to smash Japanese cars for a dollar a swing. Japanese cars were vandalized and their owners were shot at on the freeways. On TV, radio, and the local street corner, anti-Japanese slurs were commonplace. Politicians and public figures made irresponsible and unambiguous racial barbs aimed at Japanese people. Lee Iacocca, chairman of the failing Chrysler Corporation and onetime presidential candidate, jokingly suggested dropping nuclear bombs on Japan, while U.S. Representative John Dingell of Michigan pointed his fury at “those little yellow men.”

Bumper stickers threatened “Honda, Toyota—Pearl Harbor.” It felt dangerous to have an Asian face. Asian American employees of auto companies were warned not to go onto the factory floor because angry workers might hurt them if they were thought to be Japanese. Even in distant California, Robert Handa, a third-generation Japanese American television reporter, was threatened by an autoworker who pulled a knife and yelled, “I don’t likee Jap food . . . only like American food.”

I had lost my job at Chrysler in the first round of layoffs, four years earlier, but every time I drove my car I was grateful that it was American-made. The tension was an ominous reminder of dangerous times past. It seemed only a matter of time before the anger turned to violence.

That summer, a twenty-seven-year-old man named Vincent Chin was destined to become a symbol for Asian Americans. Vincent was a regular Detroit guy who happened to be of Chinese descent. Cheerful and easygoing, Vincent was a recent graduate of Control Data Institute, a computer trade school, and worked as a draftsman during the day and a waiter on weekends. He liked nothing more than spending a lazy afternoon fishing with his buddies. He hadn’t been touched by the Asian American movement and knew little of the violence endured by past generations of Asians in America. But he had felt the sting of racial prejudice and witnessed the

hardships of his immigrant parents, who worked in the laundries and restaurants of Detroit.

On June 19, 1982, a week before his wedding, Vincent’s pals took him out for the all-American ritual the bachelor party. They went to Fancy Pants, a raunchy striptease bar in Highland Park, a tattered enclave of Detroit, near the crumbling mansions once home to auto magnates and Motown stars and only blocks away from the abandoned buildings where Henry Ford manufactured the Model T. Vincent, who grew up in that neighborhood, had been to Fancy Pants several times before.

That night, his mother admonished him, “You’re getting married, you shouldn’t go there anymore.”

“Ma, it’s my last time,” he replied.

“Don’t say ‘last time,’ it’s bad luck,” she scolded, conjuring up old Chinese superstitions.

At the lounge, two white men sat across the striptease stage from Vincent and his three friends—two white men and one Chinese American. Ronald Ebens, a plant superintendent for Chrysler, and his stepson, Michael Nitz, a laid-off autoworker, soon made it clear that they found Vincent’s presence distasteful. The friends of the groom-to-be were paying the dancers handsomely to shower their favors on Vincent. According to witnesses, Ebens seemed annoyed by the attention the Chinese American was receiving from the nude dancers. Vincent’s friends overheard Ebens say “Chink,” “Nip,” and “fucker.” One of the dancers heard him say, “It’s because of motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work.” Vincent replied, “Don’t call me a fucker,” and a scuffle ensued. Nitz’s forehead was cut, possibly by a punch or chair thrown by Vincent. Both groups were ejected from the bar.

Ebens and Nitz hunted for Chin and the other Chinese man in his group. In the dark summer night, they drove through the area for a half hour with a neighborhood man whom they paid to help them “get the Chinese.” Finally they spotted Vincent and his friend in front of a crowded McDonald’s on Woodward Avenue, Detroit’s main central thoroughfare. Creeping up behind the Chinese Americans, Nitz held Vincent Chin down while his stepfather swung his Louisville Slugger baseball bat into Vincent’s skull four times, “as if he was going for a home run.” Two off-duty cops who were moonlighting as security guards witnessed the attack. The impact of the blows broke a jade pendant that Vincent wore—to some

Chinese, a sign of bad luck. Mortally wounded, Vincent died four days later. His four hundred wedding guests attended his funeral instead.

The *Detroit Free Press* featured the bridegroom's beating death on its front page, telling of Vincent's life and hopes for his marriage, but offering no details of his slaying—none of the circumstances were yet known. Detroit's Asian Americans, unaccustomed to any media coverage, took notice. But they remained silent even though many believed that race was a factor in the killing. The community was small and unorganized. Conventional wisdom of the "don't make waves" variety admonished that visibility could bring trouble. Even if they wished to protest, they had no advocacy or watchdog group to turn to. It seemed that the matter would end there. I read the story with sadness and alarm, too aware of the racial tensions swirling around the region. I wondered how this Chinese American came to be killed, when there were so few Asian Americans in Detroit. As an enterprising young journalist, I clipped the story out and filed it, certain that there was a bigger story behind Vincent's death.

Nine months later, on March 18, 1983, new headlines appeared on the front pages of Detroit's two dailies: "Two Men Charged in '82 Slaying Get Probation" and "Probation in Slaying Riles Chinese." It seemed to be the courtroom conclusion to Vincent Chin's death. The two killers pleaded guilty and no contest to savagely beating Chin to death; each received three years' probation and \$3,780 in fines and court costs to be paid over three years. The judge, Charles Kaufman, explained his reasoning: "These aren't the kind of men you send to jail," he said. "You fit the punishment to the criminal, not the crime." The lightness of the sentence shocked Detroit. Two white killers were set free in a city with a population more than 60 percent black, where African Americans routinely received harsher sentences for lesser crimes. The sentence of probation drew cries of outrage. Local pundits harshly criticized Judge Kaufman. "You have raised the ugly ghost of racism, suggesting in your explanation that the lives of the killers are of great and continuing value to society, implying they are of greater value than the life of the slain victim . . . How gross and ostentatious of you; how callous and yes, unjust . . ." wrote *Detroit Free Press* columnist Nikki McWhirter.

The *Detroit News* reporter Cynthia Lee, herself a Chinese American from Hawaii, interviewed members of the Chinese American community, who voiced their disbelief "You go to jail for killing a dog," said Henry Yee,

a noted local restaurateur who was described as the "unofficial mayor of Chinatown." Vincent's life was worth less than a used car, cried a distraught family friend.

The reaction within the Detroit area's small, scattered Asian American population was immediate and visceral. Suddenly people who had endured a lifetime of degrading treatment were wondering if their capacity to suffer in silence might no longer be a virtue, when even in death, after such a brutal, uncontested killing, they could be so disrespected. Disconnected, informal networks of Asian Americans frantically worked the phones, trying to find some way to vent their frustrations and perhaps correct the injustice.

I, too, was stunned. Here was the incredible ending to the story I had clipped out for future reference. I felt distraught, betrayed—and furious. The probationary sentences seemed to echo the familiar taunt, "a Chinaman's chance," that grim reminder of the days when whites lynched Chinese with impunity. The lessons from my Asian American student movement days came rushing back to me. After I read the articles, I telephoned the person named in the *Detroit News* article. Introducing myself to Henry Yee, whose common Chinese American name was the same as my older brother's, I offered to help in any way I could. Henry invited me to meet him and some others that afternoon. At Carl's Steak House, I met Henry Yee and Kin Yee (not related), president of the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council. A woman named Liza Chan, a Hong Kong-born attorney of my own generation, joined us. We talked generally about possible actions. The first step would be to conduct a larger meeting that could include more members of the Chinese and Asian American community.

The Chinese Welfare Council was the public face of the local branches of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and the On Leong Merchants Association, a tong, a form of Chinatown organization often associated with the seamier side of Chinese American ghettos. In Detroit it served a social function. Both organizations had long histories in Chinatowns. The business association, also known as the Six Companies, began in San Francisco in the 1860s to provide public services denied to Chinese by local governments. The association arbitrated disputes, representing Chinese concerns to the city, state, and federal governments. The tongs, on the other hand, were alleged to conduct

organized crime activities in Chinatowns, using their networks to run gambling, prostitution, drug-trafficking, and protection rackets. Some tongs performed legitimate community and civic functions; in Detroit, the Chinese Welfare Council and On Leong Merchants Association were well established, and both Henry Yee and Kin Yee were members.

Merchants were the Chinese pioneers in Detroit. In 1872, the first Chinese Detroiters, Ah Chee, arrived and set up a laundry business; subsequent arrivals did the same. The first Chinese restaurant opened in 1905. The Chinese business community hit its peak in the 1920s, when the city counted 300 Chinese laundries and 32 restaurants. Since that time, the Chinatown population and business base dwindled, becoming a mere shadow of its peak days.

Over the years, the Asian American population in the Detroit area changed considerably. The Immigration Act of 1965 had ushered in a new generation of Chinese immigrants, as well as those from Korea, the Philippines, and South Asia. Because the new immigration regulations heavily favored educated professionals, the newer Asian immigrants included highly trained scientists, engineers, doctors, and nurses. Many of the top researchers for the Big Three automakers were Ph.D.'s from throughout Asia. The professionals lived in the suburbs, far from Detroit's urban core and Chinatown. By the 1980s, Chinatown's shrinking base reflected the diminished role of the merchants. The children of the laundry and restaurant owners had gone to college and moved to the suburbs or to other cities. The family businesses in Chinatown faded.

The 1980 census reported only 1,213 Chinese in the entire city; while that is surely an undercount, the population was unquestionably small. On Leong ran the Chinese Culture and Recreational Center, offering activities for youth and English-language instruction to new immigrants. It also assisted the aging bachelor Chinese, settled disputes among immigrants, and maintained a cemetery plot for Chinese. If it had more nefarious pursuits, they weren't obvious, though the notorious Hong Kong-based chief of the national On Leong, Eddie Chan, was well known to the FBI and Interpol. The Detroit Chinese Welfare Council represented Chinatown interests to the city and at political functions. Both groups were run by the same aging elders who realized they needed to bolster their membership by attracting new, and younger, blood. The late Vincent Chin was one of their younger members.

Vincent's background was like that of many second-generation Chinatown Chinese. His father, David Bing Hing Chin, had worked in laundries all his life, from the time he arrived from China in 1922 at the age of seventeen until his death in 1981, the year before Vincent was slain. He had served in the Army during World War II, which earned him his citizenship and the right to find a wife in China. Lily came to the United States in 1948 to be married, like so many other Chinese women of her generation, including my mother. Lily knew her husband-to-be's family, and looked forward to joining him in America. Lily's father opposed the move because his grandfather had worked on the transcontinental railroad, but was driven out. He feared Lily might face similar bigotry. In Detroit, Lily worked in the laundries and restaurants alongside her new husband.

In 1961, Lily and David Bing Chin adopted a cheerful six-year-old boy from Guangdong Province in China. Vincent grew up into a friendly young man and a devoted only child who helped support his parents financially. He ran on his high school track team, but he also wrote poetry. Vincent was an energetic, take-charge guy who knew how to stand up for himself on the tough streets of Detroit. But friends and co-workers had never seen him angry and were shocked that he had been provoked into a fight.

For Chinese Americans, the identification with the Chin family was direct. The details of the Chins' family history mirrored those of so many other Chinese Americans, who, like Lily and David, came from Guangdong Province. So did the military service that made it possible for Chinese American men to get married, and their work in the restaurants and laundries. Vincent was part of an entire generation for whom the immigrant parents had suffered and sacrificed. Other Asian Americans also found a strong connection to the lives of Vincent, Lily, and David Chin. Theirs was the classic immigrant story of survival: work hard and sacrifice for the family, keep a low profile, don't complain, and, perhaps in the next generation, attain the American dream. For Asian Americans, along with the dream came the hope of one day gaining acceptance in America. The injustice surrounding Vincent's slaying shattered the dream.

But most of all, Vincent was everyone's son, brother, boyfriend, husband, father. Asian Americans felt deeply that what happened to Vincent Chin could have happened to anyone who "looked" Japanese. From childhood, nearly every Asian American has experienced being mistaken for other Asian ethnicities, even harassed and called names as though every

Asian group were the same. The climate of hostility made many Asian Americans feel unsafe, not just in Detroit, but across the country, as the Japan-bashing began to emanate from the nation's capital and was amplified through the news media. If Vincent Chin could be harassed and brutally beaten to death, and his killers freed, many felt it could happen to them.

After the news of the sentences of probation for Vincent's killers, his mother, Lily, wrote a letter in Chinese to the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council: "This is injustice to the grossest extreme. I grieve in my heart and shed tears in blood. My son cannot be brought back to life, but he was a member of your council. Therefore, I plead to you. Please let the Chinese American community know, so they can help me hire legal counsel to appeal, so my son can rest his soul."

As phone calls and offers of help from Chinese Americans and others poured in from all over the Detroit area, Henry Yee and Kin Yee called for a meeting on March 20, 1983, under the auspices of the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council at the Golden Star Restaurant in Ferndale, a working-class suburb just north of Detroit. Vincent had worked at the Golden Star as a waiter. The restaurant was three miles from the McDonald's on Woodward Avenue where he was killed.

One week after the sentencing, about thirty people crammed into the back dining room of the Golden Star. I had never been to the restaurant, but its familiar decor of red, black, and gold-speckled mirrors reminded me of Chinese restaurants everywhere. The lawyers stood at the front, fielding questions from the group. Barely a half dozen of them, they constituted the majority of Asian American attorneys in the entire state. Most were under thirty. None specialized in criminal law, but they agreed on one thing: once a sentence was rendered, little could be done to change it; the law offered few options. The impasse forced an uneasy quiet over the gathering, broken only by the low sounds of Lily Chin weeping at the back of the room.

Aside from Kin Yee, Henry Yee, and Liza Chan, whom I had just met, I knew no one at the meeting. At that moment I had to decide between being a reporter on the sidelines and being an active participant in whatever happened. I hesitated, then raised my hand. "We must let the world know that we think this is wrong. We can't stop now without even trying"

At first there was no response. Then the weeping stopped. Mrs. Chin stood up and spoke in a shaky but clear voice. "We must speak up. These men killed my son like an animal. But they go free. This is wrong. We must tell the people, this is wrong"

With Mrs. Chin's words as a moral turning point, the group decided to press forward. The lawyers recommended a meeting with the sentencing judge, Charles Kaufman. But who would accompany Mrs. Chin and Kin Yee to meet the judge? Some of the lawyers stepped back, explaining how such an act might jeopardize their jobs. In a community with so little political clout, to be "the nail that sticks out" was an invitation to disaster. After another pause, a woman spoke up. "I'll meet with Kaufman." It was Liza Chan, the only Asian American woman practicing law in Michigan. I took on the task of publicizing the news that Asian Americans were outraged and preparing to fight the judge's sentence. From the beginning, women would play a major role in the case.

In the next few days, Liza and Kin attempted to meet with the judge, who by now was flooded by angry phone calls, letters, and media inquiries, as Asian Americans and others challenged his sentence. He skipped their appointment. When I joined Liza and Kin for the next scheduled meeting, we were told that the judge had suddenly decided to go on vacation. On a pro bono basis, Liza began the work of finding and interviewing witnesses to reconstruct what happened to Vincent Chin that fateful night, so that Mrs. Chin and the community could assess their legal options. It soon became clear that there were failures at every step of the criminal justice process. The police and court record was slipshod and incomplete. The police had failed to interview numerous witnesses, including the dancers at the bar and a man the killers hired outside the bar to help them "get the Chinese"; when Liza and I visited the arresting officer, he had the murder weapon, the Louisville Slugger baseball bat, sitting behind his desk. The first presiding judge had set the initial charges against the killers at second-degree murder, which other legal experts determined to be too low. Almost as outrageous as the sentence itself was the fact that no prosecutor was present when Judge Kaufman rendered his sentence of probation.

After the community meeting at the Golden Star, I issued our first press release. We were flooded with numerous requests for information and offers to help. Without an existing advocacy group to manage the community response, we decided some kind of organization would have

to be formed. The founding meeting was set for the following week, after we contacted the various community groups, which were mostly religious, cultural, and professional in nature. The meeting would be held at the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council building.

On the evening of March 31, more than a hundred solidly middle-aged and mainly middle-class Asian Americans from towns surrounding Detroit packed the dingy, low-ceilinged hall. The threat of a Michigan frost still lingered, but the topic under debate this night was hot and unprecedented among Asian Americans: whether to form a pan-Asian organization that might seek a federal civil rights investigation in the slaying of Vincent Chin. There had never before been a criminal civil rights case involving anyone of Asian descent in the United States.

Once again, the gathering was mostly Chinese American, with a few other Asian ethnicities offering a thin slice of diversity. The imagery was staunchly conservative: a faded portrait of Chiang Kai-shek at the front, flanked by the red-white-and-blue—not Old Glory but the flag of Taiwan, the Republic of China.

The main order of business was to create an organization that could file petitions and legal actions, raise money, and organize the outcry for a response. The idea was to form an umbrella organization to coordinate the efforts of the area's varied Asian American groups. Members of some twenty groups had come that night, mostly Chinese, from the Association of Chinese Americans and the Greater Detroit Taiwanese Association, to such professional associations as the Detroit Chinese Engineers Association; cultural groups like the Chinese American Educational and Cultural Center; church organizations from the Chinese Community Church to the Detroit Buddhist Church; and a women's group, the Organization of Chinese American Women.

Detroit had not seen such a broad gathering of Chinese since the China War Relief effort of the 1930s. Non-Chinese were also represented, including the Japanese American Citizens League, the Korean Society of Greater Detroit, and the Filipino American Community Council.

The pan-Asian intent of the group became clear as the group discussed what to name the new organization. "Citizens for Fair Sentencing in the Cause of Vincent Chin" and "Justice Committee of the Chinese Welfare Council" were rejected as too narrow. "Chinese Americans for Justice"

limited the concern to Chinese. The vote overwhelmingly went to "American Citizens for Justice," which offered an inclusive base and a vision for justice beyond a single case. The founding of the American Citizens for Justice, or ACJ, marked the formation of the first explicitly Asian American grass-roots community advocacy effort with a national scope. Third-generation Japanese American James Shimoura was the first, and at the time only, non-Chinese to serve on the executive board. Japanese, Filipino, and Korean American groups joined in support, assured that they would be welcome. As word of our efforts spread, both white and black individuals also volunteered, making the campaign for justice multiracial in character.

That night, the new pan-Asian American organization drafted its statement of principles:

ACJ believes that:

1. All citizens are guaranteed the right to equal treatment by our judicial and governmental system;
2. When the rights of one individual are violated, all of society suffers;
3. Asian Americans, along with many other groups of people, have historically been given less than equal treatment by the American judicial and governmental system. Only through cooperative efforts with all people will society progress and be a better place for all citizens.

ACJ's first mandate was unambiguous: to obtain justice for Vincent Chin, an Asian American man who was killed because he looked Japanese.

Hard questions came quickly as the newly formed ACJ sought to gain supporters outside the Asian American community. Our first efforts at mounting a national media campaign were crude and amateurish as we learned the process of getting our news out; in the days before fax machines, each press release was hand-delivered, often by a retired Chinese American couple, Ray and Mable Lim. ACJ held its first news conference at the Detroit Press Club on April 15, 1983. The entire spectrum of local media appeared—it was big news to see Asian Americans coming together to protest injustice. To the reporters and the people of Detroit, Asian

Americans seemed to emerge from nowhere. Our task, and mine in particular, was to educate them quickly, in sound bites, about Asian Americans.

An appearance that I Liza Chan and I made on a popular African American talk radio program drew numerous calls from black listeners. Some were pleased that Asian Americans would reach out to their community to talk about this injustice. Others asked if Asians were just trying to "ride the coattails" of African Americans, and still others accused Asian people of prejudice against blacks. We tried to answer questions frankly, acknowledging that anti-black prejudice exists among some, but not all, Asian Americans, and that ACJ was trying to address racial bias and injustice against any group, including attitudes held by Asians. The talk shows gave us an opportunity to point out the contributions of Asian Americans to the civil rights struggles. The listeners' comments also underscored the need for us to bring such discussions to the more recent Asian immigrants who had arrived after the 1965 Immigration Act with little awareness of the U.S. civil rights movement.

The growing prominence of the case gave Asian Americans our first direct entry on a national level into the white-black race dynamic with an Asian American issue. We tried to explain that we recognized and respected African Americans' central and dominant position in the civil rights struggle; we wanted to show that we weren't trying to benefit from their sacrifices without offering anything in return. On the other hand, many European Americans were hostile or resistant to "yet another minority group" stepping forward to make claims. Underlying both concerns was the suggestion, a nagging doubt, that Asian Americans had no legitimate place in discussions of racism because we hadn't *really* suffered any.

Still, many did welcome Asian Americans into the civil rights fold, as a new voice from a previously silent neighbor. As ACJ began to make its case, African American organizations such as the umbrella Detroit-Area Black Organizations quickly endorsed ACJ's efforts. Its president, Horace Sheffield, became a dependable supporter at ACJ events, and Asian Americans reciprocated. The Detroit chapter of the NAACP, the largest chapter in the country, issued a statement about the sentence. Several prominent African American churches gave their support, as did the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Detroit Roundtable of Christians and Jews.

ACJ sought and won the support of other communities as well, including Latinos, Arab Americans, and Italian Americans. A diversity of women's groups from the Detroit Women's Forum to Black Women for a Better Society endorsed ACJ, as did a number of local political leaders from the president of the Detroit City Council to U.S. Representative John Conyers.

Many Asian Americans wanted to express their outrage, but were unsure how race fit in the picture. Their tentativeness about the issue of race was evident in ACJ's carefully crafted public positions. ACJ focused on Judge Kaufman's unjust sentence, deliberately not commenting on possible racial bias by the judge or the potential for a racial motivation in the killing of Vincent Chin. A few of us in the core organizing effort—attorneys Roland Hwang and Jim Shimoura, educator Parker Woo, and I—had an understanding of civil rights from the Asian American student movement days and felt that racism permeated the case on many levels. But we also knew that other Asian Americans would need to hear more conclusive evidence if they were to take a strong position on race.

ACJ waited to see if Liza Chan's interviews with witnesses would produce evidence of a racially motivated killing. I worded our press releases carefully to convey the context of our history with racism, while avoiding an outright accusation; one of the first ACJ press statements said: "This case has aroused the anger of the Asian community by recalling the days of 'frontier justice,' when massacres of Chinese workers were commonplace." News reporters, on the other hand, wanted ACJ to call Kaufman a racist. Journalists discovered that Kaufman had been held in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. ACJ refused the bait.

Soon the smoking gun the community needed appeared. A private investigator hired by ACJ to uncover the facts leading to Vincent's death reported that Racine Colwell, a tough blond dancer at the Fancy Pants, overheard Ebens tell Chin, "It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work." At a time when bilious anti-Japanese remarks by politicians, public officials, and the next-door neighbors spewed forth regularly, Asian Americans knew exactly what Ebens meant. A nude dancer with nothing to gain from her testimony had produced the link to a racial motivation that the community was waiting for. ACJ attorneys and leaders realized it was enough to charge Ebens and Nitz with violating Vincent Chin's civil rights. It was time to talk about race.

The next meeting of the ACJ was held at Ford Motor Company World Headquarters, in Dearborn. David Hwang, who had worked at Ford as a research engineer for thirty-six years, secured the use of the company cafeteria on a Sunday evening. More than two hundred people packed the cavernous room to hear updates on the legal efforts and to coordinate the grass-roots, volunteer work. A quick roll call identified Asian American employee groups from the top corporations of the Detroit area, from Burroughs and Detroit Diesel to General Motors and Volkswagen. The meeting's featured speaker from the U.S. Department of Justice explained the difficult process of getting the federal government to conduct a civil rights investigation. The FBI would need to show that there was a conspiracy to deprive Vincent Chin of his civil rights, he advised. The strong public outcry would also be a factor in its decision to investigate.

After the Department of Justice official left the meeting, a gray-haired engineer from General Motors raised his hand. In the clipped English of a native Cantonese speaker, he voiced the uneasiness of the crowd. "If we try to pursue a civil rights case," he asked, "is it necessary for us to talk about race?"

The simple question captured the race conundrum bedeviling Asian Americans. Should Asian Americans downplay race to stay in the "safe" shadows of the white establishment? Or should they step out of the shadows and cast their lot with the more vulnerable position of minorities seeking civil rights? Was there a third, Asian American way that would take sides with neither?

"We may alienate our supporters," argued an earnest-looking businessman, who voiced his fears that a stand on racism might affect an already fragile existence between black and white. "Could we win the NAACP but lose the FBI?" asked another.

Behind the discomfort of "talking about race" was the question of where Asian Americans fit in America, and, more important, where we wanted to be. Asian Americans had never been included in broad discussions on race, nor had we interjected ourselves. The questions were many. If race was such a volatile subject for whites and blacks, why should Asian Americans step in, to face potential wrath from one or the other, or both? Organizing over race might make us seem like troublemakers, as African Americans were often perceived, but we lacked the numerical strength and

political power of blacks; if we stepped out of the shadows to make waves, wouldn't we risk becoming targets again?

One by one, people discussed their uncertainties. Those of us who had been involved with Third World movements knew the political theories about race and racism, but making the argument to struggling restaurant workers or comfortable professionals was another matter. Even in 1983, fifteen years after the term "Asian American" first designated a pan-Asian identity, civil rights and their importance to Asian Americans were simply not familiar at the grass-roots level of the Asian ethnic communities. We tried to give direct, even practical answers: yes, a civil rights suit would involve race, and if we wanted to pursue a federal case, we would have to get comfortable educating people—including ourselves—about our experiences with race. But remaining silent would not protect us from the anti-Japanese racial hostility all around us and we could all become targets anyway, the way Vincent Chin had.

Suddenly people began talking about the anger and frustration that brought them to this meeting, why they were touched and outraged by what happened to Vincent Chin. "I've worked hard for my company for forty years," said a computer programmer, his voice shaking. "They always pass me over for promotion because I'm Chinese. I have trained many young white boys fresh out of college to be my boss. I never complain, but inside I'm burning. This time, with this killing, I must complain. What is the point of silence if our children can be killed and treated like this? I wish I'd stood up and complained a lot sooner in my life."

The outrage overcame the fear. "We want to win this case, and we want equal justice for all, including Asian Americans," David Hwang reminded the group. In the end, we reached a consensus: to fight for what we believed in, we would have to enter the arena of civil rights and racial politics. Welcome or not, Asian Americans would put ourselves into the white-black race paradigm.

ACJ began to publicize its findings of racial slurs and comments made by Vincent Chin's killers and to call for a civil rights investigation. The backlash that some had feared was immediate. Non-Asians, most particularly those in a position to make policy on civil rights and race matters, openly resisted claims by Asians of racial discrimination and prejudice. Angry white listeners called in to radio talk shows to complain:

"What does race have to do with this?" and "Don't white people have civil rights?"

White liberals were the most skeptical. When Wayne State University constitutional law professor Robert A. Sedler met with Liza Chan and other ACJ attorneys about the legal issues in a civil rights case, he told them to forget it. In his opinion, civil rights laws were enacted to protect African Americans, not Asians. Asian Americans cannot seek redress using federal civil rights law; besides, he said, Asians are considered white.

Sedler wasn't alone in this view. The American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan initially dismissed the outcry from Asian Americans as a law-and-order, "mandatory sentencing" movement. Later, as the community outrage continued, Howard Simon, its executive director, issued a report absolving Judge Kaufman of bias and blaming the prosecutors for failing to prepare the facts of the case for sentencing. The Michigan ACLU wasn't interested in the civil rights aspects of Chin's slaying.

Nor did the Detroit chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, which defined itself as part of the political left, find any connection between Vincent Chin's killing and racism. But the Guild's West Coast chapters, more familiar with Asian Americans' history with racial violence, mustered the votes to give the national endorsement to ACJ's efforts. A near mutiny broke out in the Detroit chapter, but the national body prevailed.

To build a broad coalition of support, ACJ decided to approach the United Auto Workers union, and not just for its powerful presence in Detroit. We felt that if we could change some of its members' anti-Japanese rhetoric, we might be able to prevent future attacks on Asian Americans—and possibly save lives. The UAW department of fair practices was across from Solidarity House, the international headquarters, so it was impossible to avoid the racially inflammatory signs and bumper stickers adorning the parking lot entrance. "300,000 Laid-Off Autoworkers Say Park Your Import in Tokyo" proclaimed one large sign; Volvos, VWs, Saabs, and other European imports apparently presented no problem. I recognized Joe Davis, the fair practices director, from my days as a Chrysler press operator, when he was president of a militant UAW local. Davis told us that the UAW condemned the attack on Vincent Chin. "But if he had been Japanese," noted Davis, an African American, "the attack would be understandable, and we wouldn't give you our support." I had a similar encounter with Doug Fraser, the former president of the UAW, at a

reception. I had just shown a city council member, Maryann Mahaffey, a supporter of ACJ, the photo of a poster at Auto World theme park in Flint, Michigan, that featured a buck-toothed, slant-eyed car dropping bombs on Detroit—an example of autoworkers' racial hostility. Mahaffey showed the photo to Fraser, who burst into gleeful laughter—until he saw me standing nearby. As a former UAW member, I was embarrassed and repulsed by the union's acquiescence in racism. I recalled the violent anti-Asian campaigns of Samuel Gompers and wondered when the chain would be broken.

In spite of the backlash, local, national, and international support for ACJ's efforts was growing daily. The legal twists and turns garnered steady local news coverage, and the mobilization of Detroit's Asian Americans was an interesting new phenomenon for reporters. The Vincent Chin case broke into national news by a strange twist of fate. I had rented a car while my American-made auto was in the shop; as I waited at the car rental agency, I stood in line behind a woman with a *New York Times* notebook and copies of the two Detroit daily newspapers, each open to a story about the Chin case. I happened to be carrying several ACJ press packets and asked her if she wanted more information. She turned out to be Judith Cummins, a *New York Times* reporter in town visiting relatives. She wrote a story about the killing and the controversy, even though the local bureau chief had shrugged us off. Perhaps Cummins recognized the story's importance because she was African American and the bureau chief missed it because he was white; in any case, the *New York Times* coverage brought other national media interest, including national network news, TV news magazine specials, and an appearance on the Phil Donahue show.

It was the first time that an Asian American-initiated issue was considered significant national news. Ethnic media from the Asian American community, as well as foreign-language news media from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, followed the case closely—sending to Asia images of Asian Americans raising political Cain over issues of race, racism, and racial unity. As the news of the case spread, groups from all over the country and the world contacted ACJ to extend their support. We developed an international following. Several Chinese Canadian groups offered assistance, as did the North American representative of Taiwan; ACJ politely declined Taiwan's help, deciding not to accept money from foreign governments. Families of other hate crimes victims reached out

from afar; a representative for the family of Steven Harvey, an African American musician who was killed by whites in Kansas City, came to an ACJ meeting. Asian Americans and African Americans pledged mutual support.

ACJ was pursuing a three-pronged legal effort. It called on Judge Kaufman, who finally heard arguments by Liza, to set aside his own sentence, since it was based on incomplete information. ACJ filed briefs with the Michigan Court of Appeals to overturn Kaufman's sentence. The third approach was the civil rights case. Kin Yee and Lily Chin went to Washington, D.C., to meet with William Bradford Reynolds, President Ronald Reagan's civil rights chief, about a federal civil rights investigation. As the local and state actions turned sour, the FBI began to take an interest in the case. To capture the mounting frustration of the community, the ACJ decided to hold a citywide demonstration at Kennedy Square in downtown Detroit, the site of many historic protests. We had held a number of noisy picket lines in front of City Hall, but there had never before been a protest in Detroit organized by the broad Asian American community. This would possibly be the first in the country outside the larger Asian American centers of New York City and the West Coast.

The "demonstration committee" was headed by David Chock, Michael Lee, and Man Feng Chang, all senior scientists from the General Motors Tech Center. They enlisted the help of other engineers, and joked that this would be the most precisely planned demonstration in history. The outpouring of support was unprecedented. Waving American flags and placards that demanded equal justice, hundreds of professionals and housewives marched alongside waiters and cooks from Chinese restaurants across the region. The restaurant owners shut their doors during the busy weekday lunch rush to allow employees and their own families to participate in the demonstration. Children and seniors, hunched and wizened, walked or rode in wheelchairs. Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos marched in pan-Asian unity. Support statements were made by the city's major African American and religious organizations, local politicians, and even the UAW. At the rally's emotional end, Mrs. Chin appealed to the nation. Through her tears, she said haltingly, "I want justice for my son. Please help me so no other mother must do this." Finally, the demonstrators marched to the Federal Courthouse singing "We Shall Overcome,"

and hand-delivered to U.S. Attorney Leonard Gilman a petition with three thousand signatures seeking federal intervention.

ACJ used the demonstration to launch its call for a federal prosecution of the killers for violating Chin's civil right to be in a public place, even if that place was a sleazy nude bar. In his speech to the demonstrators, ACJ president Kin Yee read the group's carefully worded position on race: "Eye-witnesses have come forward to confirm something that we suspected all along: that Vincent Chin was brutally slain as a result of a racial incident. Ronald Ebens, a foreman at Chrysler, was so consumed with racial hatred toward Asian people that he started a fight, blaming Asians for the problems of the ailing auto industry. Even non-minority immigrant groups like the Irish and the Poles have faced violence from others who blamed them for their problems. This misguided view encourages attacks on Asian American people and it must be fought against by all who cherish justice and have respect for human dignity."

In direct yet subtle terms, ACJ showed the ways in which Asian Americans had been made scapegoats for the ills of the modern American economy, naming anti-Asian violence as a present-day phenomenon that should concern all people. This created a framework for Asian Americans to organize nationally, and was a first step toward placing Asian Americans in the center of domestic and international economic, political, and social policy contexts. Across the country, in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago—cities with far greater Asian American populations than Detroit's—pan-Asian coalitions were being built to support the campaign and to address anti-Asian violence in the local community. Fundraising efforts nationwide encompassed the entire spectrum of Chinese American society, from the National On Leong Association and local chapters, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, to overtly left-leaning groups like the Chinese Progressive Association and the Chinese Association for Human Rights in Taiwan. In between were civil rights groups like the Organization of Chinese Americans, Asian American Law Students Association, Chinese restaurants and business enterprises, and church groups. Dozens of chapters of the Japanese American Citizens League sent money, as did the Korean American Association of Illinois and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. The broad cross section showed that the Vincent Chin case was able to overcome the forces of tradition and fear of the

unknown, particularly in the arena of race politics. Asian Americans were finally joining together to correct perceived injustices.

Such unity was difficult to maintain. It was rare for the highly educated suburbanites who spoke the Northern Chinese Mandarin dialect to be aligned so closely with Cantonese-speaking Chinatown merchants and workers whose roots were in Southern China. In addition to differences in language, class, and kinship bonds, there was the political gap. Many business owners were Chiang Kai-shek loyalists and fervent anti-Communists, while the more left-wing groups openly supported Mao Tse-tung and the People's Republic of China.

Partly to avoid fractious conflict over "homeland" politics, the charter of the Organization of Chinese Americans, for example, expressly prohibited taking stands on international issues—a policy that is still in effect. ACJ's policy was to admit all who supported its goals, as long as they also maintained an open and tolerant policy toward others. Vincent Chin's story had struck such a raw nerve that Asian American groups were competing to be affiliated with ACJ. In San Francisco, with its rich profusion of Asian American groups, near warfare broke out among various factions. The first cracks appeared when the Chinatown business groups, a powerful constituency in San Francisco, withdrew their support of the case because leftist, pro-People's Republic groups were involved. They used their influence over several Chinese-language newspapers to criticize the fund-raising efforts.

Meanwhile, the leftists were at odds with one another. The Reverend Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign manager for Northern California, Eddie Wong, arranged for Jackson to stop in San Francisco's Chinatown to meet Mrs. Chin, who was attending local support events in California. Jackson became the first national political leader of any race to speak out against racial violence toward Asians. During Jackson's speech in front of a swarm of national reporters and TV cameras at Chinatown's historic Cameron House, where assistance had been provided to Chinese immigrants since 1874, the leaders of two rival leftist groups pinched and shoved each other, trying to elbow the other off the stage just beyond Jackson's view.

Despite the rumblings among the Chinese, ACJ continued to actively reach out to other Asian ethnicities. The second non-Chinese board member was Minoru Togasaki, a second-generation Japanese American. The

Chinese speakers on the board felt worried that they might insult Min by mispronouncing his polysyllabic name, difficult for Chinese speakers accustomed to single-syllable ones. A practice session was held, with a room full of Chinese Americans gingerly repeating the name "To-ga-sa-ki" until they got it right.

Detroit's growing Korean community was represented by two large groups: the Korean Society of Greater Detroit, and the Korean American Women's Association. The two groups had rarely worked together. The Korean women were the wives of non-Korean GIs and were often looked down upon by other Koreans—but their support for the Vincent Chin case brought them together. The Filipino and South Asian populations were larger than any of the others and had well-established connections with both Republican and Democratic parties. Their political savvy and access to politicians made it clear to other Asian American groups why they needed to get involved in politics, which many new immigrants tended to shun.

At ACJ's first fund-raiser dinner, a prominent local citizen appeared, the architect Minoru Yamasaki, designer of the World Trade Center towers in New York and other buildings of world renown. Yamasaki, then seventy-three years old, unexpectedly came to join the gathering as an ordinary citizen. Looking dignified but frail, he rose up slowly from his seat with the assistance of a companion. A hush fell over the banquet room as Yamasaki said in a strong, clear voice, "If Asian people in America don't learn to stand up for themselves, these injustices will never cease."

The civil rights investigations dragged on. In November 1983, a federal grand jury indicted Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz for violating Vincent Chin's right to enjoy a place of public accommodation; the trial would take place the following June. During this period, other racial attacks drew the attention of the Asian American community. In Lansing, Michigan, a Vietnamese American man and his European American wife were harassed and repeatedly shot at by white men shouting racial slurs. In Davis, California, a seventeen-year-old Vietnamese youth was stabbed to death in his high school by white students, while in New York a pregnant Chinese woman was decapitated when she was pushed in front of an oncoming subway car by a European American teacher who claimed to have a fear of Asians.

In other cities, Asian Americans followed the Detroit Asian American community's example and organized to track such incidents. In Boston, a pan-Asian group called Asians for Justice was formed after an escalating number of anti-Asian attacks against Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Cambodian Americans, as well as the stabbing death of a Vietnamese American man. As such new groups raised public awareness about the particular kind of racial hostility against Asians, they prompted more people to come forward to file hate crime reports. The growing list of cases underscored the existence of racism against Asian Americans.

ACJ expanded its civil rights work from anti-Asian hate crimes. It took on employment and discrimination referrals; successfully lobbied the governor to create a statewide Asian American advisory commission; campaigned against offensive media images, like the poster of the slant-eyed car displayed in Flint, Michigan, and a children's TV program whose host, Jim Harper, appeared in yellowface as a sinister Fu Manchu character with a phony Asian accent. To reach out to children and young people, ACJ members Pang Man and Marisa Chuang Ming sponsored a ten-kilometer Run for Justice, while Harold and Joyce Leon's three daughters, professional violinists and a pianist with the world's leading symphony orchestras, performed a special benefit concert for ACJ.

When the federal civil rights trial began on June 5, 1984, in the courtroom of Judge Anna Diggs Taylor, a dignified jurist who was one of the first African American women to serve on the federal bench, ACJ knew that the courtroom battle would be uphill. Many people had a hard time believing that Asian Americans experienced any kind of racial prejudice, let alone hate violence. What Asian Americans found to be racially offensive fighting words drew only shrugs from people who would otherwise never use racial epithets—at least not in public.

The words Racine Colwell, the stripper, heard—"It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work"—didn't contain a single racial slur. Asian Americans recognized that they were being singled out in that comment, but to others it was simply a true statement. Don Ball, the veteran *Detroit News* reporter covering the trial, wrote that such statements and the fact that Ebens and Nitz hunted for Vincent and his one Chinese buddy, while ignoring his white friends, were "flimsy evidence that Chin's slaying was racially motivated."

On June 28, the federal jury in Detroit disagreed, and found Ebens

guilty of violating Vincent Chin's civil rights; Nitz was acquitted. The jury foreperson explained to filmmakers Christine Choy and Renee Tajima in their documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* that Racine Colwell's testimony was the clincher—in Detroit, it was clear that "you motherfuckers" meant the Japanese, or people who looked like them. Ebens was sentenced to twenty-five years by Judge Taylor.

But the case won a retrial on appeal in 1986 because of pretrial publicity and evidentiary errors associated with audiotapes made of witnesses when ACJ was first investigating the case. It was a cruel irony that the very interviews that convinced Detroit's Asian American community and the U.S. Department of Justice of the killers' racial motivation would be used to grant Ebens's appeal. The new trial would be held in Cincinnati, where there was less chance that prospective jurors knew of the case.

Located across the Ohio River from Kentucky, Cincinnati is known as a conservative city with Southern sensibilities. Absent was the heightened racial consciousness of Detroit, with its black majority and civil rights history. If Asians were hard to find in Detroit, they were near-invisible in Cincinnati—but not completely invisible; on July 4, 1986, a gang of patriotic whites shot up the homes of Southeast Asian refugees in the city. When the jury selection process for the new trial began on April 20, 1987, potential jurors were interrogated on their familiarity with Asians. "Do you have any contact with Asians? What is the nature of your contact?" they were asked, as though they had been exposed to a deadly virus.

Their answers were even more revealing. Out of about 180 Cincinnati citizens in the jury pool, only 19 had ever had a "casual contact" with an Asian American, whether at work or the local Chinese takeout joint. A white woman who said she had Asian American friends was dismissed as though the friendship tainted her; also dismissed was a woman whose daughter had Asian friends, and a black man who had served in Korea.

The jury that was eventually seated looked remarkably like the defendant, Ronald Ebens—mostly white, male, and blue-collar. This time the jury foreperson was a fifty-something machinist who was laid off after thirty years at his company. This time the defense attorneys tried to argue that ACJ and the Asian American community had paid attorney Liza Chan to trump up a civil rights case; that argument was objected to by the prosecutors and overruled by the judge.

It was a terrible disappointment, but not a surprise, when the jury of this second civil rights trial reached its not-guilty verdict on May 1, 1987, nearly five years after Vincent Chin was killed. This jury, composed of people with so little contact with Asian Americans and knowledge of our concerns, couldn't see how "It's because of you motherfuckers" might contain a racial connotation.

Mrs. Chin was distraught. "Vincent's soul will never rest. My life is over," she said. She cried every day for Vincent, when she awoke in the morning and when she lay down at night. Soon after, she moved to New York, then San Francisco, to stay with relatives. Detroit had too many hard memories. Once the legal proceedings were over, Mrs. Chin, disheartened by the failure of the courts to bring her son's killers to justice, moved to her birthplace in Guangdong Province, China, after spending fifty of her seventy years in the United States.

In a civil suit against Ebens and Nitz for the loss of Vincent's life, a settlement judgment of \$1.5 million was levied in September 1987 against Ebens, who later told documentary filmmaker Christine Choy that Mrs. Chin would never see the money. He stopped making payments toward the judgment in 1989. At no point did Ebens ever publicly express remorse for taking Chin's life; he never spent a full day in jail. He and his wife, Juanita, moved several times, leaving a trail in Missouri and Nevada en route to whereabouts unknown.

ACJ, however, vowed to continue in its mission of equal justice for all. After the Cincinnati trial, its president, Kim Bridges, a Korean American, announced that ACJ was founding a Midwest Asian American Center for Justice.

Losing the legal effort in its first national campaign of this magnitude after five years of intensive organizing did not devastate the Asian American community; instead, it had been transformed.

The legacy of the Vincent Chin case has lived on, in mainstream America as well as the Asian American community. The documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* is a staple on college campuses, retelling the story to generations of students. Musicians from balladeer Charlie Chin to jazz artist Jon Jang have created songs and musical arrangements about the struggle for justice in the Vincent Chin case. The Contemporary American Theater Festival of Shepherdstown, West Virginia, near Washington, D.C., commissioned playwright Cherylene Lee to write the play *Carry the Tiger*

to the Mountain; West Virginia Governor Cecil H. Underwood used the issues raised by the play to launch a statewide dialogue on race, modeled after President Clinton's Race Initiative. Consuelo Echeverria, a Latina sculptor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, welded a life-size installation from forged steel auto parts, portraying the baseball bat slaying, called *Because They Thought He Was*.

Los Angeles attorney and activist Stewart Kwoh, a MacArthur Fellowship "genius" award winner, attributes to the Vincent Chin case his inspiration for establishing the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, which conducts an annual audit of anti-Asian hate crimes. New generations of Asian American activists, such as Victor M. Hwang, a civil rights attorney with the Asian Law Caucus in San Francisco, cite the influence of the Vincent Chin case on their desire to make a difference as Asian Americans.

Numerous scholars have studied the Vincent Chin case and its impact on the Asian American community. As Yen Le Espiritu, professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California at San Diego, wrote in her book *Asian American Panethnicity*:

Considered the archetype of anti-Asian violence, the Chin killing has "taken on mythic proportions" in the Asian American community (W. Wong 1989a). As a result of the Chin case, Asian Americans today are much more willing to speak out on the issue of anti-Asianism; they are also much better organized than they were at the time of Chin's death. Besides combating anti-Asian violence, these pan-Asian organizations provide a social setting for building pan-Asian unity.

After a century of seeking acceptance by distancing from one another, Asian Americans were coming together to assert their right to be American.