

An Asian Heritage Month unlike any other, as communities resist racism - with love

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Body

May 07--Asian American groups across the country intended to spend Heritage Month celebrating landmark achievements in culture, arts, and labor, including the 151st anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, built by Chinese migrant toil.

Instead, they find themselves navigating a threatening new world where Asians have become targets of violence and harassment, the resentment stoked by the Trump administration's claim, presented without evidence, that the coronavirus originated in a Chinese lab.

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How are people responding?

Here's one way: with love.

On "Food of Love Day" on Sunday, Chinese American communities and restaurants in all 50 states will provide free food for their fellow citizens, delivering hot meals to homeless shelters and offering supplies to food banks.

"Let's honor the memory of our forefathers and combat hate with love!" the Washington-based organizer, United Chinese Americans, said in an announcement.

Restaurants and groups in the Philadelphia region are pitching in, despite the economic devastation wreaked on businesses in Chinatown, where dining establishments have closed and workers have been laid off.

"We told people, everyone is struggling, but if you can, please donate to someone who is worse off than you," said Steven Zhu, president of the Chinese Restaurant Association in Philadelphia.

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This is an Asian Pacific American Heritage Month unlike any other. Usually, the city's Franklin Square park would be illuminated with festival lights, and the Phillies would be preparing to honor Asian contributions during a special night at Citizens Bank Park.

Instead, on Monday the Anti-Defamation League cited "surging reports of xenophobic and racist incidents targeting members of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community," ranging from racial slurs to physical assaults, to spitting, to taunts of "Go back to China!"

"To the system, we are all various shades of Chinese," said Nancy Nguyen, director of the South Philadelphia-based advocacy group VietLead. "Trump and his administration are trying to divert attention, and move the target from their backs to ours."

Nearly 1,500 incidents of anti-Asian harassment, discrimination, and assault have been reported nationally since March, according to Stop AAPI Hate, an information-gathering project.

With DACA down to the wire, immigrant health-care workers fight the pandemic as possible deportation looms Polls show three in 10 Americans blame China or Chinese people for the coronavirus.

According to an April poll by the Center for Public Integrity and Ipsos, a global market research firm, 44% fault a specific group or organization for the virus -- rather than viewing the pandemic as a natural disaster -- and of those, 66% blame China, Chinese people, the Chinese government, or a lab in China.

How to change those views? How to teach someone not to hate?

"This is a question people are really grappling with," said Alix Webb, executive director of Asian Americans United in Philadelphia.

Part of the solution must be education. Another part is youth-to-youth discussions. And, she said, it's important that elected leaders speak out on what's right and fair.

In Philadelphia, where Asians make up nearly 8% of the population, City Council members have condemned xenophobic rhetoric, Councilwoman Helen Gym plans to introduce a formal resolution, and Mayor Jim Kenney has warned that hateful acts "will not be tolerated."

Since the pandemic began, the local Chinese American United Association, chaired by Jason Lam, has raised \$117,000 from communities across Pennsylvania -- using it to buy and donate protective masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer to hospitals, churches, senior centers, and police.

"We hope our action, our love [will encourage] more people coming out to support each other and help the people who need help," Lam said.

That follows donations of more than 27,000 protective masks by the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation in March.

United Chinese Americans specifically set Food of Love Day for May 10, which marks the 151st anniversary of the completion of the cross-country railroad. On that day in 1869, the presidents of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads met in Utah to drive a ceremonial last spike.

An 8-year-old girl in U.S. legally to fight cancer might see her mom deported Written out of history until recently were the Chinese migrants, as many as 10,000 to 12,000 on any given day, who for years performed grueling, dangerous work in snow and desert to build the railway. Hundreds died.

Today, Asian American organizations say they'll continue to aid pandemic relief.

"The Chinese community, we are here, we love the city, we need to help everyone who needed help," Zhu said. "We encourage people to donate, to bring the love from your heart."

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