

## 20 IN THEIR TWENTIES; DEBBIE LIU

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### Body

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DEBBIE LIU 29, Community engagement associate, Metropolitan Planning Council

Debbie Liu spent more than two years on a premed track at the University of Illinois before deciding she'd rather check the pulse of communities than individuals.

"You can treat a patient for diabetes, but diabetes is still going to exist," says Liu, who eventually earned a degree in health policy and a master's in public health. "So how are we building an environment that supports healthy behavior rather than having unhealthy behavior and correcting it in the long term?"

She took that preventive health mindset to her native Chinatown to battle what she diagnoses as an imminent threat to the neighborhood's well-being: gentrification that could price out and displace many of its longtime residents.

Watching neighborhoods like Logan Square and Pilsen fight similar issues as downtown Chicago has gotten wealthier, the daughter of Chinese immigrants has emerged as one of Chinatown's most vocal and influential leaders fighting for residents to dictate the community's future. She spent most of the past four years with the Coalition for a Better Chinese-American Community helping Chinatown residents register to vote, organizing town halls and advocating on their behalf to political leaders as upscale development converges on one of the city's most ethnically authentic neighborhoods.

The Walter Payton College Prep grad last year parlayed that into a gig with the Metropolitan Planning Council, where she's spearheading a charge to head off similar displacement threats in other parts of town. She co-created a pilot program last year in East Garfield Park to form a guide with development priorities for the community as determined by its residents.

"She realizes the power of advocacy and civic engagement," says Ernie Wong, a Chicago architect and Chinatown Chamber of Commerce board member. "She's been nothing but honest and true, and she's gained credibility in the community for that."

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Liu has political advocacy in her blood-her mother was involved in Chinese Tiananmen Square demonstrations in the late 1980s before immigrating to the United States. But nurture helped shape her passion for representing Chinatown: One of her earliest memories is bigoted residents from neighboring communities lobbing both derogatory slurs and rocks at her family as the local Chinese American population grew in the mid-1990s.

"I know there's a better alternative," she says. "And if we're not fighting for it, we're just going to be replicating things for my future kids' generation."

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