# Helen Zia: 'We didn't learn enough'

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## Body

Helen Zia is one of USA TODAY's Women of the Century. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, we've assembled a list of 100 women who've made a substantial impact on our country or our lives over the past 100 years. Read about them all at usatoday.com/WomenoftheCentury.

Helen Zia is concerned. She's seen this before.

In 1982, racism and hatred toward Asian Americans led to the death of Vincent Chin. He was a Chinese American man in Detroit killed by two autoworkers who thought he was Japanese, whom they blamed for the industry's struggles. His killers paid a $3,000 fine each and went free.

"When that happened, the whole city was up in arms," Zia said. "Everybody who had a feeling of human dignity and justice said, 'What do you mean? You can beat somebody to death with a baseball bat and then get off scot-free, not a full day in jail, and just pay a fine?'"

Zia was a Chinese American journalist who became the spokesperson for the Justice for Vincent Chin campaign, which brought different Asian American communities together to fight for civil rights and equality.

Zia's parents met in New York after both had fled the Communist takeover of China. She grew up in New Jersey where her family - clearly - was not welcome. "It was the 1950s, and it was a time when the House Un-American Activities Committee was going on. People who came from countries like China that politically had gone communist were highly suspect," she said.

"I felt like not just an alien, but an alien from Mars. Whenever we walked into a diner or a store, everybody in that place would look and stare. People told me I didn't belong here. 'Go back where you came from' was something I heard on a regular basis."

Zia graduated a member of Princeton University's first coed class. She had a stint in medical school, worked construction and then moved to Detroit to become an autoworker and community organizer. She went on to become a noted author and journalist, and remains a leading advocate for Asian American and LGBTQ rights.

She says that today, with Asian Americans being harassed or worse over COVID-19, she's reminded of those dark days.

# Helen Zia: 'We didn't learn enough'

Question: Let's talk about what's going on with COVID and the parallels to McCarthyism and Vincent Chin.

Helen Zia: Unfortunately, there is a thread of history that is connecting the dots here. While we might have learned from things in the past, we didn't learn enough or some people have forgotten. Right now it seems that we have to relearn what happened with Vincent Chin. We have to relearn what happened at Selma.

People are not only miserable because they aren't sure about food and the rent or the mortgage, they're worried about their health. They may have lost loved ones. So people I think are even in more pain and suffering than the time that I remember in Detroit, or the time right after 9/11 with Islamophobia and anybody who looked Muslim was under attack.

We're in a pandemic of a virus and a pandemic of racism. Most of the people who have been reporting hate incidents - which range from people spitting or coughing on their children or throwing acid on them, beating up elderly people or stabbing a 2-year-old and a 6-year-old in Midland, Texas, at a Sam's Club - most of the people are not even of Chinese descent. It doesn't matter. It's just taking that anger and frustration out.

How did the Black civil rights movement change you?

Asians at that time were also redlined. There were neighborhoods and whole cities and towns that we were not welcome to move into. So when the civil rights movement was going on, it really spoke to me as an Asian American kid, hearing people talk about equality for all people, what racism and discrimination was like, seeing that on the news, as well as the war that was going on in Vietnam, because we looked like the enemy.

All of those things were part of my awareness. We had demonstrations in high school. We talked about racial equality. Those were moments where I had to think about how do I fit in to this society where, back then, race was only talked about as a matter of Black and white? It was trying to have to navigate, well, what does that mean for me as an Asian American?

What would you say is your proudest moment?

In my culture, we're not supposed to point to proudest anything, because there's always another thing that we can try to do. I do have to say that getting involved in the Vincent Chin case, when I was a struggling baby journalist and worried that I might lose my career, (was when) I finally thought, "Oh, I can do this. This is where my heart is." I chose to stand up and raise my hand and raise my voice.

There have been moments where I didn't say things, and I always felt like I should have said something. But the times that I did speak up and tried to do something, to the best of my ability, those I think were the things I could say I'm proud of.

How do you overcome adversity?

No life goes in a straight line. It's never all good. It's never all bad. Life goes on like society does, in a zigzag. History is like that, too. So, I try to remember we can always make a difference no matter how difficult things are. There's no such thing as small. What can I do? Big or small, it's all big. Because we can do things as individuals, but when we get together and do it with other people, it becomes big.

What's your definition of courage?

Courage is facing down the things that you are afraid of. Courage is saying, "What's the worst thing that could happen to me? Well, that's not so bad. I can face this. I can do the things that people tell me I shouldn't do, because there really are no shouldn'ts."

There are people that we can look up to who are icons, like John Lewis, who faced people who are clubbing him down and fracturing his skull, and only got up to do it again and again. That is true courage. We don't all have to do something as incredibly scary and life-threatening as that, but there are things we can do that are everyday brave

moments, that men, women, boys and girls, people do every day. We should recognize that bravery in ourselves, and know that once you take that step, you can take another step and another step.

If you were to be able to go back and talk to 11-year-old Helen, in that classroom of people who you said didn't really know what to think of you, what advice would you give her?

I would say, "Stand up, stand straight, be tall. Use your voice. Don't ever feel that you are less than or that you should ever be a shrinking violet. No matter what people say to you, no matter what they might try to make you feel, that you have your full humanity and you should stand tall."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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