

Coronavirus: Anti-Asian "Zoombombing" of Asheville Chef highlights troubling trends

Brian Gordon, Asheville Citizen Times Published 5:24 p.m. ET April 11, 2020 | Updated 8:36 a.m. ET April 12, 2020



J Chong, Asheville Chef (Photo: Courtesy of J Chong)

ASHEVILLE -- J Chong had her culinary lesson set. Pesto pasta, made from ingredients she discovered in her cupboards, would make for a flavorful, accessible meal, one her homebound audience could replicate through their computer screens.

The Asheville-based [Campaign for Southern Equality](https://southernequality.org/) had invited Chong to lead this free, virtual cooking tutorial for its The Front Porch series of community webinars. The 42-year-old Chong, who serves on the CSE board, had already posted a few meal demonstrations on her Instagram during the coronavirus outbreak. Doing another with CSE seemed like a perfect fit.

"To me, cooking is easy," said Chong, an executive sous chef with [Katie Button Restaurants](https://katiebuttonrestaurants.com/). "But when we're stuck at home and some are homeschooling and some have kids, cooking can be very stressful. I like to offer some help to the community."

Minutes before the lesson began on Zoom, a video conferencing platform, Chong received a brief warning from a CSE staff member: "There may be some people who interrupt the class." Chong didn't give the caution much concern. "It's not a biggie," she thought. "If it happens then we will work through it."

Held in the afternoon of March 27, the lesson started seamlessly. Chong's wife, Danielle, filmed and CSE staff monitored the Zoom video stream, handling any technical difficulties and booting out any unwelcome guests. Around 10 attendees signed on to watch Chong turn spinach, parmesan, parsley, dill, and some almonds into a thick pesto sauce.



J Chong leading a virtual cooking tutorial. (Photo: Courtesy of the Campaign for Southern Equality)

About half an hour into the lesson, after Chong tossed the sauce with cooked penne and was preparing to take audience questions, around a dozen new accounts flooded into the video stream.

Chong's first thought: "Cool, more people are joining."

Instead, the new entrants began spewing a string of slurs toward Chong. Both verbally and on Zoom's chat feature, the intruders got off a torrent of anti-Asian and homophobic epithets before CSE staff scrambled to block off all accounts. While the entire episode lasted around 20 seconds, those listening in said it seemed much longer.

"It felt like forever," said Al Murray, CSE's director of engagement and organizational development. "It was infuriating. J is an incredible human and just walks through the world with so much kindness. She is the last person I'd wish this upon."

Chong, for her part, remained stoic. "I am a queer Asian, and those words I've heard all my life," she said. "My wife told me I didn't flinch while it was happening."

While few words in a xenophobe's vocabulary can shake Chong, one line uttered during her cooking tutorial was new. Never before had she received the taunt: "The coronavirus is happening because of you."

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Anti-Asian hate in the time of COVID-19

The intrusion into J Chong's lesson represented two broad trends of the COVID-19 outbreak: disruptive video chat "bombings" and growing incidents — both nationally and locally — of discrimination against Asian-Americans.

Social distancing, working from home, and remote schooling have bolstered the prevalence of video conferencing services like Zoom. Yet greater use has been accompanied by an uptick in "Zoom bombings," as internet provocateurs around the world coordinate to barge into personal conversations to stir chaos.

At physical and online events, CSE staff said they're always on alert for any unwanted guests wishing to protest the organization's pro-LGBTQ messages. Still, the extent of this orchestrated interruption of Chong's lesson took the monitors by surprise.

"We didn't have any awareness of it," Murray said. "We have been hosting webinars with open attendance processes in the past and haven't seen anything like this happen."

Alongside "Zoom bombings" many anti-Asian incidents have been reported as some accuse China for the virus's evolution into a global pandemic.



"I think it's very, very important that people know this is happening to Asian Americans right now," J Chong said. (Photo: Courtesy of J Chong)

In late March, UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University released (<https://www.unc.edu/posts/2020/03/25/message-expressions-racism/>) statements (<https://today.duke.edu/2020/03/statement-president-price-covid-based-bias-incidents>) denouncing coronavirus-linked racism against Asians.

Ricky Leung of the advocacy group [North Carolina Asian Americans Together](https://ncaatogether.org/) (<https://ncaatogether.org/>) said his organization has heard from Asian North Carolinians fearing discrimination. "We've been getting inquiries about it pretty much since February," Leung said. "People are just kind of concerned."

North Carolina is home to one of the fastest growing Asian American populations in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, no other racial or ethnicity group in the state has grown as quickly since 2010. Asian Americans now make up 3.1% of North Carolina's total population with larger communities in Greensboro, Charlotte, and Raleigh.

In Asheville, Calvin Chu, a self-employed entrepreneur, said his Chinese-American ethnicity still makes him unique. "I stand out wherever it is that I go in Asheville," he said.

In an April 10 Facebook post, Chu described a recent trip to get his oil changed, revealing his thoughts that the cold, uneasy reactions he perceived from the staff may have had something to do with his ethnicity. "I

"I felt a little bit thrown off and frustrated," Chu said.

J Chong believes awareness can help diminish misinformation and fear. "I

"I think it's very, very important that people know this is happening to Asian Americans right now," said Chong, who is also of Chinese descent. "All the world is suffering right now. We're all going through this together. It's a global pandemic. It's just very unfortunate right now that Asian Americans are being targeted. So, it's very important we talk about it."

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Chong's second cooking tutorial

After the CSE monitors banished the “Zoombombers” Chong continued the lesson by fielding culinary questions. The returning audience, she said, was supportive and shocked.

Al Murray and other CSE staff regrouped over the following days and researched a more rigorous process to weed out intruders on future webinars. For future events, those wishing to attend must have a password, RSVP, and then be placed on a waiting list as CSE staff verify their identifies and intentions. While Murray said this system should prevent what happened to Chong from happening again, they acknowledge these added steps come at a cost. “

“We don’t like having those barriers with people and spaces that are intended to be safe and to help foster connection,” Murray said.



The Caesar salad side J Chong prepared during her April 10 virtual lesson. (Photo: Courtesy of J Chong)

Immediately following the pesto pasta lesson, CSE asked if Chong would teach another class in the Front Porch series. She didn’t hesitate in her response.

“I’m not one to allow stuff like this to stop me,” said Chong, who had detailed her “Zoombombing” experience on Instagram. “If they asked me to do more, I’ll continue doing more.”

On the afternoon of April 10, Chong guided a virtual audience of 12 through a Shrimp pasta recipe with a Caesar salad side. Murray and their fellow CSE staff watched for any unapproved accounts but none appeared. Chong said it was a perfect way to end the week.

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