

Vincent Chin's Story / Lily Chin: The Courage to Speak Out



Photo: Lily Chin speaks at a news conference in 1983 at historic Cameron House in San Francisco's Chinatown. Rev. Jesse Jackson took time from his presidential bid to show support for the national campaign to seek Justice for Vincent Chin. Pictured on stage, left to right: Henry Der, Edward Lee, Rev. Jackson, Lily Chin, Butch Wing, Helen Zia, Mabel Teng, Alan Yee.

Vincent Chin's Story / Lily Chin: The Courage to Speak

HELEN ZIA

On June 19, 1982, Vincent Jen Chin and a few close friends were out on a warm summer evening in Detroit, Michigan, to celebrate his upcoming wedding with an all-American bachelor party.

The early 1980s were a time of deep economic depression, when a massive oil crisis made it difficult for people to drive big Detroit-made gas guzzling automobiles. Instead, Americans were buying smaller and fuel-efficient Japanese cars — and hundreds of thousands of autoworkers in Detroit were unemployed, losing their jobs and their homes. Many business and political leaders pointed their fingers toward the Pacific and blamed Japan, inciting racial-hatred against anyone who looked Japanese, rather than taking responsibility for their own failed policies.

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– Helen Zia on Lily Chin

At the bar where Vincent and his friends went to celebrate, two Anglo autoworkers blamed the Chinese American for Detroit’s difficulties. They called Chin racial slurs. He fought back and they chased him through the streets of Detroit. When the night was over, the two Anglo men, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, beat Vincent Chin to death by swinging a baseball bat to his head several times. His 400 wedding guests went to his funeral instead.

Several months later, the two men were in criminal court, waiting to receive their punishment after they were found guilty of Vincent Chin’s slaying. The shocking sentence: probation and \$3,000 in fines for brutally beating another human being to death. The two Anglo men didn’t spend a single day in jail for their violent and deadly crime.

People everywhere were outraged that these killers got away with murder. Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans were especially angry that the court would allow a hate crime against an Asian person go unpunished. For many Chinese Americans, it was just like the frontier “justice” of the 1800s, when a white man could kill an Asian person with impunity.

Because of this injustice, many people in the Asian American community of southeastern Michigan organized a national civil rights movement to reach out to people all across America. Vincent Chin’s mother, Lily Chin, an immigrant from China who spent a lifetime of hard work in restaurants, laundries and factories, became the moral conscience of this national campaign. The goal was simple: that people of Asian descent in America should be treated as full human beings, with equal justice, fairness and dignity.

The campaign eventually forced the federal government to seek a civil rights trial against

the two killers — the first time the federal government ever pursued a civil rights claim on behalf of an Asian American person. Although Ebens, the one who swung the bat at Vincent’s head, was found guilty in federal court, his conviction was later overturned without either killer spending a day in jail.

Lily Chin was devastated and grief-stricken after the brutal killing of her only child. When she learned that Vincent’s killers would go free with only probation and fines, her heart broke again. Yet she found the strength to speak to thousands of people at community gatherings, rallies and demonstrations across the country, and even to appear on television. Often speaking through tears, Lily Chin would say, in halting English, that she didn’t want any other mother to lose their child as she did.

These and many other examples of Lily Chin’s bravery inspired Asian Americans of all ages and backgrounds to speak up against hate crimes in their own communities. Numerous Asian American groups all over the country organized for equal justice and against hate violence because of Lily Chin’s willingness to raise her voice. An Academy Award-nominated film called “*Who Killed Vincent Chin?*” documents her role in motivating the movement against anti-Asian violence and racism.

Sadly, Lily Chin died after a long illness in 2002, twenty years after her son was killed. She did not live to see justice done for her son, but she had the love and support of the many people whose lives were touched by her. Lily Chin’s sisters asked me to deliver the eulogy at her funeral. I did so with much sorrow in my heart — and with the conviction that Lily Chin’s spirit continues to live on, teaching all how one person who speaks truth to power can spark a movement to change the world.



Photo: Vincent Chin, credit: © Estate of Vincent Chin.

Eulogy for Mrs. Lily Chin

*June 15, 2002, William Sullivan Funeral Home,
Southfield, Michigan*

If Lily Chin were to sit up right now and look at us, I know that her eyes would get wide and they would flash that special, almost mischievous, spark that she had. She'd give us a smile as wide as this room and she'd say, "Waaahhh, look at so many people here today. Why you all come and see me?" She would say, "You make my heart very happy," and then she would try to feed us all, every one of us.

Mrs. Chin was like that — friendly, warm, generous, and funny. She was a person who loved people, especially children. She was always happy to have visitors and to hear the latest news in their lives. She was very close to her large extended family and she also loved to connect to the families of the people she met. She would never fail to ask, "How's your Mama?" Or, "How's the baby?"

You could count on Mrs. Chin to tell it like it is — if she hadn't seen you in a while, she might say, with a grin, "Eh, you look like 10 pounds heavier." Or, "Oh, you look so skinny. Better eat more." Or she'd say, laughing, "Those shoes — looks like a duck."

She was very observant and sharp; she knew what was going on around her. She read the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* — in English, of course. She also read the Chinese language newspapers. She was very up on current events. And she knew everything that was happening with her son Vincent's case.

That's how Mrs. Chin was, and I feel very blessed to have known her. Many people only saw Mrs. Chin through the media, in her terrible grief and sadness, over the tragic death and injustice of her beloved son Vincent. I also first got to know Mrs. Chin during that shocking time.

I met Mrs. Chin at a small meeting at the Golden Star Restaurant in Ferndale, where Vincent had

worked nights as a waiter. It was right after Judge Charles Kaufman let Vincent's killers off with probation and a fine for their brutal hate crime.

Mrs. Chin sat in the back of the room as people discussed the legal options. Everyone could hear her sobs throughout the meeting. But then, when it was unclear what direction the community might take, Mrs. Chin stood up and said in her firm voice, "We must tell the American people this is wrong."

In that moment, everyone could feel Mrs. Chin's courage and strength. Even in her deepest personal pain, she was able to stand up and press forward. It would have been far easier for Mrs. Chin to suffer privately than to bare her raw feelings over and over again. She relived the details of her son's terrible tragedy hundreds of times, telling the story to strangers, to reporters, to television cameras, and to Phil Donahue on national TV — each time reliving the pain, all in the pursuit of that elusive thing called justice.

The Pledge of Allegiance that Mrs. Chin took so long ago when she became an American citizen contained a promise: "with liberty and justice for all." Mrs. Chin knew very well what that meant and she wasn't fighting for her son alone. She declared from the very beginning that she hoped that no other mother would have to feel the pain that she did, losing a child to violence and bigotry.

Some people call Mrs. Chin the "Rosa Parks of Asian Americans" — and she was indeed. She stood up and refused to accept what was handed to her. Her courage rang through her grief, touching all who could hear. For me and hundreds and thousands of others, it was a call heard far and wide, uniting Asian Americans and people of conscience across this country.

Her dignity, strength, and bravery stood in sharp contrast to those who said that nothing could be done, that we had to accept another 'Chinaman's chance.' Mrs. Chin stood up to show millions of Americans that something could indeed be done.

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I'm sure Mrs. Chin never imagined that she would become the symbol of moral courage to a civil rights movement that would reach around the world. When she came to America in 1947 as the bride of David Bing Hing Chin, they didn't have much in material wealth. She told me stories about her life working in a small laundry with her husband in Highland Park in the 1950s. They laundered shirts for a few cents, and sometimes they were lucky if they cleared two dollars for the day. Later on, they worked in Chinese restaurants, and when her husband retired, she took a job at a factory on 11 Mile Road, where she assembled snow brushes and ice scrapers for cars.

She lived an honest life that resonated with so many other Americans. For an Asian American like me, Mrs. Chin's story struck a deep chord. Her family story could have been my story, could have been so many of our family stories — sure, different faces in different places — but it was the same struggle and the same spirit of building a life in America.

I never heard Mrs. Chin complain about her life. Not once. She wasn't a victim — she was a doer and a fighter in every way. When it came to fighting for the check at a restaurant, Mrs. Chin could get down and wrestle anyone to the ground — she was tougher than a cowpoke at rodeo. That's how Mrs. Chin was. She had a backbone of steel and a heart of gold — she was generous and giving. Now, that didn't mean she was a spendthrift, because she knew how to watch for the bargains. But she was always making gifts for other people. And could she ever knit! She could knit a vest or a sweater in a day or two — a scarf, in a blink! She was always making something to give to someone.

And then, there was food. Mrs. Chin was a wonderful cook who only used the freshest vegetables — she would even grind her own meat. In fact, she was always whipping up delicious meals for friends, families, and the lawyers and volunteers who would often stop by her house on Gardner Street in Oak Park.

Mrs. Chin was everyone's mother, grandmother, sister, auntie. She paid special attention to the small children of so many of the ACJ volunteers who were young parents back then. I think her favorite hobby was matchmaking — she was always trying to find matches for the single, unmarried people she met.

Mrs. Chin would try to show her thanks in any way she could to all of the many people who had fought for justice with her. I know Mrs. Chin would want me to say now, again and again, that she was especially grateful to people of all colors, religions, and backgrounds from all over America, and especially here in the Detroit area. She was very familiar with the groups that were there in the beginning, such as the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council, the Association of Chinese Americans, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the Detroit Chinese Church. Above all, the American Citizens for Justice held a special place in her heart. She was deeply appreciative to so many individuals and organizations that are too numerous to mention here.

By 1987, the legal cases were over and Mrs. Chin decided to move to China, it was just too sad for her to stay in America. It was a good move for her — her elderly mother was still living then, and in the last 15 years, Mrs. Chin was able to travel on tours to Europe, Australia, and in Asia. We wrote to each other and I thought I'd share a few lines from some letters she wrote to me:

1987 — *Dear Helen, how are you? I feel very well. I stopped in Hong Kong for 10 days in October went to Canton. My Mama is very happy to see me. I buy new furniture. The price is cheap. The weather is good.*

1989 — *Dear Helen, I have your letter. I am OK in Guangzhou. Canton is good. Don't worry about me, I can take care of myself. The weather is very hot. Two weeks ago I got a letter related to Vincent. Do you understand? Thank you.*

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Photos, left: Lily Chin at the podium with Rev. Jesse Jackson looking on. Right: One of many rallies across the U.S. calling for Justice for Vincent Chin. © Estate of Vincent Chin.

“Lily Chin’s story could have been my story, it could have been so many of our family stories — different faces and different places, but the same struggle and same spirit of building a life in America.”

— Helen Zia on Lily Chin

1994 — *The house in Canton had to be torn down. I moved to Hoi Ping. I got many cousins and the town looks great. I moved to a flat. The decoration is nice. I’m fine and healthy. Thanks to all and say hello to my friends.*

I was able to visit her in China. We went on walks through Hoi Ping (Mandarin: Kaiping) together, and she seemed to know everybody. People would stop her to say hello, and they’d exchange news and jokes. Mrs. Chin showed me the school she helped build with the little bit of money left from Vincent’s case. She also wanted to continue the scholarship in Vincent’s name that is administered through ACJ. I hope you’ll all donate to it and help spread the word.

Last year, Mrs. Chin came back to Michigan for medical treatment. She didn’t want people to know about her illness. She fought valiantly to stay as independent as she could, and she was able to do so with the love and care of her sister Amy Lee, her niece Jenny and nephew Lewis and their families, who all watched over Mrs. Chin around the clock during these difficult months. Mrs. Chin was also able to find some spiritual peace through church. She was baptized into the Farmington Hills Chinese Bible Church last Thanksgiving, and she found a lot of comfort from Reverend Tsang and her fellow parishioners. When she couldn’t take care of herself anymore, the good

people of the Farmington Hills Health Care Center came to her assistance.

If Lily Chin were to sit up right now and smile with that sparkle in her eyes, she’d say, “Waaahhh, look at so many people here today. Why you all come to see me?”

Mrs. Chin, we’re here to thank you for touching our lives with your courage, your strength, your dignity, your friendship and love. We came to let you know that you didn’t fight alone and that we will continue to work for justice for all. We came to give you our love and we are so glad that you are at peace now; that you are together with your husband and with your beloved son Vincent.

I know Mrs. Chin is saying to us now, “You make my heart very happy.”

Postscript:

In the years since Lily Chin’s death, I often think of her — especially her laughter, the way she got excited, eyes sparkling, when she was about to make a funny observation about something she had seen or heard. We had developed a close relationship over the years and long ago we decided that I should call her “Godmother.” She was indeed motherly to me and others around her, always looking after other people. Knowing this about her only deepened my sense of



Photo: Lily Chin, credit: © Estate of Vincent Chin.

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her loss with the murder of her only child as well as the loss of grandchildren she would never enjoy.

Mrs. Chin’s special caring qualities and honesty made her the kind of person whom others looked up to and were willing to follow — an inspiring leader with her courage, forthrightness, and integrity. She was so much more than a symbol of injustice and a mother’s grief, which were the images that the media had captured so movingly.

One of the saddest and most difficult things I’ve ever done was to tell Mrs. Chin that the civil rights case was over, lost. When she heard that there were no more legal avenues to pursue, she turned to me and asked, “Helen, is there anything else we can do?” I had to answer, “No, there’s nothing more with the civil rights case.” Then I watched as the pain and disappointment washed over her.

There is still unfinished business in the quest for justice for Vincent Chin. After the civil rights trial was over, there was one more court case, involving the monetary loss from taking Vincent Chin’s life. A civil judge assessed the killers with a sum of money liability that the killers would have to pay Lily Chin for the loss of her son.

Ronald Ebens told reporters that he would never pay Mrs. Chin as the court ordered. He soon left Michigan and moved to Henderson, Nevada, without telling the Michigan court his new location, making it possible for him to avoid paying his court-ordered obligation to Lily Chin. The convicted killer who never spent a day in jail for his vicious attack against an

Asian American has been living a comfortable life in Nevada. But Lily Chin’s estate has remained open so that Ebens will never be free of his obligation to pay for the injuries caused by his hate-motivated crime.

It is also disturbing to hear the occasional voices that claim anti-Asian racism had nothing to do with Vincent’s death. In addition, there have been many cases involving members of law enforcement, public officials and the media, who automatically deny that race or discrimination plays a factor when a hate crime against an Asian American occurs, even if they know little or nothing about Asian Americans. Such attitudes exist among too many people who are ignorant about the racism that Asian Americans encounter in American society. This ignorance must be overcome through education. But when authority figures with power and influence hold such views, their attitudes are harmful to Asian Americans and to the ideal of fair and equal treatment in a civil society.

For example, playwright Cherylene Lee wrote a moving play about the hate crime against Vincent Chin in her drama *Carry the Tiger to the Mountain*. It was first staged near Washington, D.C. — in a festival that had never shown an Asian American play before. For some reason, the festival organizers decided to invite Ebens’ attorney to write a comment in the program notes. His attorney wrote that Vincent Chin could have been killed by striking his head on the pavement, not from Ebens pounding his head with the baseball bat — and therefore no racism was involved. Even though this commentary contained



Photo: Vincent, credit: © Estate of Vincent Chin.

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many false statements that were contrary to the court testimony of several eyewitnesses, including two police officers, the festival organizers published it anyway. It was as though a play about the Holocaust included notes from a Holocaust denier, or a play about slavery included comments from someone who claims that lynchings never took place.

These comments in the play’s program became compounded when a theater critic wrote about the play in the *Washington Post*, an influential newspaper read by many political leaders and policy makers. The critic gave the play about Vincent Chin a negative review — because, he wrote, Ebens’ attorney said it was doubtful that race had anything to do with Vincent’s death.

Some people continue to believe and to perpetuate the harmful notion that Asian Americans are the “model minority” that does not encounter racism, discrimination or hate crimes. This widely held stereotype has caused much damage to Asian Americans, making it difficult to get attention for the needs of Asian American communities. The stereotype that Asians in America are not targets of racial violence

certainly played a significant role in Vincent Chin’s case and the fact that a judge and a jury allowed his killers to go free.

Lily Chin stood up to all of these doubters and proved them wrong. The courage and willingness of this Chinese immigrant mother to speak out, despite her grief, continues to inspire people to keep up the fight for justice, against hate and violence in all its forms. Because of her brave stand and the hard work of American Citizens for Justice and so many voices around the country, new generations of activists and advocacy organizations are still growing and evolving.

Lily Chin reminds us that there is still much to be done, and that there is a terrible price to pay if we don’t speak up. Lily Chin, a dear mother who immigrated from China and spent a lifetime working in restaurants, laundries and factories so that her son could have a better life, showed us what is possible — and what we are all capable of. Her shining example of standing up and speaking out, even when it is most difficult, is an inspiration for all people who value fairness, equality and justice in society.

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