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Black Lives Matter billboard sparks controversy, death threats in Houston's Vietnamese community

Brittany Britto | July 11, 2020 | Updated: July 12, 2020 7:55 a.m.



State Rep. Gene Wu, left, joins others Saturday in support of a Black Lives Matter billboard at 11107 Bellaire Blvd.

Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Dozens gathered Saturday to discuss why a “Black Lives Matter” billboard in a parking lot in southwest Houston caused such strife in the local Vietnamese community that death threats were made against the man who bought the sign.

Insurance company owner Lê Hoàng Nguyên, who is Vietnamese American, paid for a billboard that read “Black Lives Matter” and “Stop Racism” in English and Vietnamese.

Soon after the billboard went up, Nguyễn said in a July 8 [Facebook post](#) that he had received messages from people within the Vietnamese community calling for his lynching and to boycott his business.

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“You try to be strong but when your entire life, 50 years, that you worked so hard to build, to share, gets unfairly and unjustly judged, convicted and executed ... in the court of public opinion, it hurts,” said Nguyễn in the video, while donning a cap with an American flag.

Tran Quoc Anh, president of the Vietnamese Community of Houston and Vicinities, said Saturday that he planned a town-hall meeting to discuss the strife, but that it was canceled because the shopping center owner feared for his tenants in case of a protest. Tran said he still showed up to announce that the event was called off.

“We’re here together to help both sides educate each other — why they support it, why they are against it — and together, we can sit down in our community so we can be peaceful,” Tran said. “We don’t want it to blow up.”

Nguyễn, who was not present at Saturday’s event, declined to comment, but said in a [public statement](#) that his goal was to use the billboard to start important, but difficult conversations, to inspire future leaders, and to show support for ending all racism and injustice.

“It is not a political message. It does not support any particular organization. It supports the simple idea of the Black Lives Matter movement to stop racism and injustice for all,” he said. “It does not mean other lives do not matter. I believe every life matters. But, if we do not stand up for the lives of those most marginalized, how can we say that all lives matter?”

Different experiences

In his statement, Nguyễn also responded to arguments he received that Vietnamese Americans also face discrimination and that the U.S. is the land of opportunity and requires hard work to succeed. Nguyen agreed — noting his own experiences with racism as an immigrant and Vietnamese American — but stated that the discrimination has differed from the experiences of Black Americans.

“I did not grow up with people who ran when they saw me. I did not have to fear for my life anytime I saw the police. I was never told I am worthless by those with different skin colors,” Nguyễn said. “I know that my life would have been a lot harder to build if I did. Who am I to judge the enduring challenges that others

face?"

Around 30 community members, including State Reps. Gene Wu and Hubert Vo, both Democrats who represent the area, turned out to the billboard site Saturday.

Vo, who became the first Vietnamese American elected to the state Legislature, said he's faced discrimination his entire life as an Asian American and wanted to stand in solidarity with the Black community.

"I'm here to support our fellow minority community," Vo said. "We need to put a stop to this because we're in the 21st century. This shouldn't be happening anymore."

Wu said he was notified that an anti-Black protest would take place at the billboard site, causing him to call on people to counter the protest in a tweet on Friday night, before learning that it was canceled.

"As a representative of the Asian community and a local state representative, my stance is that bigotry or hatred of any kind in this city of diversity, immigration and tolerance simply will not stand," Wu said. "... The community in general was concerned that this was going to be a black eye for the Asian community, because the Asian American community has not had a great relationship ... with the African American community, and that is a shame."

Bang Nguyễn, 60, however, said he believes the billboard sends the wrong message to the community and implies that the Vietnamese community has issues with the Black community.

"We are not against Blacks or any race here," Bang Nguyễn. "Why is it that they decide to bring it here? It's more of a political thing than anything else. They give the Black community the wrong message that the Vietnamese community are racist or against Blacks, and that is not correct."

Anna Duc Tran, 72, agreed with Bang Nguyễn, feeling as though the billboard was a tool of division.

"We are here to gather everyone to pray for everyone to love each other, every race," said Anna Duc Tran through translator and freelance writer Nguyễn Lê. "We value all human lives. ... We must not discriminate against each other."

Though Anne Chao, the manager of the Houston Asian American Archive and adjunct lecturer in the humanities department at Rice University, considers racism human nature, she says that racial discrimination has undoubtedly been a part of

Asian culture — some of it stemming from ignorance, Asian society's praise for Houston did not come from a complicated history with other communities

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arriving in the U.S., especially when white residents felt that they were threatening their jobs. Many Asian American immigrants found ways to start their own businesses, including independent grocery stores in Houston's African American neighborhoods, such as Third and Fifth Wards and Sunnyside, where the rent was typically cheaper.

'Model minority' myth

Relationships between Black and Asian communities were mostly cordial through the 1950s, Chao said.

Asian grocers began to sell credit to African American customers and hired within the Black community for deliveries, Chao said, but in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, things began to change.

Bad experiences with looting, rioting and robberies during that time caused many Asian American business owners to leave certain neighborhoods, Chao said. Many held onto their experiences, causing some to think negatively of African Americans, Chao added.

Some would suspect customers to be thieves or wouldn't let African Americans touch products in their stores in fear them being stolen, she said.

Chao said activist Glenda Joe, who was half-Chinese and half-Irish, worked to help Asian American business owners in Houston to become more welcoming of all patrons and to combat negative stereotypes of Black people and colorist sentiments. Some of the tension subsided, but some of it endured.

The myth of the "model minority," a concept that praises Asian people for being hard-working and silent about their discontent while comparing them to other minorities, has also not helped relations between the Asian and Black communities, Wu added. This myth, Wu said, is a common form of racism against Asian Americans that restricts their ability to speak up about needed change and move forward, especially into leadership positions.

"The Asian American community needs to not only stand up against that, but they need to stand up for other communities. Because if Black lives don't matter, why would Asian lives matter?" Wu said.

Councilwoman Tiffany Thomas, of District F, who watched many of the

interactions from afar, said the attacks against Nguyen “shows what has been happening historically — the demonization and disregard of Black people.”

She added that a larger conversation needs to happen between members of the Asian American and Black community in Houston — especially in District F where the billboard is located.

According to [local government data](#), the area was 42 percent Hispanic, 24 percent Black, 18 percent Asian, 14 percent white, and 2 percent other in 2018.

Brandon Mack, 36, an organizer of Black Lives Matter’s Houston chapter, said people of different generations showing up in solidarity and in support of Black lives was an important step.

“It is about building and bridging communities together because collectively that is how we’re going to get to where we have racial equity and racial equality in our country, and it’s going to be through collaboration and people educating each other on why Black lives matter and the importance of stopping racism,” Mack said.

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