

OPINION//OUTLOOK

Opinion: Korean Americans are just like you. We are more alike than different

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Meiling Liu takes a photograph of her husband and daughter, Zhimin Huang and Charlotte Liu, respectively, at the "Stop Asian Hate Vigil & Rally" to mourn the six Asian American victims killed in Atlanta and denounce a rise in hate incidents and violence targeting Asian Americans Saturday, March 20, 2021, at Discovery Green in Houston.

Yi-Chin Lee, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Last Thanksgiving, I accidentally bumped into a woman while navigating the maze of people at H-E-B with their frozen turkeys.

“Go back to where you came from,” she sneered as she yanked her cart back.

I looked up at her, opening my mouth to say, “I’m sorry,” but then, I froze. I knew her.

“Can she even speak English?” the woman muttered as she pushed her cart away. I watched her neat blonde hair turn into an aisle, until I dropped my gaze to stare at the turkey buried in my cart. I blinked and smoothed out my list with trembling fingers. Ok, next. Sparkling apple cider.

She must not have recognized me behind my mask embroidered with yellow flowers. She did not treat me like the friend who worked with her on a charity fundraiser for a few months. The person who would spend hours brainstorming with her at a whiteboard over Starbucks coffee.

This memory gnaws at me, especially now in the wake of almost 4,000 acts of hate and violence against Asian-Americans over the past year. Did she respect me only when she knew that our kids went to the same school, that she would see me in carpool line or on the sports fields? Suddenly, when I wore my casual sweats and anonymity, did I, as an Asian, no longer count?

She judged me based on the fact that I look Asian. She did not see the person beyond her stereotypes. She did not acknowledge that I am a person like her.

That is the trouble with acts apparently motivated by stereotypes, hate or ignorance. They erase your personhood in the eyes of other people. And, presently, they create an underlying sense of anxiety among Asian American families, communities and allies that will continue to reverberate. The encounter in H-E-B still causes my fingers to tremble.

We can, however, overcome these divisions. While policy and legal approaches are important to combat racism, each of us can also easily break down walls in our own lives by reaching out to our neighbors.

For the Korean American community in Houston, one way we have worked to break down walls is through service. When our Houston community was in need, we made thousands of masks for underserved families, schools, hospitals and nursing homes across the area. As we work together with organizations across Houston and learn to value each other, we can begin to combat the scourge of racism and other forms of discrimination. When you give joyfully, people see and appreciate your service. They see your heart and they see who you are — a caring person. Together, we can get beyond our stereotypes and recognize each other's value.

We, Korean Americans, are just like you.

We love our families. We work hard so that our children can have every opportunity to succeed in our great nation. We care for our elderly because that is how we were raised.

We each have our own journeys to Houston. Mine started when my father brought us to Pennsylvania as part of a large wave of Koreans arrived in the United States after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. My father, along with many of his medical school classmates, immigrated in the early 1970s as United States opened its doors to foreign trained physicians, nurses and auto mechanics as there were a shortage of these professionals. Eventually, my husband and I moved our family to Houston where we have built our community and friendships.

Fortunately, my experience as a 9-year-old in a new town set the foundation for my American experience, not the incident at H-E-B. I arrived at a new school and a kind boy, Abraham, motioned for me to sit in the empty seat next to him. Throughout the year, he would make sure I had a seat at the lunch table. He did not look at me through the eyes of bias. He saw me as a fellow student who needed help navigating a new school and new group of friends. He showed me kindness and reached out to help.

I know everyone may not have experienced the same kindness I have, but I know it is possible. I know it is there in all of us. I know that kindness can help break down stereotypes and barriers. It just takes two people getting together — one person reaching out and another to open the door to sharing.

Know the person you are hurting. We are more alike than different.

Jhin is a volunteer and advocate for the Korean community.