



Ohio Asian American / Pacific Islander
LEGISLATIVE DAY

Take me to Columbus: An eye-opening journey to the Ohio's Statehouse

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by Charu Gupta

Most of the Chinese seniors, including 79-year-old Yu Yun Qing, had been up since dawn. The bus from Columbus had departed promptly at 7:30 a.m. from downtown Cleveland. Now was Yu's chance to catch up on sleep. The sun was crisp and bright and poured through the large windows of the chartered passenger bus. Yu dozed amidst a small collective of her elderly Chinese women friends. For the first hour, only a few voices rose above the din of the road, and those mostly of ASIA staff in back prepping for the big day.

It was June 8, 2010. The Cleveland bus alone had carried 50 passengers and was one of five from around the state that would converge on Columbus for Ohio's first-ever Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Legislative Day in the Main Atrium of the Statehouse.

The objectives for the day were simple: introduce new and old generations of AAPIs to the political process and their elected leaders and show them how to use their voice to affect change. But what exactly attendees like Yu would get out of the event remained unclear. Like Yu, many in the AAPI community didn't speak English; the day's events would all be in English with only a few interpreters scattered around the room. With little history, interest or knowledge so far of the political process, what would those like Yu do with whatever they learned?

As the bus drew closer to Columbus, Yu awoke as did her friends, all residents at Asian Evergreen Apartments, a senior housing development designed specially for Asians. Together they filled the bus with chatter and laughter in Chinese and answered questions through a translator. It quickly became apparent that this had been a chance for Yu and her friends to get out and do something new; a field trip. "I've never been there before," Yu said through the translator. "I want to look around, I want to see a government 'leader.' I'm not sure what I'll say to them because of language barriers. If they say hello to me, I will be happy."

Buses from Cleveland, Akron, Toledo, Findlay, Dayton, Cincinnati and Columbus pulled into the state capital just before 10:30 a.m. Almost 400 AAPIs, mostly older first-generation immigrants from India, Pakistan, China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Nepal, Japan, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, stepped out. They made their way inside the Statehouse and into the Main Atrium,

a majestic hall with pillars, vaulted ceilings, gaping windows and wall engravings. The stage was already set with banners and chairs for the day's speakers and panels.

Kitty Leung, a 25-year-old social worker, looked around the room. So far so good – the place was packed. As a staff member with ASIA, a social services agency for Ohio's Asian American communities based out of Cleveland and Akron, Kitty had been keenly involved in planning for the day. She reveled in the success of drawing out so many community members. "A lot of people here don't get outside their ethnic enclaves," Kitty said. "Lots of them don't know how government works. The readiness is just not there. It's going to be a slow process and very difficult to show them they can voice their opinion."

Asian Americans make up 2 percent of Ohio's population (and 5 percent nationwide). Their median income, at \$55,000, tends to be slightly higher than that of all households combined, which is \$45,000. Because many have high levels of education and job success, especially in the science and technology industries, pervasive and damaging stereotypes of the "model minority" and foreigner" abound.

This hides the fact that in Ohio alone, 13 percent of all AAPIs, including children, live below the poverty line. A large number of AAPIs remain without even a high school diploma. Many face language barriers, accent discrimination, lack of mainstream job opportunities and career advancement and access to health care services.

The model minority perception is debunked even faster when the AAPI community is held under a microscope. For example, while true that many Asian Americans are employed in high-paying white collar jobs, a great number are non-Pacific Islander. Pacific Islanders, however, are more likely found in low-wage, service-sector jobs.

Yu doesn't look her age. At 79, she walks fast and is immaculately dressed in a checkered black-and-white blazer and comfortable one-inch-high shoes. The years have given her a hunch but only a few of the requisite wrinkles. Her eyes and quick laugh suggest that, around other native Chinese speakers, Yu has a sharp wit. Her initial remarks suggest that she's easy going as well.

Yu came from China nine years ago to be near her daughter's family in Cleveland. She's been living in the Asian senior citizen apartment complex for almost a year. Networks there connect her to the larger Asian and Chinese communities and services she's eligible for. Yu smiled fondly when mentioning her young grand-daughter. When asked what problems she faces day-to-day, Yu shook her head, as if to say, "I'm good." She revealed more only when prodded further and more specifically: Did she have any health-related concerns?

Yu has no health insurance and no money to see a doctor. “I have no choice,” she said. She’s worried. She wants health insurance but cannot get any. She’s never worked in the US so doesn’t qualify for Medicare. What will she do if she falls sick? Go to the low-income discounted program at the county public hospital or the emergency room and see what happens.

It’s not a surprising tale. The “model minority” stereotype, one that puts forward Asian Americans as only English-speaking doctors and engineers with no need for help, hides predicaments like Yu’s, one of poverty, language barriers and lack of access to critical services. One goal of the Legislative Day was to plant the seed for change into the hearts and minds of those like Yu. “For certain groups of AAPIs,” said Kitty the social worker, “it’s trying to move them from a survival mode to political consciousness.”

The day’s events began just after 11 a.m. Dr. Yung-Chen Lu, a long-time advocate of AAPI issues and chair of the Legislative Day, gave the welcoming remarks.

“Today is an important turning point,” Dr. Lu said. “The ‘model minority’ perception keeps the mainstream medical establishment from addressing Hepatitis B in Asian American communities.” Chronic Viral Hepatitis B infects the liver and can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer. If gone undetected for too long, Hepatitis B is fatal. It is preventable through early diagnosis, vaccinations and treatment.

In the U.S. 1.3 million people have Hepatitis B. Fifty percent of them are Asian American – and four times more likely to die from the disease. Of Ohio’s 220,000-strong Asian American population, 10 percent unknowingly live with Hepatitis B. This is because AAPIs are often infected during birth or by sharing personal items like a toothbrush. Conventional medical wisdom, however, only tests for Hepatitis B when high-risk behavior, like unprotected sex or drug needle-sharing, is detected.

Dr. Lu helped establish the Ohio Asian American Coalition to help address these problems. “Today, we are here to learn and dialogue with each other,” he told the crowd at the Legislative Day. “We are here to take that back to our regions and begin identifying issues and concerns and organize around them.” The Coalition was formed in 2000 to address AAPI health issues and the main organizing arm of the Legislative Day.

As Dr. Lu spoke, Yu sat with her friends at the very back of the atrium, in front of long tables of bottled water and boxed lunches.

The next two presenters, both seasoned advocates and English speakers, told the crowd about the importance of political engagement. Those who understood listened intently. After the speakers,

there would be lunch and tours of the Statehouse. Yu's head and eyes drooped and she nodded off in wait.

Next up was Sen. Miller, a Democrat from Ohio's 15th District, Senate Minority Whip and Founder and Chairman of the Ohio Commission on Minority Health, tried to combat how some AAPIs cope with the model minority stereotype. "If you just 'blend in' then there's no value to the community," Miller said. He ended with: "Any time you need me, you know you can call me."

Similarly, Kiran Ahuja, the executive director of the White House Initiative on AAPIs, brought her years of fighting for civil rights and against racism to bear in her keynote address. "If we don't tell and share our stories, politicians and others won't know or care, they'll think all is OK in our communities," Ahuja said. If only Yu, now fast asleep, could have heard her. Ahuja continued. "I got some advice once: Act like you own the place, because you do. You're supposed to be here. So go in with that confidence."

A Georgia native, Ahuja also served as a civil rights attorney in the U.S. Department of Justice, where she filed the Department's first peer-to-peer student racial harassment lawsuit. Ahuja took the helm of the AAPI Initiative in December 2009, after President Barack Obama re-established it through Executive Order. The last time an executive order impacted Asian Americans was February 1942 and it justified the internment of Japanese Americans.

By 3 o'clock, all the speakers, panels and tours were over. Yu, her friends, Kitty and the remaining passengers gathered at the back of the atrium to board the bus back to Cleveland.

For Kitty, the Legislative Day was step one in a long mission yet to be accomplished and part of ASIA's ongoing expansion from outreach and service into advocacy and organizing. "This was an introductory trip for all the groups," Kitty said. "It will be important to have follow-up community meetings and town halls for feedback and questions; for ASIA to develop a shared agenda across the diverse populations. That's been a challenge but we can do so much more as a collective grassroots group."

Yu said she had been entranced by the Statehouse during the hour-long tour. It's really beautiful," she said about the building. "It was so touching to see it. I've never seen that kind of architecture before." It was also the first time Yu saw a map of Ohio and, when the guide pointed out Cleveland, her place in it. "I'm almost 80 years old already and I've never been here," she said. "I'm going to tell my grandchildren about my trip to Columbus."

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