

Try and Unite

By Hanna Kim

My name is Hanna Kim, and I had been a transfer student at Los Angeles City College. I wrote a grievance letter to LACC administrators because of an incident that occurred in my Asian American Studies class Monday night, 22 April 2002. The following addresses two different but related issues that concern Asian American Studies.

In August 2002, LACC administrators decided to cut many courses including the only Asian American class offered for fall 2002. Students who wish to earn an Associates degree in Asian American Studies find it difficult to fulfill the requirement when the college has not made Asian American Studies available to the community. Indeed, LACC has offered only four Asian American courses in the last decade.

With a campus population that is twenty percent Asian American, LACC needs to offer Asian American Studies courses that serve the needs of its larger Asian Pacific Islander student body. In addition, LACC needs to hire full-time faculty members that are qualified to teach Asian American Studies courses on a consistent basis. A campus that offers an Associate degree in Asian American Studies should ensure that students have an opportunity to attain that degree.

The students of the spring 2002 Asian American Studies 001 class had an unfortunate change of professors. The class felt it wrong to change professors in the middle of the

semester, signing a petition to communicate our displeasure with the change. Our original teacher, Wallace Wong, was dismissed because of a snafu on account of the administrators at LACC.

Professor Henry Ealy replaced Mr. Wong because he had a Master's degree in African-American Studies, not Asian American Studies. Because Mr. Ealy had a Master's degree in Ethnic Studies, he was technically qualified to teach the Asian American course.

The incident that occurred 22 April 2002 illustrates Mr. Ealy's cultural insensitivity. He began to lecture about World War II. When he pointed out the fact that Japanese Americans were interned by the United States government excluding German and Italian-Americans, he asked the class what, if any, were the physiological differences between Asians and the population at large. I began to respond with observations that stereotype Asians as having dark hair, lighter skin tone, and brown eyes. Immediately, Mr. Ealy pointed his index finger at me and said in front of approximately thirty students that "I would make a perfect Nazi." That word Nazi conjures up images of heinous crimes against humanity led by the most calculated, racist, megalomaniac dictator the world had ever seen. It was wrong for a professor and especially the chairperson of the American Cultural Studies to say that a student is essentially a Nazi.

Moreover, Mr. Ealy has no place to accuse an individual without so much as any degree of foresight or decorum, as a Nazi. I had never held a conversation with him prior to his entry into the Asian American Studies class. After the class was dismissed, I informed

my fellow classmates that I was not a Nazi, and I am here to learn and contribute to the class dialogue. I had been a member of Amnesty International for over three years.

While I was a student at Tulane University, I created pamphlets and posters that addressed global violations of human rights. On a weekly basis, I helped serve food for the hungry in New Orleans, and I volunteered as a project coordinator for two historic houses in the French Quarter. At LACC, I mentored Belmont high school juniors and seniors in order to facilitate their understanding of the dynamic learning curve that occurs in both academic and personal relations in college. What Mr. Ealy accused me of amounts to an intolerable, personal attack that echoes the scapegoat lies told to the German people by Hitler. I was in a state of shock, disbelief, and was utterly offended. I made a conscious decision to not let injustice idly run its course. Rather, I voiced my understanding of the social and political issues pertinent to fostering greater relations among different cultures.

Over the course of the next months, I filed a grievance petition with the Ombudsperson at LACC. I appealed up to LACC President Mary Spangler, who denied my request for an official hearing on the basis of academic freedom that professors have in their classes. Additionally, it was around this time that I learned that the only Asian American Studies course offered for fall 2002 had been cancelled. As chair, Mr. Ealy had the power to choose classes for the course schedule, and he cancelled that course while offering multiple African American and Chicano Studies courses. Disappointed, I contacted Warren Furutani, the President of the Board of Trustees for Los Angeles Community College System, and met with him September 2002. He apologized for Mr. Ealy's

behavior and assured us that he would help in any way he could. Mr. Furutani has been an advocate for Asian American Studies for many years. He spoke with Mary Spangler, Mr. Ealy, and Mr. Wong, and after getting hundreds of signatures from LACC with a small group of dedicated students, we were able to bring an Asian American course back to LACC. Students were able to enroll for Asian American Studies 001 Spring 2003. With the help of advocates, we were able to bring awareness to this issue regarding foremost the lack of education offered to the API community. My personal experience showed me that we could make a difference if we try and unite. I appreciated the letters sent by Professor Susie Ling, Professor Glenn Omatsu, Assemblywoman Judy Chu, and David Chung, director of Asian Pacific Coalition at the time at UCLA. Also, I utilized the resources at UCLA through Meg Thornton and Sefa Aina, who gave advice and contact information on proceeding with our campaign. We responded to racism, asserted our rights, and united with others to promote equality and justice.

In many ways, the intersection of my life with history is both a terrible and magnificent lesson because I gained a new perspective personally and socially. No longer was I concerned for the sake of learning. I wanted to inform and help people through active participation in college life and in my future career as a social worker. As in all things, I try to gain something positive from a negative situation, and I was able to do so with the help of dedicated students, faculty, advocates and community support. It is terrible because being called a derogatory term is disorienting and painful. I had to look inside myself to know and understand that I was not so. Socially, I became part of a process that permeated institutional racism. Professors and administrators have the freedom to do

as they see fit with limited voices given to students. It comes as no surprise that we are able to physically see where the administrators place their priority. Their offices are new, and they have comfortable chairs for themselves and their secretaries, while students have sat on rickety chairs that are thirty-years-old. But I digress. I learned step-by-step about becoming an advocate. Before this incident, I was gleefully going through classes and earning good grades in the hope of getting into UCLA. Afterwards, I had a newfound passion not only to learn about Asian American history but to apply that knowledge to help our communities. In a small way, I hope I have done so.

Coming to UCLA, I have been given the opportunity and privilege to learn about issues that deeply impact our communities. The knowledge that we gain from Asian American Studies encourages me to get involved in creating positive social change for all Asian and Asian Pacific Islander Americans. This is one of the primary reasons I chose to take this class, Asian American Social Movements 116. Above all, I greatly appreciate the support of community members and students without whose help we could not have advanced our cause. I hope to give back to the community that has given me so much. Professor Glenn Omatsu is an inspirational individual who has guided many toward greater dreams and goals. I plan on participating in and out of class because I see learning as an adventure. I do see life as an active agent in our communities.