

Learning from the Residents of Boston Chinatown

By Katie Li

“Haaah??? *Tai dai sang ah!!*” yelled an elderly Chinese woman wearing a set of earphones with the volume obviously turned up too loud. I rushed over to her, adjusted her walkman-looking machine, gave apologetic looks to the speakers at the front of the crowded room and finally sat down to view the rest of the presentation myself.

I was surrounded by a roomful of mainly elderly Chinese, each wearing a headset that whispered the Cantonese translation of what the official-looking, suit-wearing presenters were saying while they aimed their laser pointers at their flashy PowerPoint animations. The speakers were property developers and Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) land-use planning government officials, proposing to build a 30-story luxury apartment building adjacent to an already thriving and crowded residential area. “Kensington,” they proclaimed, “will clean up the blight and add class to the neighborhood.”

Familiar with the ever-changing land developments surrounding their home, this was not the first time that Boston Chinatown residents faced major developers seeking profit at the expense of their community. Just the year before, they had passionately fought and ultimately lost to another developer that now has the rights to build a high-rise luxury apartment opposite to the proposed Kensington Place.

Yet their hopes still remained high before the meeting as I marched in circles with them around the entrance of the meeting hall with a picket sign that read “BRA: Bad

Redevelopment Authority,” while chanting “BRA, Go Away, We Don’t Want Your PDA!” (PDA stands for Planned Development Area, a designation of the area that would give the developers the right to build a high-rise building there.) Now, the residents present at the community meeting (with a few exceptions of nodding heads) attentively looked on as the developers presented slide after slide of what Kensington would look like if built. They waited patiently for the question and answer period in order to publicly support or oppose the development.

I became involved with this community after taking a summer internship position with the Chinese Progressive Association in Boston. I had originally wanted to apply for an internship in Washington, but was convinced that I needed to know what and who exactly I would be advocating for. I never dreamed that being associated with the Chinese Progressive Association, namely, the newly formed Chinatown Resident Association would drastically alter my views on the role of government.

During the community meeting with the developers and the BRA, I had planned to listen quietly to residents, community activists and leaders express their opinions about Kensington Place. My co-workers had encouraged me to speak in opposition to the development, but I declined — after all, at that point, I had only been working for the non-profit organization for less than a month. However, as the meeting progressed, the testimonies of so many residents opposing the development moved me. I walked up to the front of the room and signed my name on the list of speakers.

As I shakily walked up to the front of the room with a few notes jotted down on scrap piece of paper, I could see that the officials at the front of the room badly wanted to leave. The meeting had already gone on for hours and the developers did not want to deal with this issue anymore and go home. But wasn't that the point? The developers could go home and not deal with the issue anymore — it was a part of their job. But the residents in the room either walked past or lived next to construction sites all over their community. As I took the microphone in my hand, I looked directly at the developers and spoke.

“I have attended private Catholic schools all of my life. I was born and have lived in the suburbs all my life, surrounded by middle class white families. I now go to a prestigious college. Thus, my experiences are very different from the mainly working-class immigrant Chinese families that live in Boston Chinatown. In fact, the environment in which I live probably matches with your lifestyle more than with anyone else in this room. So I suppose I have no right to come to the front of the room and oppose this development, since I don't actually live here. In fact, I had originally no intention of speaking today, heck, I had originally had no intention of working with the Asian American community. I had entered college thinking I'd be going to medical school directly afterwards. But something about the struggle gave meaning and passion to my life. I know that working with communities doesn't always lead to the intended result. In other words, no matter how much we protest or picket or oppose this development, no matter how moving the testimonies of residents today are at this very meeting, if the government and developers want this development to happen, it will happen.

But let me give you my opinion, one that is more objective I hope, since I do not live here, and since, technically, it is only my job. I had mentioned earlier that I had attended private schools all my life. Like any traditional curriculum, we had classes in government and social studies, which consisted of memorizing definitions and the branches of government. Up until taking this internship this summer, I have always been taught that government does justice for the people, helps the poor and welcomes the immigrants. Let me tell you right now, that almost as soon as I walked into my community internship, my previous vision of government was shattered.

This development that you propose is not an isolated development. Boston Chinatown has been continually exploited over the years. During Urban Renewal in the 1960s, Boston claimed a large residential area in the name of eminent domain and proceeded to build a highway on the space. Then in the 1970s, the official zoning of the Adult Entertainment Zone next to remaining residential space has led to continual problems of violence and crime in the community. In the 1980s, institutional expansion of medical facilities took another large chunk of the remaining Chinatown area. Now, developers want to buy land and build high rises that contradict the Boston Chinatown Master Plan, all in the guise of trying to get rid of the Combat Zone that was zoned there by the government in the first place.

Until I learned about these atrocities done to the Chinatown community, I believed that government protected its most vulnerable citizens. I have gradually and inevitably come

to the realization that the citizen's interest is not considered at all. Every time I hear the phrase "BRA," I am disgusted at how a government sanctioned group can have so much power and do so much bad to the community. I've come to learn that politicians do not plan areas in a city with the citizens' needs in mind; instead, they use land planning as political tools to bribe and appease people with money and power. How very ridiculous — the concept that our government and rich developers will only listen to us if we picket and scream under their noses. I'm asking you today to base your actions on what government is here to: to protect the community and not profit. Don't build this high-rise tower in our neighborhood — and yes, I say *our* neighborhood because I recognize that my job is not isolated from my life. I feel a deep connection with this community, and even if we don't win today, we will continue to voice our dissent. This is not the end of our battle. As personal request, I'm asking you today, to restore my faith in government."

The incident at the community meeting made me realize the history of the community that I was working with. I no longer was going into an impoverished community, giving them my expertise; instead, I was learning from the many residents who spoke out against a big developer, held picket signs outside a meeting, and truly believed that their voice would be heard. My experience this summer has allowed me to redefine my concept of "leader." A leader is not all knowing; instead, a leader grows with her community, struggles beside them, and realizes decisions and directions together. Just as my cheering for them empowered them to stand up in front of a crowd and voice their opposition, their support has empowered me to stand up and speak out as well.