

Strengthening Our Community Through Crisis

In March 2021, six women of Asian descent were killed during a series of shootings at Atlanta area spas. Even though Atlanta is more than 500 miles away from Richmond, Virginia, the pain and agony of that tragic event was felt by the 18 member communities of the Asian American Society of Central Virginia (AASoCV) and it still lingers on today, amidst a dramatic increase in Asian hate crimes nationwide.

The AASoCV, a non-profit charitable 501(c)(3) organization, was established in 1998 to promote unity, harmony, and diversity in Central Virginia. Its mission is to “advance integration of Asian Americans into the local community, while maintaining ethnic traditions, culture, and identity” as well as “nurture a non-partisan atmosphere of cooperation and unity among diverse groups.”

Asians tend to be reserved, yet this shooting sparked a change in our organization’s mission. It motivated us to speak up against violence and racism. We asked ourselves, how can we make sure our voices are heard while empowering our community and the next generation?

AASoCV responded by organizing several events throughout the region, from

a candlelight prayer vigil in Chesterfield, to a rally in Short Pump Park, followed by a march for peace and unity. At each of these events, speakers shared personal experiences of racism and bigotry, community leaders shared their anger and frustration, while political figures expressed hope for the future of our country. The crowd held signs and banners that read “Stop Asian Hate!” The march, vigil, and media coverage brought us out of our shell, and we evolved into a more outward facing organization.

Previously, most people may have known AASoCV for its annual Asian American Celebration, our signature event showcasing the beautiful cultures of the Asian American communities through arts, food, and exhibits. For us, this celebration helps us to keep our cultures alive even though we no longer live in our respective homelands. In addition, we want to encourage younger generations that attend to understand the cultures of their ancestors as well as share our cultures with all Virginians.

After the rallies and marches that we organized, AASoCV has solidified its voice to clearly condemn violence and hate against all Asian-Americans. We saw an opportunity for our community to voice

its concerns and needs to the law enforcement officials. We arranged meetings with the police chiefs and attorneys from Henrico and Chesterfield counties as well as the City of Richmond. Moreover, we stand in solidarity with other community groups and organizations against all forms of racism and xenophobia.

As the attention from the tragic events fade away, AASoCV continues work that empowers its communities by incorporating health, safety, and education initiatives along with its cultural programing. We dedicate our efforts to those six women whose lives were shortened on that tragic day in Atlanta. We will never forget them: Soon Chung Park, Yong Ae Yue, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng.

As an Asian woman, these events also impacted me personally. I am originally from Singapore and speak English, Italian, and Mandarin. I also speak various Chinese dialects including Teochew, my mother tongue, as well as Cantonese and Hokkien. My husband, Franco, is originally from Italy. We moved to Richmond, Virginia from Sydney, Australia in 1985 when Franco received a job offer here.

When we arrived, some Richmonders laughed at our accents. Richmond was a small, Southern city and quite isolated. But since then, Virginia has become much more multicultural and even international. You can read Franco’s story on page 82 as he describes how we experienced the cultural evolution of our city and state.

I believe that the USA was, and is, a “melting pot.” Perhaps that is because I like food. And who doesn’t? After settling into Richmond, I worked as a consultant to numerous restaurants, including the very first Chinese buffet in the area. That concept has gone on to become incredibly popular. At first, I served as a multilingual translator and cultural advisor. My business evolved from helping Chinese restaurants to working with other ethnic restaurants as well as American restaurants. When we arrived, there were no Vietnamese, Thai, Filipino, Korean, or Pakistani restaurants. And there was only one Indian restaurant. Today, we can find dozens of these types of restaurants all over the Richmond area.

If there is one thing that I have learned over the years, it is that there is nothing that brings people together more than sitting down and sharing a meal.

And speaking of sharing a meal together, that is exactly how this book began. Franco met with the author, Joe Kutchera, after he had completed publishing the original versions of these stories on RVAStrong.org/ portraits. Franco felt moved by the portraits and suggested that AASoCV sponsor a book to bring these stories into print to document the lives of Virginia’s Asian American and multicultural immigrants, as a testament to their tenacity and belief in our democracy.

We are very pleased that Joe has updated and expanded many of the immigrant stories featured here in this book. Most significantly, he and Alfonso Pérez Acosta created a new portrait for our book of a recent refugee from Afghanistan, a prominent journalist and entrepreneur. Khushnood Nabizada arrived in Virginia with his wife and three children in late 2021, following the Taliban takeover of his country. Subsequently, we have welcomed Khushnood and the Afghan community into AASoCV and provided financial aid for housing Afghan evacuees through Commonwealth Catholic Charities. In addition, the author proceeds from this book will also go towards supporting Afghan and Asian refugees.

I would like to thank our executive committee, vice chairman, Andrew Armada, and our board of trustees, past and present, for believing in this book project. Their tireless efforts and dedication have made our organization what it is today: a symbol of the Asian-American community’s strength and pride. Many thanks to AASoCV member Pim Bhut for connecting us with her daughter, Tida Tep, to design this book. And I am most grateful to Joe Kutchera, Alfonso Pérez Acosta, and Tida Tep for working together to make it all happen.

I know that you will enjoy the many interesting stories and have a better understanding of the journey of each immigrant. We hope you share this book with your family and friends, young and old. We hope this book finds its way into classrooms to enlighten students about the rich, multicultural fabric of our community.

Humbly,
JULIE MEI LI LAGHI
*Chair of the Asian American
Society of Central Virginia*
AASoCV.org
May 2022

Stories of Gratitude, Progress, and Manifesting Dreams

During the fall of 2020, following the George Floyd protests along Richmond's Monument Avenue, I saw an African American woman wearing a t-shirt with this message in bold letters.

I am my ancestors' wildest dreams.

As a (white) writer, I was stunned at how one sentence could leave me speechless and make me feel such a wide range of emotions. At first, I felt infinitesimally small, humbled by the brutal African American history behind that sentence, reflecting the violence and intimidation that Black Americans experienced during slavery and Jim Crow, which kept them from America's prosperity. And seconds later, the sentence made me feel incredibly hopeful as it communicated that great progress and change is indeed possible, measured through a multi-generational lens, taking into account the sacrifice and suffering of previous generations. The formerly wild dream of freedom and opportunity is now, we hope, finally possible for African Americans today, though we still have a long way to go to ensure equitable outcomes for all Americans.

Many Americans may know Richmond, Virginia (RVA) for its history as the capital of the Confederacy with its Civil War Museum and the now-removed statues of Robert E. Lee and Confederate generals along Monument Avenue. The ugly history

of slavery and the myth of the 'Lost Cause' permeate so much of the city, but a more complex and hopeful picture of its citizens is emerging.

In decades past, a majority of RVA's residents have been Black, with Whites representing most of the remainder of its population. Yet, a more multicultural, and even international population, is growing out of RVA's Black and White history. The 2020 Census shows that RVA's African American population fell below 50%, while its White population increased as a result of gentrification. Blacks appear to have left Richmond City for the suburbs (Henrico and Chesterfield Counties), where the Black population increased. Yet, the Asian and Hispanic/Latino population grew by double digits in Richmond City, Henrico, and Chesterfield Counties, and the people who selected "some other race" and "two or more races" grew by triple digits. This reflects an increase in children of interracial couples, immigrants from Africa (distinct from African Americans), as well as 'mestizos,' or people of mixed races, from Latin America. However small those populations might be now, the growth rates indicate that RVA, like the rest of the country, is becoming much more diverse.

With this in mind, I am grateful to be working with the Asian American Society of Central Virginia in sponsoring the publication of this book. AASoCV represents

18 diverse Asian communities that have stood up against racism and xenophobia, as described by AASoCV's chair, Julie Laghi, in the foreword. AASoCV provides a perfect example of how people from vastly different language groups can come together to build community and cultural bridges, thereby promoting tolerance and diversity.

AASoCV has enabled me and the team involved behind this book to take this project to the next level, furthering our mission to share immigrant stories and reflect on how they embody the American dream. Tida Tep, the daughter of Pim Bhut, featured on page 70, joins us to visually bring these stories into the printed medium.

Our project initially began in an organic way. In August 2020, around the time that I saw the "I am my ancestors' wildest dream" t-shirt, I received a call from Karla Almendarez-Ramos, who manages the City of Richmond's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Engagement (OIRE). She asked me if I would be interested in and available to write profiles of immigrants as a celebration for National Immigrants' Day on October 28, 2020. Richmond-based Colombian artist, teacher, and muralist, Alfonso Pérez Acosta, had pitched the idea to Karla after crafting his initial computer-drawn portraits.

I immediately told her yes, that I would love to work on the project. I have written about and reflected on the subject of

immigrants' journeys previously, both interviewing recent immigrants and researching my own ancestors immigrating from Eastern Europe to the United States. My wife, Lulu, migrated from Mexico to join me in Richmond in 2013. And previously, I had migrated to Mexico and the Czech Republic for work during different chapters of my life. As a result, I also understand the immense challenges that immigrants face when moving to a new country.

National Immigrants' Day has been celebrated since 1986, but mostly in places like New York City. We wanted to bring this celebration to Richmond, Virginia to highlight the diversity of its community and the variety of languages spoken (in addition to English). With the support of a grant from Virginia Humanities, we unveiled the portraits on October 28, National Immigrants Day, on RVAStrong.org/portraits and published updates regularly through Thanksgiving to honor our subjects' themes of gratitude. The exhibit's social media campaign ran through December 18, which the United Nations has named International Migrants Day as a testament to humanity's "will to overcome adversity and live a better life."

Many of the people we featured came as migrants initially, moving to the U.S. temporarily for work or educational opportunities. While others came as refugees, fleeing war and violence. And still others came here simply because they fell in love with an

American! Yet, they all became immigrants when they decided to settle down permanently in the United States.

Each portrait features the subject's name, country of origin, and language, written in both English and their respective language. To create the color behind each portrait, Alfonso combined all the colors from each subject's flag of their home country to formulate that single, albeit blended color. For example, the red and white in the Swiss flag become pink behind Dominik Meier's portrait (on page 62). I wrote personal histories to accompany each portrait to shed light on the challenges of migration and displacement, as well as explore the commonalities of learning to speak English and integrating into American culture. Their stories showcase the incredible creativity and ingenuity of these immigrants in overcoming numerous obstacles in their journey, some of whom have gone on to start companies and obtain graduate degrees.

In speaking with everyone we featured in this book, they have taught me how Richmond is a far more diverse and dynamic city than I ever realized. They truly appreciate America's freedom, democracy, and the way that their neighbors have accepted them. As a result, I see Richmond and the United States through their eyes. In listening to their stories, I get the sense that they, too, have accomplished their

dreams, and in some cases, even their ancestors' wildest dreams.

"Virginia is for lovers...But we need to keep that slogan alive," says Mahmud Chowdhury, originally from Bangladesh (page 22), referring to the state motto of Virginia. "Let's continue to love each other, be our brother's keeper, and have each other's back," says Hannah Adesina, from Nigeria (page 58). Immigrants are here "to demonstrate the best of ourselves, manifest our hopes and dreams," says Brenda Aroche, from Guatemala (page 26). And Ping Chu from China (page 96) encourages us all in saying, "We need to build up a united country. This is the *United States*, right?"

The U.S. has an individualistic culture with an "I" oriented English language. Even though that is the case, the immigrants featured in this book have taught me that when we work together and support one another, WE can become our ancestors' wildest dreams.

When Chinese New Year celebrations took place on February 1, 2022, the same day that Black History Month began, I learned that 2022 was the year of the tiger. I realized that 2022 couldn't be a more perfect year for us to launch this book with a symbol of bravery, courage, and strength on our side.

JOE KUTCHERA

Portraits with Simplicity and Power

I started working on the Portraits of Immigrant Voices with the idea of drawing portraits that focused on each person's face, but also incorporated their name, country and most importantly, their original language, since the fundamental direction of the project was to talk about language diversity.

I first started sketching the drawings on my tablet with a digital pen and saved them in a digital format. This allowed me to play and explore different options in composition, color, and texture, especially with the first ones, always looking for portraits that presented themselves with simplicity and power, in both a refreshing and deeply engaging way. Most of the elements from the full series of portraits were defined in this phase: the background color, the silhouette colors, the concentration on (and emptiness around) a fragment of the face with the richest texture, the placement, color and fonts for the words, and the standard size for each image.

The decisions of color in the background and silhouettes were based on the flags of each participant's country of origin

in a way that reflected the original colors, but also allowed me to highlight the face texture, connecting it well with the rest of the portrait and making some slight variations or adjustments according to the overall palette of the project.

The sketching or scribbling of the faces was definitely my favorite part because, in that exercise of building a very detailed face, I go into a calm state of awareness where I try to connect with the person that I'm drawing as much as I can, allowing the portrait to reveal itself at the end. I make an effort to maintain the sensation of fragmentation or detachment from the whole body, so the viewer feels that the face is floating in the middle.

The names, countries, and languages were made with a freehand font to go along with the rest of the drawing, including colors and placements that could be very visible and clear on their own while staying connected and supportive of the image in general. The size was defined by a format that best served the sharing of the project on social media and digital platforms.

The second phase of the portraits was the translation of the digital versions into prints on paper, which took place in a very creative way that was only possible through an artist-in-residence grant at Studio Two Three. This was a really special time to learn about print-making, and with the guidance from the people at the studio, translate the digital elements of each portrait into an amazing limited series of multi-layered prints that included screen printing, old school letter printing, and hand drawn interventions on each portrait.

With the final prints, we were able to put up an exhibition of all of the portraits in the windows of Studio Two Three for the general public to enjoy, give one print to each participant as a way of honoring and thanking them for their participation, as well as put together another exhibition to be displayed permanently at the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Engagement (OIRE) in Richmond, Virginia.

ALFONSO PÉREZ ACOSTA



"I go into a calm state of awareness where I try to connect with the person that I'm drawing."