

Episode 43: AAPI at Cornell, Part IV
Released on May 28, 2021

[00:00:00.12] TORAL PATEL: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees.

[00:00:11.35] Welcome to the Inclusive Excellence podcast. May is Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month, a month that honors and celebrates Asian American and Pacific Islander identity, also known as AAPI. While there are many events that recognize this special month, it is important to acknowledge that this time feels different.

[00:00:33.06] The wave of anti-Asian violence and racism that has negatively impacted the community is something that cannot be dismissed. We continue our series called AAPI at Cornell, where you will hear the stories of Cornell staff members in their authentic voice celebrating their heritage and the joys of being Asian and Pacific Islander while also naming the very real concerns that they experience in this moment. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:01:00.86] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:01:02.48] TORAL PATEL: And you are listening to AAPI at Cornell. The final episode in this series is a continuation of our conversation with Caleb Yu, Hei Hei Depew, and Christina Liang. Thank you for joining us again on the last episode of this special series. To wrap up this conversation, I will talk a little bit about how each of you have been impacted by the recent events. And so let's kind of start more broadly with what it means to be Asian, whether it's here at Cornell or Ithaca or in the United States at this time.

[00:01:34.60] CHRISTINA LIANG: For me, I sit in, I think, a unique role at Cornell. I do student conduct work and so a lot of the students who come through our office, they're required to come. I kind of make that joke sometimes. We're not study abroad. People are not smiling and happy and excited to come into our office.

[00:01:54.97] And that's OK, but I think what that means for me, though, is I come into space with a tremendous amount of authority, and that can come through when I meet with students who are particularly emotional, whether it be anxious, defensive, whatever that emotion could be. And when I see Asian students come through our office, which I will say is few and far between, not to reinforce a lot of minority myths, but when that does happen, I think it's particularly meaningful and I feel like the connection is almost automatic because it gives them an opportunity for me to just say, how are you doing? There's a significant Asian population at Cornell, but I think when we look at the staff and faculty, the numbers are not proportionate, and that's meaningful, I think, for our students.

[00:02:41.14] Connected to our previous conversation about folks who are brought up in this world of being silent, kind of absorbing whatever comes at you, that mentality, that's reinforced when you are in a space at an institution where people don't look like you. The people who are supposed to provide the resources and support and education may

not look like you. And so it's been particularly meaningful for me to be invited into spaces like this to talk and to just let our students know that we are out there and we are here to listen. We are here to support in different types of ways.

[00:03:19.90] What it means for me to be Asian in Ithaca, that's a tough question because I have been here for a period of time and I still struggle to find community. I have kind of like a really small, little pot of really good friends that I'm so grateful for, but it feels difficult to find a sense of belonging here in the Ithaca area. And I think that's a multitude of reasons behind that, but I do think the diversity and the fact that there's a very transient community within Ithaca, that can make it really hard for people to kind of place their roots.

[00:03:58.21] And what it means for me to be Asian in the country right now, I've had a lot of emotions in the past couple of weeks and months as I navigate all the really terrible things that I hear in the background as well as in my face. I process it by going through the emotions as I want to. I'm at that point in my life and in my world where I just spend a lot of time being worried about my family. That's really the primary piece.

[00:04:30.49] I really appreciate a lot of my colleagues and my friends reaching out to me and sharing that gentle care that I did with my Black friends when we were seeing everything that was going on with systemic racism against the Black community. And ironically, I will say when people reached out to me to make sure I was OK, it didn't feel as good as I thought it would feel, and I think it's because that's just not how my mind is wired. It's like thank you, thank you, I appreciate you, but I'm spending all my energy and time worried about my family, worried about my grandparents who live in Brooklyn. And so it's a reminder for me that as we deal with these very important issues in America in terms of how we are treating marginalized community, whether it be by your race, your gender, or your sexuality, whatever it may be, it's not a one-size-fits-all approach.

[00:05:23.35] Any time something happens within a particular community, we do the same motions. We reach out, we say we're with them, we post a meme, we host a protest. It's not a checklist, it's different for every community.

[00:05:36.41] One of my friends who is still in the city went to check up on my grandparents, and that made me cry because I was like, that's what I needed. That's what I needed you to do. She didn't tell me anything, it was just my grandparents letting me know later on that that happened. And I was like, yeah, that's what I needed without you even reaching out to me. So that's how I feel in the moment, being Asian in this country.

[00:05:58.83] CALEB YU: I definitely relate to part of Christina's sharing, especially with that part what does it mean to be Asian in Ithaca. So my family's been moving to Ithaca for, gosh, almost three years now. Before this, I lived in Boston. My wife is from the Bay Area. And so both, the Bay Area and Boston, we have large groups of Asian American friends and we have a very strong community there.

[00:06:27.73] I remember the first year after we moved to Ithaca, we moved here in August and on the Thanksgiving dinner, a group of our Asian American friends drove down from Boston to visit us and spend the Thanksgiving with us, and it was the best time. And I remember sharing with them how this past three months has been, and I just started crying. And I was like, oh, I haven't found a community here. I feel alone here.

[00:06:53.25] Obviously later we started establishing our friend circle, and eventually we have our support circle, our community. And it doesn't necessarily look like what we had back in Boston or back in the Bay Area, but that made me really feel like OK, what does that mean to me? Not just the physical support, but the emotional connection and the emotional support, the cultural understanding and support.

[00:07:24.06] And what does it mean to be an Asian here at Cornell? I feel like given what was going on in the past couple years, especially with Asian populations and students, I feel like me being in the career services environment, talking to a lot of students, I feel like I'm very grateful. I'm given the platform to let them see that there's at least someone in career services that looks like me or has the same skin color that may be able to understand the root of my question or the kind of fundamental thing where I made my decision from.

[00:08:07.17] So I felt like that was something that I found to be really grateful for, which is to work in, to be honest, not the most diverse environment in career services, but be able to be the representation there, and maybe even to be a safe haven for some students who open their hearts to share this is what I'm struggling with. And I know that you know the root issue, so let me tell you more about this. So that's something I feel like I'm grateful for.

[00:08:39.63] HEI HEI DEPEW: So much of what Caleb and Christina have said really resonated with me. I feel like that representation is so important. Building community is so important. I've been at Cornell, I don't know, six, seven years now, and when I first got here, I mean, it's very difficult to find people of color if I'm being completely honest. It's rather homogeneous here.

[00:09:00.57] When you look at the staff population, the percentage of Asian people is not 6%, which is the national average. It's not 20%, which is the percentage of Asian students at Cornell. It's really rather small. So to find somebody that looks like you within this community has been difficult.

[00:09:17.83] For me it's been important being here to really recognize where I'm from. And so that means for me posting Chinese New Year parties. It means teaching people how to make dumplings and showing people how I maybe steam bao or something. So to bring people together to share part of who I am has been really important.

[00:09:37.68] But whenever I meet somebody who I can identify with, I try to reach out. I reached out to Caleb through a recommendation from my friend Christine. I've reached out to Christina through Facebook. If there's ever an opportunity to connect with people,

I just welcome it so much because I think there's so much to learn from one another and there's so much support within this community that we can build for one another.

[00:10:00.18] What has really helped me is joining the Women of Color Colleague Network Group. I think that's just been this amazing network of women who are there to sort of lift all of us up. Whenever somebody gets promoted, whenever there's a new opportunity, there's always somebody to really support that and really just be a champion for you, and I think that's really wonderful.

[00:10:20.38] My hope is that as we continue having these conversations, we continue connecting people with these stories, with our experiences, and just kind of create a support system for one another. I think that would be really great.

[00:10:32.43] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and part of my experience is just slightly different in that I think my community found me, so I didn't have to go looking. And so about nine years ago, my family and I moved here from the Tampa Bay area in Florida. I think the biggest difference that I've noticed in the community-- so, where I grew up in India, it's a group of like, 26 or 27 villages. It's a very small group, subset of individuals. And so we have a very strong community across the United States here within our 26 villages.

[00:11:03.10] I think the biggest difference that I'm seeing in the community that I've found is that I've found myself traveling a lot further to stay with that community. And so we're in Tampa, I was like, oh, I wasn't going to drive more than half an hour. And I didn't have to because it's a large metropolitan area, I was able to find my whole group of people within a very short distance. Here in the central New York area, it's like, when I say my community, it's not just the Ithaca area, it's literally Binghamton, Syracuse, Rochester, and it also includes people in Buffalo and Albany. That's central New York and that's the whole area makes up the community.

[00:11:41.42] And so I find myself traveling a lot further to engage with the community that I have built. But I will be honest and say that when we first moved here-- we moved here for my husband's job, so this was before Cornell was even in the picture for me-- people reached out to us to say, hey, we heard you just moved here, come over for dinner.

[00:12:00.83] And so being part of that kind of community, of course I'm going to travel two hours to go to somebody's birthday party because they welcomed me when I needed it. So the biggest difference for me has been that I haven't had to find that community within Cornell itself because I have this huge one outside of the immediate organization. But I also did not move here to work at Cornell and so that adds to it.

[00:12:24.16] I will say, though, I don't live in the Ithaca area, I live in Cortland, which is about 30 minutes outside of Ithaca. And I probably have noticed things living in Cortland that I've never ever paid attention to being in Tampa. The biggest thing I've noticed is sometimes I am the only one, whether it's Asian or a person of color in certain areas. And it's not something that I've had to pay attention to in a really long time.

[00:12:50.45] And so I think Christina, you were mentioning earlier about being worried for your family. So when all of the things have been happening to the Asian community, I've had to tell my family that they couldn't do certain things. One of the examples is that my father-in-law, who lives with us, likes to go on long walks. Every single day, rain or shine, he's walked for like, 40 years every single day. And when I say long, it's anywhere between like, three to five miles.

[00:13:15.04] And I tell him that he can't go very far from the house where I can't see him because if he can't speak English, he can't communicate with anybody. And because of the environment that we live in where it's a predominantly white town, I've never had to have that conversation with him in Tampa. I was like OK, go, I'll see you in an hour, and that was fine. So I find myself having different types of conversations with family members and traveling much further to still stay intact with that community that I've found.

[00:13:45.79] So realizing what the Asian community is going through right now, how have each of you taken care of yourselves? What have you done for yourself?

[00:13:54.43] CHRISTINA LIANG: Sometimes it can be really difficult. Sometimes I feel like there's a barrage of information from different sources, from aunts and uncles, from social media. Just every day there's a new attack on an Asian person. And so I think sometimes you just have to take a step back from the news coverage and just think about things that are important to you.

[00:14:14.44] Maybe think about craft, think about cooking something, think about a book that you might want to read. I've been reading a lot of books by Asian American authors, and I think that's been pretty helpful. I think taking a step back from this barrage of information is good.

[00:14:31.27] CALEB YU: Yeah, totally agree. I feel like sometimes it will be too much at a point that I feel like, OK, whenever I open, let's say, Apple News or whatever news, 90%, 85% of the news are negative or bad news or sad news. So at a point, I just feel like OK, I don't need all these things to tell me what's going on and drag me down and my mental health or emotional well-being. So that's definitely one helpful thing that I've also done.

[00:15:04.27] Something else my wife and I have been really enjoying is to watch shows that are either talking about Asian people, families, or are produced by Asian people, or even just more diverse cultures. So we've been really enjoying that. And before that we were watching Black-ish that was talking about Black families and their cultural struggles in daily life and whatnot.

[00:15:32.23] Through some of these things, it also sparks some of the conversations between me and my wife to talk about, OK, what does this mean for two of us as a family? And then also be able to share some of the shows that we're watching with our friends and to tell them we really identify with all these things happening in the show so

hey, why don't you watch that? Most of those are comedies so it's light to watch but then also generates some conversations later on we could have.

[00:16:02.33] HEI HEI DEPEW: Taking care of yourself, self-care, has always been difficult for me, but I also kind of got sick of apologizing for not taking care of myself in some ways. Like it's just this recurring theme I either get from a supervisor or friends or family. You got to take care of yourself.

[00:16:21.90] Yeah, that seems reasonable, like a logical thing that we probably tell ourselves all the time. But for me, self-care is about also knowing that my people are OK. That makes me feel good. And so making sure that my family is OK, making sure that the people around me understand what's happening is in itself self-care for me, too.

[00:16:47.27] My husband teaches ASL in Ithaca at high school, and having conversations with him to make sure he's taking care of the Asian students at the high school is self-care for me, too, and so I think about it in that way. And I do think there's a survival mode that folks might enter when all this overwhelming stuff is erupting. And then when we finally have the moment of OK, I've taken care of business, I've talked to people, I've checked in with people, there is that moment OK, now I can actually just think about how I feel about it, and that's when maybe the ugly crying kicks in, that kind of stuff.

[00:17:25.23] And so for me, self-care looks different at different phases, I would say. And so right now, it really is about getting through day to day, minute by minute. And making sure I take time every day, especially now since the weather is nice, to step outside, as sad as that sounds, to get some fresh air and find some time for just me.

[00:17:46.01] CALEB YU: Something Christina said reminded me like, for me, or maybe for the Asian community, self-care, at least for me, is not a concept that's natural because our culture is such a communal culture. We were taught to take care of others or care for the elderly and whatnot. We were never taught you need to take care of yourself first or hey, you matter. We always talk about a family matters, others matter, community matters.

[00:18:16.28] And so whenever we talk about self-care, I feel like it takes, at least for me, a lot of effort to really think about what that means and what are some things I can do to care for myself.

[00:18:29.61] TORAL PATEL: Christina, what you said also resonated with me because I agree that I think my immediate reaction to self-care is making sure that everybody else is taken care of. And this comes in every component of my life, including the work that I do, so it's very hard for me to think about myself first. But I also think that I feel better when I'm in this mode of like, for lack of a better term, when I'm problem-solving for others. That makes me feel good. I have helped you and that in turn helps me. And so I hear you because I am very similar.

[00:19:02.01] And so with all the things that been happening within the Asian community, my first mode of reaction was to make sure that my family is taken care of. And to be honest, the way it shows up for me is that I start planning. I start making notes, I make to-do lists. And so I feel like I'm doing something and I am accomplishing something, and whatever I'm accomplishing is helping my family.

[00:19:22.23] So obviously one of the conversations I had to have was with my father-in-law, as I mentioned earlier, about the walks that he takes. And so for those of you that don't know, my husband is a manager of a hotel and we live at the hotel, and so now my father-in-law walks around the hotel. He doesn't venture very far from that.

[00:19:38.06] Another planning session that I had to put in was that my husband has done the night shift for the last two years at the hotel. And so it took me a lot of bugging and bugging and bugging and so we now have a lock on the door. And so the main door to the hotel locks at 11 o'clock at night and he has to actually physically push a button to let somebody into the building. And that has now allowed me to sleep at night, whereas before I wasn't.

[00:20:04.88] And it wasn't good for him because I had an alarm set every hour, every two hours. I'd just be calling him or log in because he gave me access to the cameras. I could just see to make sure he was OK. And I went through that for a while.

[00:20:17.82] And so I think we kept realizing I can't be waking up every two hours to make sure that you're OK downstairs by yourself. And so though it cost the hotel some money, we got a lock system in there. So I feel safe that knowing that he's safe, so I feel better.

[00:20:32.12] So just like I said, those kinds of planning things that I have to do for my family. That's how I take care of myself, by taking care of others. So I wholeheartedly hear you because I work the same way.

[00:20:43.04] CHRISTINA LIANG: It's also been really helpful to have conversations with my family. Sometimes it's good to hear about how they're doing and get out of this mindset of everything is terrible. And I think every day there's something horrible happening.

[00:20:57.32] To get some different perspective has been really helpful, and to have these spaces and these platforms for conversations with other people to get a sense of how everybody else is feeling has been really helpful. To hear different stories from different people, it's just all been a part of trying to reconcile what's happening for me. These conversations are part of it.

[00:21:18.53] TORAL PATEL: So I think we started talking about this towards the end of part one of our conversation, but how do we find inspiration to keep this conversation going and continue the momentum here? And so if we are having these types of

conversations, as we talked earlier, it's like how do we celebrate Asian Heritage Month beyond May? What do we do for the rest of the 11 months?

[00:21:38.17] CALEB YU: I think one thing works well for me when I approach other topics, which is to be really honest and be curious to ask questions. Don't pretend like oh, this is just what it is, or go on Google and read a news and then OK, that's what it is. Because oftentimes things are more complex than what we see.

[00:22:01.21] And so I feel like I can encourage other people if you have questions, I think we'll be happy to have a discussion. Ask us questions. We can share our experiences. And if we don't know the answer, that's another learning opportunity for us to engage in more conversations or read more things like that. So I feel like be honest and ask questions is a good way to continue this whole thing going.

[00:22:29.28] HEI HEI DEPEW: I've found a lot of inspiration based on just the abundance of resources that are out there now. I remember stumbling upon-- it's terrible, I forget the author. Somebody had translated a message about Black Lives Matter to all different languages, including Chinese. And I was like, that's really awesome because I was having trouble having that conversation with people in my family and my extended family.

[00:22:56.19] And those are complicated conversations. It can easily turn into this sense of challenging family and challenging their belief system, what they raised you upon. And so I thought that was a fantastic resource that I was able to use.

[00:23:10.69] And so it's a perfect blend, I think, of you doing your own work but then also sharing those resources. I remember sending that to a lot of people being like, this is really good stuff, I hope you use it. And so that's been inspiring because sometimes you just don't know where to start in some ways to address some of these things that are really meaningful to you and to keep conversations going. So I've been really inspired by the spaces that have been created, the resources that are available and that people are creating and sharing.

[00:23:41.31] TORAL PATEL: I would just add a message to our listeners that we as Asians also shouldn't be afraid to just share our stories even when we aren't asked to share stories. I don't necessarily want us to feel like we can only share if people ask us questions. If people are talking about holidays, I'm just going to jump right into that conversation. I'm going to tell you about my holidays. Or if people are talking about what family means, I'm just going to jump right in and talk about what family means to me.

[00:24:08.58] For example, I share with everybody. In my language and the culture that I grew up in, we don't have a word for cousins. Everybody is considered your brothers and your sisters. And so when people talk about cousins, I said for me, I don't even know what second cousin means or third cousin means because I don't even have a first cousin in my culture. So if people are talking, I just jump right in. So I think it's

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something that I want to encourage our listeners, to say don't be afraid to share your own stories and your viewpoints and your beliefs and information about your heritage.

[00:24:41.17] CHRISTINA LIANG: I agree. Around this time, around April-- well, it's May already. But around this time I usually celebrate Qingming Festival, which is a little bit of a strange holiday for people who've never heard of it. You go to the cemetery and you essentially have food there. You're sort of having a picnic at a cemetery. You burn things that represent gifts to your ancestors, offerings to your ancestors.

[00:25:04.41] And being in Ithaca for six years, every time I celebrate it I'll go back to the office and I'll tell everybody who will listen about what I did over the weekend. I went to the cemetery in Westchester and I lit some incense and I ate some roast pork right there in the cemetery with the rest of my family, and that's what I did over the weekend. And people have been really nice about it. And I think it's important to share this so that people can see OK, this is maybe different from the way that I celebrate my ancestors. There's something really honest and good about that.

[00:25:36.97] And maybe there's some correlation with your heritage. Maybe you celebrate Dia de Muertos, Day of the Dead, maybe you celebrate Memorial Day. There are some connections there to be had, and I think it's interesting to think about perhaps how you can identify with what we're trying to do here, which is to celebrate our ancestors and to find a way to connect to our heritage and keep traditions going. So I'm always a fan of celebrating and sharing the ways in which I honor my heritage and my background to being a Chinese American.

[00:26:08.34] TORAL PATEL: Christina, Hei Hei, Caleb, as we wrap up the series, I want to thank you for sharing your stories. What you shared was just so valuable and insightful. It gave me things to think about, and I'm sure it gave our listeners things to think about and reflect upon, so I want to thank each of you for joining me today.

[00:26:24.66] HEI HEI DEPEW: Thank you.

[00:26:24.93] CALEB YU: Thank you for having us.

[00:26:27.18] TORAL PATEL: That's it for this special series. We would like to thank each and every one of our guests for the vulnerability and for sharing their stories in honor of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:26:47.01] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to AAPI at Cornell.