

Vincent Chin Remembered 35 Years After His Death

By Roland Hwang

We in the Asian American civil rights movement remember Vincent Chin, the 27-year old Chinese American who was beaten to death with a baseball bat swung by Ronald Ebens while his stepson Michael Nitz held Chin in a bear hug on Woodward Avenue in Highland Park, Michigan in 1982. We still remember the words attributed to Ebens, “because of you mother f-----s we’re out of work”, “nip”, and “chink”. We remember the 3-year probation and \$3,000 fine meted out by Wayne Circuit Court Judge Charles Kaufman, and the community outrage that arose following the sentencing. We remember the two federal civil rights trials, one in Detroit, and then after an appeal and remand from the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, one in Cincinnati, that resulted in Ebens and Nitz never having served a full day in jail for the killing of Vincent Chin. And we remember that his death sparked a Pan-Asian civil rights movement to seek justice for Vincent.

It is because we remember all of this that the Association of Chinese Americans (ACA) and American Citizens for Justice (ACJ)/Asian American Center for Justice held a remembrance on June 24, 2017, that began at the Chinese Community Center. We were joined by members of the family including Amy Lee and Carmen Lee, and Vincent’s longtime friend Gary Koivu. Those of us there heard about the connection between racial hatred and intolerance from the time of Vincent Chin’s death to the present day racial climate.

Film maker Curtis Chin started the remembrance with a screening of his 2009 movie “Vincent Who?” and answered questions. A panel followed with Carol Chin Watson recalling stories about the Chin family going back to the time Vincent was killed. Kendall Kosai, representing OCA National, spoke about the continuing work that OCA does to address racial discrimination and hate crimes.

Steve Spreitzer, CEO of the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion, spoke about how the Vincent Chin case has been followed by so many recent incidents of racial intolerance and bullying, including the February 2017 killing of South Asian Srivinas Kochibhotla in Olathe, Kansas by a veteran who yelled “Get out of my country” before he shot him. Spreitzer urged all to embrace racial and religious tolerance, and to fight racial bias.

Michigan Department of Civil Rights Director Agustin Arbulu spoke about what the Department does to combat hate speech, hate incidents, and how it follows up on hate crimes.

Daphne Kwok, Vice President for Multicultural Markets at AARP and former Executive Director of OCA, reflected on the good civil rights work done at the community level, and what each of us can do in the name of racial justice and understanding.

Helen Zia, noted author and ACJ’s co-founder, reflected on all of the people who sacrificed so much to work on the Vincent Chin case 35 years ago, many of whom continue to be engaged in civil rights work today.

Pastor Andrew Cheng of the Chinese Bible Church spoke about healing and reconciliation and concluded his remarks at the Chin grave site at Forest Lawn Cemetery. Vocalist YuPing Yen sang hymns at the grave site. Finally, each of the attendees at the grave placed flowers in remembrance.

Several supportive organizations must be thanked: Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion, the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, Michigan Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission, Council of Asian

Pacific Americans, Chinese Association of Greater Detroit, and Japanese American Citizens League-Detroit. Many thanks go to each of the panelists and to the committee including Roland Hwang, Ayesha Ghazi, Sharon Dow, James Beni Wilson, Shenlin Chen, David Liou, and others.

Beyond the 35th Year Remembrance, several articles and news stories reflected on the Vincent Chin anniversary, including “Witness, The Killing of Vincent Chin” on BBC World News, Richard Lui’s piece on MSNBC, National Public Radio, NBC Asian America, Detroit Free Press (“History seems to be repeating itself” June 24, 2017), Asia Society (<http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/35-years-after-vincent-chins-murder-how-has-america-changed>), and “Asian-American’s Fatal Beating Over U.S. Job Loss Resonates Today” in Huffington Post.

History has a tendency to repeat itself especially if there is a knowledge vacuum. So we must continue to tell the Vincent Chin story so future cases of hatred and intolerance might be avoided.



Remembrance program at the Chinese Community Center



Gravesite visitation