

LOCAL NEWS

Translating action to power for Cap Region Asian Americans

Local leaders meet to find ways to balance representation disparity

By Lynda J. Edwards October 1, 2017

Colonie

More than 80 Asian Americans converged at a meeting that was a combination of voter registration drive, wake-up call and celebration. The joy was inspired by a couple dozen millennials, the demographic notoriously difficult to lure into the voting booth. They chose to spend Saturday discussing how to organize politically, get out the vote and run for office. U.S. Congressman Paul Tonko was a guest speaker.

University at Albany student Jennifer Yang is president of the Asian American Alliance. She acknowledged that Asians face organizational challenges that U.S. Latinos don't. Latinos usually share Spanish and Catholicism as common ground. Asians include Pakistani, Filipino, Korean and other ethnic groups with unique languages, dialects and faiths. The Capital Region includes groups that range from a vibrant Bangladeshi community first drawn to a Columbia County button factory, to Warren County's Hawaiian expats.

"We're trying to build bridges between different Asian groups on campus by holding events like the Mid Autumn Moon Festival and a barbecue coming up," Yang said. "I'd never thought about running for office; I'm a human biology major. But what I heard today inspired me. I'd like to help with a voter drive or campaign."

The meeting's organizer was retired General Electric senior global researcher HP Wang who heads the Albany chapter of the Asian Pacific Islander

American Public Affairs Association. He warned Asian Americans can no longer trust assimilation and business success to shield them from bigotry.

"Asians work very hard, take care of family, pay attention to our children's education. But then we disappear," Wang said. "Asian Americans are 9 percent of New York state's population, but only 1 percent of its legislative representation."

Minority business specialist Michael Fondacaro offered the somber example of Chinese American Vincent Chin to show how quickly angry rhetoric can escalate into violent death. Chin was at his 1982 bachelor's party in a suburban Detroit bar where two unemployed white auto workers screamed at him about Japanese car manufacturers stealing U.S. customers. Chin was a Chinese American engineering draftsman. The men didn't care. They beat Chin to death with a baseball bat. Fondacaro said they never served a day in prison.

"History has taught us time and again that social justice gains are not permanent," said Dr. Aliya Saeed, a Cohoes psychiatrist.

GE engineer Jennifer Zhao built a solar lab from the ground up but Wang hailed her like a rock star for being a newly elected Niskayuna school board member.

"I've lived in this area almost 40 years and can't remember an Asian American being elected to school board," Wang said proudly.

Schenectady city councilwoman Leesa Perazzo offered advice on how to lay the groundwork for anyone to run for local office. Her business background and math skills quickly helped her understand the complexities of the city budget. But when she ran for council the first time at age 46, she needed to spike her confidence.

"I would drive my car with Florence and the Machine blaring to empower myself," she said, laughing.

Zhao said she also had to battle worries about not knowing enough about politics. She chose to run for her unpaid school board job because parent-teacher organizations often focus on getting funds for field trips and school supplies. Zhao wanted to shape decisions on what and how a curriculum is taught in schools.

"I stopped worrying so much over what I didn't know and concentrated on these people who needed my help," she said.