

Asian American Hate Crimes: The Lives and Legacies of Vincent Chin and Joseph Ito

From "[Vincent Chin - Lily Chin: The Courage to Speak Out](#)"
(excerpts from [Untold Civil Rights Stories](#))

By Helen Zia

1) On June 19, 1982, Vincent Jen Chin and a few close friends were out on a warm summer evening in Detroit, Michigan, to celebrate his upcoming wedding with an all-American bachelor party. The early 1980s were a time of deep economic depression, when a massive oil crisis made it difficult for people to drive big Detroit-made gas guzzling automobiles. Instead, Americans were buying smaller and fuel-efficient Japanese cars — and hundreds of thousands of autoworkers in Detroit were unemployed, losing their jobs and their homes. Many business and political leaders pointed their fingers toward the Pacific and blamed Japan, inciting racial-hatred against anyone who looked Japanese, rather than taking responsibility for their own failed policies.

2) At the bar where Vincent and his friends went to celebrate, two Anglo autoworkers blamed the Chinese American for Detroit's difficulties. They called Chin racial slurs. He fought back and they chased him through the streets of Detroit. When the night was over, the two Anglo men, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, beat Vincent Chin to death by swinging a baseball bat to his head several times. His 400 wedding guests went to his funeral instead.

3) Several months later, the two men were in criminal court, waiting to receive their punishment after they were found



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—Helen Zia on Lily Chin

many false statements that were contrary to the court testimony of several eyewitnesses, including two police officers, the festival organizers published it anyway. It was as though a play about the Holocaust included notes from a Holocaust denier, or a play about slavery included comments from someone who claims that lynchings never took place.

These comments in the play's program became compounded when a theater critic wrote about the play in the *Washington Post*, an influential newspaper read by many political leaders and policy makers. The critic gave the play about Vincent Chin a negative review — because, he wrote, Ebens' attorney said it was doubtful that race had anything to do with Vincent's death.

Some people continue to believe and to perpetuate the harmful notion that Asian Americans are the "model minority" that does not encounter racism, discrimination or hate crimes. This widely held stereotype has caused much damage to Asian Americans, making it difficult to get attention for the needs of Asian American communities. The stereotype that Asians in America are not targets of racial violence

certainly played a significant role in Vincent Chin's case and the fact that a judge and a jury allowed his killers to go free.

Lily Chin stood up to all of these doubters and proved them wrong. The courage and willingness of this Chinese immigrant mother to speak out, despite her grief, continues to inspire people to keep up the fight for justice, against hate and violence in all its forms. Because of her brave stand and the hard work of American Citizens for Justice and so many voices around the country, new generations of activists and advocacy organizations are still growing and evolving.

Lily Chin reminds us that there is still much to be done, and that there is a terrible price to pay if we don't speak up. Lily Chin, a dear mother who immigrated from China and spent a lifetime working in restaurants, laundries and factories so that her son could have a better life, showed us what is possible — and what we are all capable of. Her shining example of standing up and speaking out, even when it is most difficult, is an inspiration for all people who value fairness, equality and justice in society.

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(Photo Courtesy of Estate of Vincent Chin)

guilty of Vincent Chin's slaying. The shocking sentence: probation and \$3,000 in fines for brutally beating another human being to death. The two Anglo men didn't spend a single day in jail for their violent and deadly crime.

4) People everywhere were outraged that these killers got away with murder. Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans were especially angry that the court would allow a hate crime against an Asian person go unpunished. For many Chinese Americans, it was just like the frontier "justice" of the 1800s, when a white man could kill an Asian person with impunity.

5) Because of this injustice, many people in the Asian American community of southeastern Michigan organized a national civil rights movement to reach out to people all across America. Vincent Chin's mother, Lily Chin, an immigrant

from China who spent a lifetime of hard work in restaurants, laundries and factories, became the moral conscience of this national campaign. The goal was simple: that people of Asian descent in America should be treated as full human beings, with equal justice, fairness and dignity.

6) The campaign eventually forced the federal government to seek a civil rights trial against the two killers — the first time the federal government ever pursued a civil rights claim on behalf of an Asian American person. Although Ebens, the one who swung the bat at Vincent's head, was found guilty in federal court, his conviction was later overturned without either killer spending a day in jail.

7) Lily Chin was devastated and grief-stricken after the brutal killing of her only child. When she learned that Vincent's killers would go free with only probation and fines, her heart broke again. Yet she found the strength to speak to thousands of people at community gatherings, rallies and demonstrations across the country, and even to appear on television. Often speaking through tears, Lily Chin would

say, in halting English, that she didn't want any other mother to lose their child as she did.

8) These and many other examples of Lily Chin's bravery inspired Asian Americans of all ages and backgrounds to speak up against hate crimes in their own communities. Numerous Asian American groups all over the country organized for equal justice and against hate violence because of Lily Chin's willingness to raise her voice. An Academy Award-nominated film called "*Who Killed Vincent Chin?*" documents her role in motivating the movement against anti-Asian violence and racism.

9) Sadly, Lily Chin died after a long illness in 2002, twenty years after her son was killed. She did not live to see justice done for her son, but she had the love and support of the many people whose lives were touched by her. Lily Chin's sisters asked me to deliver the eulogy at her funeral. I did so with much sorrow in my heart — and with the conviction that Lily Chin's spirit continues to live on, teaching all how one person who speaks truth to power can spark a movement to change the world.

Full text available: AdvancingJustice-LA.org/VincentChin

From "[A Family Educates to Prevent Hate Crimes: The Case of Joseph Iieto](#)" (excerpts from [Untold Civil Rights Stories](#))

By Stewart Kwoh

Why Was Joseph Iieto a Hate Crime Victim?

1) On August 10, 1999, Joseph Santos Iieto, a Filipino American postal worker was gunned down along his Chatsworth route by a self-professed white

supremacist named Buford O. Furrow. Just hours after Furrow fired shots into a playground full of children at the North Valley Jewish Community Center (NVJCC) in Granada Hills, the killer encountered Joseph, who happened to be covering another mail carrier's route that day.

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2) Furrow approached Joseph and asked him to mail a letter for him. As Joseph agreed to mail the letter, Furrow pulled out his gun and shot Joseph nine times. Furrow later confessed that he killed Joseph because he looked Latino or Asian and because he was a federal employee. Furrow also stated that Joseph's racial background and employment with the government made him a good "target of opportunity." As Joseph tried to run away, the killer shot him a few more times before finally escaping himself. Joseph died from gunshot wounds to the chest and one to the back of the head and was the only fatal victim during Furrow's rampage. The day immediately after the shootings, Furrow turned himself in to the authorities and confessed his guilt.

Kuya — Who Was Joseph Santos Iieto?

3) To his family, Joseph was fondly known as Jojo or *Kuya*, a Filipino term of respect for an eldest brother. With the death of their father at an early age, Joseph played a central role in the household. A filial son, a devoted brother and brother-in-law, *Kuya* was an honest and modest man who never hesitated to help others. Ismael Iieto, Joseph's younger brother, recounted an incident where Joseph helped the local sanitation workers when they came around on their shift. "That's their job," Ismael recalls saying, but that did not stop Joseph from helping those men.

4) At 39, things were going well in Joseph's life. While attending California Polytechnic at Pomona for an Engineering degree, Joseph went to work at the United States Postal Service. An avid chess player, Joseph had been featured

occasionally in magazines and newspapers for his accomplishments. Joseph had also just become an uncle as his brother Ismael and his sister-in-law Deena celebrated the arrival of their son, Kyle. Close to his younger twin sisters Carmina and Raquel, and his loving mother Lilian, Joseph was the family's big brother, their *Kuya*, in every sense of the word.

5) Around the time of Joseph's death, the national media had prominently focused on the brutal hate crimes perpetrated against an African American man in Texas named James Byrd, and a gay man in Wyoming named Matthew Shepard. In the wake of these murders, the Iletos were aware that hate crimes were happening but it never occurred to them that someone in their own family could become a victim. "We never even got the chance to say goodbye.

6) "I want to tell him that we miss his company and I hope he can see that we're doing our best to honor his name," Ismael said, fighting back tears, "I want people to remember my brother Joseph not just as a hate crime victim, but for what his name stands for: J.O.S.E.P.H.I.L.E. T.O. Join Our Struggle; Educate and Prevent Hate; Instill Love, Equality and Tolerance for Others."



(Photo Courtesy of Iieto Family)

Full text available: AdvancingJustice-LA.org/JosephIieto