



Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health



Episode 152: Asians for Justice (Transcript)

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Hi, welcome to Into the Fold, the Mental Health podcast. I'm your host, Ike Evans, and today we're delighted to bring you episode 152: Asian Texans Mobilized for Mental Health. But first, today's mental health headline. I'm pleased to announce that Katie McCormick, a doctoral candidate at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin, has been recently awarded a Moore Fellowship from the Hogg Foundation. The fellowship goes to support dissertation research on the human experience of crises.

Her dissertation is titled Contributors of Occupational Stress and Burnout Among Texas Harm Reduction Workers. Congratulations to Katie, and I will have a bit more to say about this a little bit later. But right now, we move to our main story. It is a question that has long fascinated us here on Into the Fold. What does it mean to do public policy work in a state with as challenging a policy environment as Texas? And then for Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, what particular challenges and opportunities do they face?

Lily Trieu: And so with that, we firmly believe that if we really want to create a world that's more equitable and more just and safer and healthier for all, we really have to empower young people to claim their voice, to claim their space, to make those demands of their community, of community leaders. And what we have found is in the API community, culturally, the immigrant community is very oriented in a way of let's not stir the pot, let's keep our heads down, let's not make any waves, largely because a lot of immigrants came to this country from Asia having lived through some terrible things.

Ike Evans: And for younger people who are just learning, just finding their footing, just finding their identity, how is it more challenging yet? For this second podcast for Minority Mental Health Awareness Month, we are talking to Lily Trieu. She is an

organizer for Asian Texans for Justice, who came to our studio recently to help us answer some of these questions.

Lily, what's up? How are you doing?

Lily Trieu: I'm hanging in there. These days are filled with both good and bad news, and so just trying to get through them.

Ike Evans: I hear ya. I hear ya. Our listeners would love to know more about you and how it is that you came to know the Hogg Foundation.

Lily Trieu: Absolutely. I think anytime I introduce myself, I obviously start with, hello, my name is Lily Trieu, my pronouns are she/her, but then I always follow that up with I am the child of Vietnamese refugees. I am from Houston, grew up in Southwest Houston, and I now work as the Interim Executive Director of Asian Texans for Justice. We are a statewide 501c3 organization serving the Pan-Asian American Pacific Islander community or API community. And I came to learn of Hogg just through some of the policy priorities that we have. And then I was really fortunate to be connected with an organization that is hosting a Hogg fellow. And so I get the honor of serving as their mentor while they are with Hogg. So it's been a delight.

Ike Evans: Mentorship is a built-in feature of our Policy Fellows grant program, which Lily was just referring to. What was that experience like for you and what did you learn from it?

Lily Trieu: I think mentorship programs are so special and I think about my career, I've had so many opportunities to work in different sectors and in different roles, and having strong mentorship was always really important. So I think just in general, the fact that mentorship is built into the program is great. I think it just shows the strength and the thoughtfulness of the program. Beyond that, I think because of the topic in which the fellows are working in, the topic of mental health, the issue of policy, the issue of advocacy, a lot of times this work leads to secondary trauma or reliving existing traumas. And I think having a mentor is especially important in that environment because having that support system is really critical. Doing the kinds of work we do can already feel isolating. And so I really love the fact that the fellows have somebody who maybe has been through it before, who can maybe provide some perspective. And I really just think that really strengthens your program and the experience.

Ike Evans: So July is Minority Mental Health Awareness Month, and this is just me talking, not my organization, but I have sometimes found awareness months to be a bit of a mixed blessing. Although when we do one, we kind of go full bore. So how are you feeling this July and how would you describe your mood at present?

Lily Trieu: I am a hundred percent with you with the awareness months. Our team had the same conversation in May. May is Asian American Pacific Heritage Month, and

these heritage months and these themed months, they're great in the sense that they do highlight really important issues, but it's frustrating because these issues are year round issues. These issues are issues that impact real people every day, 365 days a year. And to shrink it to a month is hard. And I think on the topic of mental health, especially in minority communities, it is more so important that we're amplifying this every single day of the year. So I would say I share probably your perspectives in terms of how I feel about it. Yeah, we need to lean into it, we need to raise awareness, we need to own the moment, but then how do we make that moment stretch into every single day of the year?

Ike Evans: Yeah. So you alluded to different professional hats that you've worn over time. Yeah, how do you identify professionally these days?

Lily Trieu: These days, I think, I really identify as an advocate for the community, whatever that looks like. And I think that's the kind of beauty of our organization, our mission, is we genuinely believe regardless of where you work, who issues your paycheck, regardless of what you're doing from 9:00 to 5:00, anybody can be an advocate for their community in their own ways. And so that's really the ideology we lean into, and that's kind of how I identify.

Ike Evans: Okay. And was that a progression that was slow in happening or were there the jagged peaks toward being able to so confidently claim that for yourself? What was that trajectory like for you?

Lily Trieu: It definitely was a slow process. It was a slow awakening. I am a proud double Longhorn, I've went to UT now for both my undergrad and graduate degrees. I think initially if you had asked me 15 years ago, I would've told you I was a business person. I was somebody who worked in the corporate space. But now reflecting back, even in my early years of my career when I worked in the corporate world, I had very strong feelings and very strong values tied to diversity, equity, and inclusion. So even in that capacity, I was advocating for my community and for those who I felt deserved to have their voices amplified.

And then as my career progressed, I think those values took up more and more space and it became less about the actual work I was doing, but it was more about how my employer or my organization aligned to my values. And so I think coming to this identity of being a community advocate definitely took time. But I think the more opportunities I had, the more evident it was to me that being in a mission-driven, values-oriented role or organization was ultimately what was most important. And when you land on that, then naturally you're a community advocate because you're saying that doing work for your community is the driving factor in your work. So really long answer to say, it took me a long time to get to a place where I've decided that's really where I feel most myself.

Ike Evans: A prime focus of your work is empowering younger people. And I would just love any personal stories that you might have that attest to the impact that you are trying to have in this area.

Lily Trieu:

I think that's a great question. So at Asian Texans for Justice, we serve the Pan API community in Texas, which means we serve everybody, regardless of their ethnicity, of the immigration status, of their age. But the API community in Texas, there are 1.9 million of us now here in Texas. We are generally speaking a younger racial group. The vast majority of folks who identify as API, I think, are below the age, I think, of 45 or 50 was the number that we use as a benchmark. So, people in our community are a bit younger, a lot of people in the community are immigrants. And so with that, we firmly believe that if we really want to create a world that's more equitable and more just and safer and healthier for all, we really have to empower young people to claim their voice, to claim their space, to make those demands of their community, of community leaders.

And what we have found is in the API community, culturally, the immigrant community is very oriented in a way of let's not stir the pot, let's keep our heads down, let's not make any waves. Largely because a lot of immigrants came to this country from Asia having lived through some terrible things, having lived through war and poverty. And they come to the US and they just want to seek stability and safety. And so as a result, young people don't feel the empowerment they should to take action.

And so one of the things that we've done that I'm really proud of is we've launched a civic engagement fellowship program. It's a 10-week program in which we basically train API youth ages 16 to 24 to become a community organizer in their own right. Last summer was the first summer we launched it, and we had six fellows from across the state of different identities, and they came together and they had their own organizing projects around the issue of Asian American studies, of inclusion, of our history and our identities in Texas's K-12 classrooms.

And many of these students had never done advocacy before. And so as we progressed across the summer, we taught them new skills. At the end of the summer, they had the chance to go in front of the state Board of Education and to testify and to share their personal stories as to why it was so important to have this course taught. And that was just the most powerful moment.

I remember there was one young woman who went up and testified and talked about her own struggles with anxiety and mental health and bullying in school. And she went on to UT and got a degree in Asian American studies. And she reflected on how if she had had the opportunity to learn those stories and to learn that content when she was younger, she would've had a stronger sense of self amidst all the bullying that she went through living in north Texas. And that was so powerful to me, to see her claim her story and to claim her voice and to speak it loudly and proudly and to make demands of elected officials. Those are the moments that really inspire us to continue to do our work with youth.

Ike Evans:

So you mentioned being from Houston. So are you a lifelong Texan?

Lily Trieu: I am technically not a lifelong Texan. I try not to tell folks that. I think people in Texas have some opinions on it. I was actually born in Chicago and I moved to Texas when I was five. I have left the state for a few years, but I have always found my way back.

Ike Evans: Okay. So you just mentioned bullying. Was that something that you ever experienced growing up? And what particular forms did it take, if you don't mind me asking?

Lily Trieu: Absolutely. I think bullying's a thing that a lot of kids encounter, regardless of your identity, regardless of who you are. But I think as I think about my experience, the answer is yes, I have experienced bullying. And for me, I wouldn't say all of it, but a lot of the bullying that I encountered was race based. I remember being in elementary school and having kids pull on their eyelids, doing the slant eye thing and making fun of me, or making fun of Chinese languages, even though I've been fluent in English basically my entire life, kind of kids doing the ho ching chang chong thing and kind of mocking me.

And that was pretty prevalent all throughout my earlier years. And then there was a period where I think the model minority myth really leaned in and people would assume because I was an Asian American young woman that I must be good at math or I must be good at science. So a lot of discriminatory viewpoints. And I'm sad to say that my experience is not isolated. 80% of Asian American youth have reported being bullied in schools. So what I experience as very common and basically the experience that the majority of students, some students of which who experience much more threatening bullying. My bullying, it did not cross the line of physical. But for some kids, that's the reality they have to face in their schools.

Ike Evans: Okay. So your organization is Asian Texans for Justice?

Lily Trieu: Yes.

Ike Evans: And I just have to ask, what is, and I hope this isn't too much of a leading question, I always have to ask the Texas question, what is especially challenging about advocating for Asian communities in Texas? And what particular either soft or hard skills have you had to learn while you've been doing it?

Lily Trieu: I think if you talk to any organizer, organizing any community is difficult for us. I will claim that my perspective, as biased as it is, my perspective is that it is particularly difficult organizing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Texas. The reason being, we have a huge population. So Texas actually has the third-largest API population in this country, third only to California and New York. So there are a lot of us. The second reason why I think organizing APIs is difficult is because of how diverse we are. We're the most diverse racial group. So we are made up of over 50 different ethnicities. We speak over a hundred different languages. We practice dozens of different religions. So our shared experience is

pretty limited. Everyone really comes from very different lived experiences and backgrounds. And so one of the things I always say is APIs in Texas, we came to the state at different times, in different ways, for different reasons.

I mentioned earlier my family, my parents were Vietnamese refugees. So they came to America in 1980 and they came after Vietnam War. So their experience is very much limited to the last 40 years. But I also have friends whose families have been here for generations, where maybe they're the third, fourth, fifth generation to have lived here in Texas. And so because of how different those experiences are, organizing them takes so much more learning and listening. It requires us to be culturally sensitive and competent when it comes to different religions. It requires us to invest in language translations and interpreters. It requires us to understand that while we may be passionate, we are not always the best messenger, that maybe we need to rely on a community leader or a faith-based leader. And so there's a lot of learning to do, even though I identify as part of the community, I have to learn every day about how to do this work better.

Ike Evans: Okay. And I like to think that this is getting better, but we use Asians as a big catchall term, and that's how many billions of people? Yeah, and you're nodding, and again, you could give an entire seminar on this, give our listeners a sense of the kinds of boundaries that exist between within and among Asian communities that you have to navigate or traverse in the course of your work.

Lily Trieu: I probably could give a seminar on this topic. It is so loaded with history, and I hate to always go back to it, but the history and the roots of colonization and imperialism, and there's just so much that goes into the language that we use today that makes it so imperfect. So I'll start off by saying the term Asian American is a relatively new term. That term was coined in the late 60s, early 70s, and that term was coined as a result of student protests during the civil rights movement. So up until then, there really was no big umbrella category for people who came from the Asian continents. And the reason why students wanted it was because when you broke out people's identities by ethnicity, you had Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans and Indian Americans, et cetera, what you get is you get these tiny slivers of populations of people.

You don't really have that collective impact. But when we grouped Asian Americans together, now all of a sudden there was scale. Now all of a sudden you take all these different groups, these ethnic groups, and you combine them. Now we have political power, frankly. Now, we can come together and say, we will vote a certain way, we'll advocate a certain way, and it's a way to uplift the community. So that's the benefits of having a big overarching delineation like Asian American. However, it really does hurt communities within that umbrella when you go back to the fact that we have very different lived experiences. So you think about today, in 2023, the experiences of an Indian American person who maybe came to the US on a visa to get their PhD, and then they stayed and they became an engineer or a professor or a tech professional.

Their lived experience is very different than maybe an Afghan refugee who just came to the US within the last five years. But they both fall under this Asian American identity. And so when you don't disaggregate that and when you don't break it down, what happens is there are groups of people who have needs and who have resources that are not met, and those gaps are not bubbling up. And then we as a community are not able to help those in the most need. So that's something we struggle with all the time. How do we unite, but then how do we also make space for our differences and how do we amplify the spaces where we really need to dedicate more resources and more attention?

Ike Evans: Sounds like you have a lot going on. How do you make time for your own wellbeing? What does that consist of and what resources and support are you able to draw on when you need it?

Lily Trieu: I think this is a challenge for anybody who works in the nonprofit space, in the advocacy space, in the community-direct service space. I think finding balance and finding wellness is really, really hard. And I think if you talk to anybody who does similar work to us, burnout is real. And I myself have experienced pretty deep burnout, especially in the last couple of the couple of years with the rise in anti-Asian hate, with a lot of discriminatory policies that have been passed, with a lot of the hateful rhetoric that's been out there. So the way I really try to address my wellness, first and foremost, my therapist. My therapist is huge. She's always there, which is helpful. We have a regular session. That's really important to have someone help me unpack and to deal with secondary trauma, to deal with however it is that I'm feeling in the moment.

But aside from that, one of the things that I'm actually doing this summer is I'm taking a sabbatical. And I think the industries in which sabbaticals are becoming more and more the norm are industries where burnout is really, really high. And so I am wondering how do we reform the nonprofit, the advocacy, the policy space to where we don't need sabbaticals? The game shouldn't be work really, really, really hard for five years and then take six months off. That should not be what it looks like. That's kind of how it looks right now, but that's not what it should look like. How do we reform the space and this work so that it can be balanced and healthy year round? That is something that I'm exploring. But until then, I'm going to take my sabbatical. I'm going to see my therapist, I'm going to try to eat well, I'm going to try to work out, I'm going to try to get less of sleep and stay hydrated. And that's kind of where we're at. But it is definitely a question that we are still trying to answer.

Ike Evans: Yeah. The first time that I heard about a professor of mine going on sabbatical, I was both mystified and envious. I was like, you can just do that? Yeah, I know. I'm sure it's one of those things that goes back to the 16th century in academia or whatever. I am very heartened by the idea that the concept is becoming more mainstream.

Lily Trieu: It is.

Ike Evans: Yeah. And so where can people go to learn more about your organization and ways that they can support?

Lily Trieu: Yeah, absolutely. So you can find our work on our website, always, AsianTexansForJustice.org. So our website always has the latest and greatest on the work we're doing, the types of programs we're running, folks who are interested in volunteering with us can also sign up on our website to be a volunteer. Obviously we are always seeking donations from our community members. Donations is what allows for us to do our work. So you can also donate on our website. Aside from our website, we're on all the social media platforms. So on Facebook and Instagram, we're @AsianTexansForJustice, on Twitter, we're @AsianTexans, and you can always find our statements, clips, photos, really just learning about any of the events that we're hosting on our social media pages as well.

Ike Evans: Okay, wonderful. Well, Lily, we really do appreciate you. We appreciate the work that you're doing and good luck with it all.

Lily Trieu: Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

Ike Evans: We weren't planning on it, but a strong theme has emerged for this month. In addition to minority mental health, the theme of community front liners. I am borrowing this from our very last podcast guest, Chaka Moore, founder and CEO of DAWA, which stands for Diversity Awareness and Wellness in Action. And here's what he had to say about community front liners.

Chaka Moore: Community front liners are people that are going to do the work regardless. So when there's a crisis, these are the people that run towards it. These are the people in the community that are going to be doing the work regardless. And also, we've put creatives in that role because why do you have singing in church? Because it does something for your spirit. It does something that just talking can't do, just the sound of someone's voice, it does something for us and it's not going anywhere. So these are people we need. We need them, right?

Ike Evans: Yeah.

Chaka Moore: And so the role that they play in terms of touching our spirit and giving us inspiration as creatives, as musicians, they're on the front line, the social workers, teachers, the people when the electricity goes out, the water or something happens. These are the people that are going to HEB, buying as much water as they can and they're handing it out of their trunk or they're organizing -- they're going in the neighborhood to check in on people, seeing what they need. These are the type of people that we feel like are undervalued.

Ike Evans: So with that in your mind, let's go back to our mental health headline, our new Moore fellow, Katie McCormick. It is very interesting to me that her dissertation is about the occupational stresses of harm reduction workers. Harm reduction

workers play a crucial role in addressing the overdose epidemic by providing lifesaving services, many of which to marginalized communities. These are simply community front liners. But as such, you can also imagine that they also experience considerable adversity, stress, trauma, and loss, which can contribute to burnout.

I would love to have Katie herself on to discuss the implications of her work. Perhaps I will. But for now, I think it's enough for me to just repeat what I said about community front liners in our last episode. Reach out to one, find out what they need and what you can do to support them. Before we close, I wanted to make an announcement that has me very excited, the pilot episode of Mind of Texas, the podcast that is a joint production of the Hogg Foundation and KUT dropped just yesterday. The host is yours, truly, Ike Evans. The topic is, you guessed it, mental health in Texas. To say that I'm thrilled about this is an understatement. You can find the podcast at kut.org or wherever you get your podcasts. Please listen, subscribe, leave reviews. We need your support.

Which brings us to the end of our two-episode arc for Minority Mental Health Awareness Month. I think the big takeaway is really, this summer in Texas is darn hot, and it's a hot summer for those of us who care about diversity and inclusion in our state. The very phrase, diversity, equity, and inclusion has become a hot button. Affirmative action in higher education has been effectively banned. And even social and emotional learning programs in schools are seen by some as a Trojan horse for critical race theory. These are hot times for those of us who feel that mental health is important, but also that you can't have mental health in a state that doesn't care about people, and that you don't truly care about people if you make taboo any consideration of the systemic forces arrayed against them.

Just something to think about as we wrap up Minority Mental Health Awareness Month. And that does it for this episode. We're glad that you can join us. Production assistance by Kate Rooney, Darrell Wiggins, and Anna Harris. Just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to help others, so it is as well that by helping others, we enhance our own resilience. And please leave a review. Subscribe to us on the podcast app of your choice. Taking us out now is "Anna's Good Vibes". Thanks for joining us.