



**Solidarity Stories from Asian American and Pacific Islander  
Community Leaders, Asian American Leaders Table**

National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC)

# Introduction

## **“Live Right, Know Your Roots, Live Strong, Live Together”**

The National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC) was founded in 1994 by a network of grassroots Korean American organizations across the United States. Young Korean Americans, who were mainly low-income and recently arrived immigrants, saw the need for a grassroots organization working at the national level that could advocate for progressive systemic change. Today, NAKASEC’s mission is to organize Korean and Asian Americans to achieve social, racial and economic justice and has bases in NY, PA, VA, IL, and TX.

NAKASEC was founded in response to the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992 that occurred 29 years ago this past April. Even though the brutal beating of Rodney King was captured on video and widely seen, the four White policemen responsible were acquitted. The Black community took to the streets to express their outrage, some of which happened in Los Angeles’ Koreatown. Black- Korean relations were already strained in Watts and other underserved Black neighborhoods in L.A. where Korean shop-owners operated grocery stores. Just one year earlier, while Ice Cube, in his song “Black Korea,” was reflecting attitudes in South Central, rapping about Korean businesses needing to “pay respect to the black fist or we’ll burn your store right down to your crisp,” a Korean American business owner Soon Ja Du accused Latasha Harlins, a young Black girl of

shoplifting and shot and killed her. Ms. Du was sentenced to only five years of probation, 400 hours of community service, and a \$500 fine.

Black and Korean community leaders made attempts at interracial community education and dialogue but still LA burned. While roughly 2,200 Korean American businesses were being destroyed in the Los Angeles Uprising, Korean American merchants called the LAPD for help. Instead of assisting the business owners, the police chose to guard the wealthier, White areas of Los Angeles and its suburbs. The Uprising was the outcome of structural racism that kept communities of color in poverty, in tension, and conflict.

This was a moment of political awakening for the Korean American community, in which they acknowledged they could not survive by staying under the radar, keeping their heads down and hoping their children would have a better life. As a working-class immigrant community of color, Korean Americans had to become civically engaged, build progressive power at the national level, and unite in true solidarity with Black and other communities of color who share the same values and vision of an equitable world for all.

# Takeaways

## 1. We must always remember, learn and build from the LA Uprising.

For Korean Americans, the LA Uprising, also known as Sa-i-Gu (which means April 29th in Korean, the day the uprising began) is particularly significant as an estimated \$400 million in damages were caused to Korean businesses. Many of these were mom-and-pop shops, where owners were already struggling to make ends meet. The business owners were predominantly recently arrived immigrants and limited in English proficiency. They experienced many barriers navigating American economic, social and political institutions. Many had left Korea due to military dictatorships and/or economic devastation in Korea, and had come to the United States to build new lives for their families within a democracy. For many of these business owners and their workers, the uprising destroyed their livelihoods.

Tensions between the Korean and Black community had been building well before the LA Uprising. Korean business owners set up their shops in the Black community, the only places they were both allowed and could afford, but these business owners usually did not live in these communities, instead taking the profits and investing them outside the Black community. Language barriers, cultural differences, unfamiliarity with a non-homogenous society, anti-Blackness, xenophobia and learned prejudices all contributed to

misunderstandings, distrust, and the inability to cultivate strong relationships.

NAKASEC calls Sa-i-Gu the LA Uprising instead of LA riots because we believe that when people of color express their outrage against the brutal racism of America, they are rising up, not rioting. The system frames it as “rioting” to shift attention away from the harm caused to our communities and turn the victims of the violence into the perpetrators of the violence.

For Korean Americans, we have to balance compassion and support for our community members who are struggling as recently arrived immigrants and people of color in a racist and xenophobic country, and may have lost their livelihoods during uprisings, with linguistically and culturally competent dialogues and educational efforts. For those of us who have had the time, space, and access to develop a stronger racial justice analysis, we have to approach our community with love and understanding as we struggle through these conversations. We should not preach at them, but really listen to them, acknowledge their pain and struggles and learn about their histories, hopes and dreams. This is critical to engaging and supporting our grandparents and parents, aunties and uncles and other community members in understanding and addressing anti-Blackness; seeing our similarities as communities of color and for them to also be able to really listen to different perspectives and experiences.

# Takeaways

At the same time, we have to be vigilant in combating anti-Blackness in both our personal and professional lives. We cannot be silent when we hear racist comments, whether from our cousins, a neighbor or an elected official. We must apply a racial justice lens to all of our work and ensure that what we are doing to empower our own community is not at the cost of another community. For example, while the vast majority of anti-Asian hate incidents today are being perpetrated by white people, the media is focusing on those by other people of color, further pitting us against one another. To push back against the further criminalization of communities of color, progressive Asian American organizations are developing alternatives to calling the police and creating community driven restorative and healing practices. When an issue develops between the Asian and Black communities, we must address it immediately so that the old tensions do not become further cemented and grow.

When we look back at where we were as a community almost 30 years ago, we can see steps forward as Asian Americans in building relationships with the Black community. The analysis of Black and Asian relations has sharpened and deepened, as has the understanding that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 paved the way for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and that our collective liberation is tied together. We have found common issues and ways to

connect them, such as “defund the police” with “abolish ICE.” Since the LA Uprising, there has been more intentional solidarity and coalition work between Asian and Black leaders and organizations. After the murder of George Floyd, Asian American organizations hosted an online space for leaders from the Movement for Black Lives to share with us their goals and vision. Within the four days we had to organize that event, over 7,500 Asian Americans registered for it. The Movement for Black Lives recently issued a statement condemning the growth in anti-Asian hate. These kinds of acts of solidarity are increasing.

And we still have a mountain of work ahead of us moving forward. Tensions between Asian business owners and Latinx and Black customers still exist as we saw over the last few years in New York and North Carolina. Senator Ted Cruz introduced an amendment to the recent Hate Crimes Act that would eliminate affirmative action on behalf of Asian Americans, a concerted campaign by white supremacist organizations that a small but vocal segment of our community supports. We must continue to do the day-to-day education work for ourselves and our community, resist anti-Black efforts and policies that are being pushed forward under the name of Asian America, and participate in multi-racial coalitions that are supporting a common agenda.

# Takeaways

## **2. We are pitted against one another AND we have common histories and experiences.**

The United States bears a long history of systemic violence against Asian Americans since Asians began to arrive in this country. As we are rising up and organizing around the current anti-Asian hate - from the racial slurs and spitting to the violent physical attacks and mass murders, we have to think about how these same attacks have been happening to Black folx in the United States since its colonial inception. Racism and xenophobia, the dehumanizing and othering, are rooted deeply in America's founding on anti-Blackness and the genocide of Native American people. We unfortunately share these histories and experiences with each other, and with the Latinx community. At the same time, white supremacy pits us against one another, naming one of us the model minority while criminalizing the other. This only serves to segregate us and prevent us from addressing root causes of anti-Asian and anti-Black hate, and eradicating these systems of oppression. It is only through uniting together that we will win our collective freedom.

## **3. We can support the Black liberation movement with concrete, immediate actions.**

When key moments of solidarity arise, like when the country was riveted by the

horrific video of George Floyd's murder by the police or when the murderer's verdict came down, it was important for the Asian American community to make our voices heard by issuing statements, writing op-eds, holding teach-ins with community members, marching in the streets, sharing about the injustice on their social media and post about Asians For Black Lives. These public displays of support are critical for the Black community and the rest of the country to know what side of white supremacy we are on, initiate dialogue within our own community, and demonstrate our understanding that our freedom is intertwined.

At the same time, it may be just as important that we do the work that may not be as public. We must hold consistent, ongoing education and conversations sessions with our own community members, which must be prepared for and delivered in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways to truly engage all of our multi-generational communities. We need to research and provide articles, documents and books with a racial justice analysis in our myriad of Asian languages. We must donate, both individually and organizationally, to Black-led organizations to support anything and everything from bail funds and immediate organizing needs to building organizational infrastructure. Asian Americans must push ourselves to be creative about other ways we can leverage resources. For example, NAKASEC served as the fiscal sponsor for

# Takeaways

BYP100 for three years, and just finished two years of fiscal sponsorship for the Chicago Center for Leadership and Transformation (CCLT). NAKASEC did not charge fiscal sponsorship fees to these organizations as it was viewed as a concrete way to support the Black liberation movement. When funders giving grants to BYP100 and CCLT discovered this relationship, they were surprised as the Asian and Black community are rarely linked in this way. In addition to donating, this is another way to support the building of Black-led organizations, following their leadership.

#### **4. We have to be intentional about building with each other consistently.**

NAKASEC was fortunate to be introduced to the UndocuBlack Network (UBN), an organization of currently and formerly undocumented Black immigrants. As two communities that are often invisibilized within the larger immigrant justice movement and by American society, NAKASEC and UndocuBlack decided to co-organize a Black and Asian Immigrant Day of Action in Washington DC in late 2017 to support of a pathway to citizenship for young people in our communities. In addition to a press conference, rally and legislative visits, the organizations facilitated two workshops: 1) Histories of Black and Asian immigrant communities and 2) White supremacy in Black and Asian communities. In a survey conducted of both NAKASEC and UBN members after an event, 92% indicated that

they spend little to no time with the other community, showing how rare this kind of space is. NAKASEC and UBN intentionally decided to keep building together and since then, have held co-organized meetings on an annual basis under the title: Woori Ujima, which means “our collective work and responsibility” in Korean and Swahili. In addition to our everyday work, it is our collective work and responsibility to build authentic relationships with each other at the community, organizational and movement levels, at the key moments, AND every day.

# Your Turn

## Your Turn

Given the historic and current relationship and tensions between the Korean and Asian American communities and the Black community, how do Korean and Asian Americans build true solidarity? In addition to issuing statements, attending rallies and marches, and sharing educational information, what can we as Korean and Asian Americans do?

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What does it mean to follow the leadership of the Black community for us as Asian Americans?

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How do we educate and combat anti-Blackness in our Asian American community given that it is multi-generational and multilingual? What should be the approaches?

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When we see incidences of anti-Blackness by Asian Americans in the mainstream media, how do we respond?

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How do we understand anti-Asian hate within the context of anti-Blackness? How does this impact creating an anti-Asian hate narrative? How do we ensure an anti-Asian hate narrative is not anti-Black?

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*Some quotes in this article have been edited for clarity.*