



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

Tavae Samuelu, Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)

Introduction

“Solidarity means: I’m going to throw down for you. I won’t ever let anything happen to you without getting in the fight.”

Solidarity work has not always been easy for Tavae Samuelu, the executive director for [Empowering Pacific Islander Communities \(EPIC\)](#), a national organization that advances social justice by engaging Pacific Islanders in culture-centered advocacy, leadership development, and research. These challenges include the underrepresentation and access of Pacific Islanders in the larger Asian American and Pacific Islander umbrella.

In the Solidarity Story below, Tavae reminds us that solidarity shouldn’t merely be a “philosophical project” but a process that requires deep relationship building and thoughtful interventions against oppression. “I think solidarity work becomes more necessary because of the insidious nature of racism and sexism and capitalism,” she says. “I’m clear [solidarity] is the only way that we’re going to get free.”

Takeaways

1. Solidarity means centering and including communities.

The term 'Asian American' rose out of the late 1960s' pan-Asian student movement as a [strategic effort](#) to unify Asian diasporic groups and build collective power. In the 1980s, the U.S. Census Bureau grouped Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders together to create the category of "Asian and Pacific Islander." In the 2000 U.S. Census, the category was split into two: "Asian American" includes persons having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent., and "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander" includes Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian or Chamorro, Fijian, Tongan, or Marshallese peoples and encompasses the people within the United States jurisdictions of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

Despite the federal classifications, many organizations and coalitions continue to use "Asian American and Pacific Islander" in their names and scope. But, Pacific Islander leaders have long criticized the lack of centering of their communities under the "AAPI" umbrella. As the video clip shows, often Pacific Islanders are afterthoughts or invisible in AAPI formations.

According to Tavae, meaningful solidarity between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders would begin with an understanding

of the effects of U.S. militarization and Asian imperialism on Pacific Islanders. It would include a clear-eyed evaluation of whether spaces and campaigns labeled as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) actually include PI representation and power. It would center Pacific Islander inclusion by investing in parallel resources and leadership within PI communities.

These three practices would meaningfully and truly center Pacific Islanders in the broader AAPI community.

Takeaways

2. Actively work to be anti-racist.

It is important to recognize that race-based spaces are not inherently anti-racist. Tavae recalls a quote from Dr. Connie Wun, shared by AAPI Women Lead, that ‘anti-Asian racism is made possible by anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity.’ This quote pushes Tavae to think more deeply about how EPIC can do better by the Black community, especially Black Pacific Islanders.

Tavae also emphasizes that her own political consciousness was developed not in Pacific Islander spaces, but in “multicultural” spaces. “[I’ve] been honed and sharpened by Black feminist thought,” she notes. “And that is actually the political consciousness that drove me wanting to come back to Pacific Islanders and think about the specific ways that racism manifests in our communities, and therefore the specific tailored ways that we have to address it.”

3. Approach criticism with courage and curiosity.

Building long-term solidarity requires a willingness to listen, reflect, and course-correct without defensiveness. Tavae notes the importance of recognizing when we make assumptions or lean on our biases. Cultivating self-awareness is an important practice for people who choose to be in solidarity with others.

Your Turn

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The AAPI category brings together dozens of ethnic and language groups. How does this complicate solidarity practice? On the other hand, what possibilities does the term offer for building unity across diverse communities?

Where did you develop your political consciousness? How does that inform your work?

When have you needed to step back and reflect on your own biases and positionalities?

What anti-racist practices and philosophies do you bring into your work? How can you consistently strengthen and check in with you or your organization's work around anti-racism?

What is your and your community's relationship to power and resources?

Some quotes in this article have been edited for clarity.