

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

Vincent Pan, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA)



# Introduction

**“We can count on solidarity always having worth and value at the end of the day.”**

Solidarity is a fundamental principle for Vincent Pan and the organization he co-directs, [Chinese for Affirmative Action](#). “Equality is not a selective notion,” Vincent explained. “To the extent that anyone is interested in equality or civil rights or racial justice or social justice, you can’t be for those things without a commitment to solidarity.”

Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) is an organization based in San Francisco that is over 50 years old. CAA has been a major partner in California’s ongoing efforts to reinstate affirmative action policies in the public sector including public employment, public education and public contracting. In 1996, Proposition 209 passed in California and banned the use of affirmative action policies, leading to [significant changes](#) in many contexts including public higher education.

CAA’s decades-long fight for affirmative action included a major statewide initiative campaign to pass Proposition 16 on the November 2020 ballot. Prop 16 would have restored the ability of public universities to consider race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin to ensure diverse classrooms. CAA helped lead more than a hundred organizations to put Proposition 16 in front of voters, and then co-chaired the campaign to pass it with partners at the Equal Justice Society and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). After four months of campaigning and, though the measure was ultimately defeated, Vincent points to many successes of the campaign, including engaging tens of thousands of local partners and community organizations, and having 7.5 million voters support of racial justice and gender equity. Vincent highlights the importance of solidarity as one of the key strategies and outcomes of the campaign. Read on to learn more.

# Takeaways

## 1. Campaigns should operate with solidarity values.

It was important for the Proposition 16 campaign for affirmative action to practice affirmative action throughout the campaign. The leadership of the governance body was very diverse where women and people of color were represented. The campaign also sought to ground their work in relationships and partnership. Vincent explained, "Much of the work was actually developing individual connections and relationships, where people could pursue common goals together." Vincent highlighted that one big success of the campaign was bringing together young people of all backgrounds to work together on this goal, and engaging more than one hundred student fellows from California community colleges, California State University, and the University of California, and universities.

## 2. Trust and relationships make a difference.

As a co-chair of the campaign committee, Vincent had a history of working with his two fellow co-chairs on working against police violence, challenging the Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies, and advocating for language access for limited-English proficient community members. "The three co-chairs have worked together for a long time. I think that really helps," Vincent

said. "At the individual level there was a foundation of trust that was important. In many ways, it also reflects their values and CAA's values. We are always trying to work across communities with intention."

## 3. Challenge narratives that pits communities against each other.

Vincent emphasized that it was important to have visible leadership from the Asian American community supporting affirmative action, along with Black and Latinx leadership. The opposition attempted to pit communities against each other in order to drive a wedge between Asian communities and Black communities. In response, CAA and its partners provided a different narrative, one that focused on the diversity of the Asian American community and the benefits, historically and today, of affirmative action programs to Asian Americans.

"We didn't think it would be possible to get to a point where all Asian Americans support affirmative action in a homogenous way," Vincent said. "But we absolutely were not going to let a narrative go uncontested that Asian Americans are hurt by affirmative action or that Asian-Americans don't support it - because we know that's factually incorrect. Affirmative action has been something that's benefited Asian Americans, that Asian Americans have fought for, that Asian-Americans continue to benefit and fight for in all sectors of society."

# Takeaways

Vincent acknowledged that there is a very visible, vocal, and strident opposition to affirmative action in the Asian American community. “I won’t paper over just how visible and in leadership these individuals were,” he said. But the campaign worked that much harder to engage the opposition and change that narrative. They deployed intensive Chinese language outreach to explain the facts of affirmative action in the context of college admissions and conducted outreach to small businesses and worker groups to communicate how affirmative action works in contracting and employment.

particular,” Vincent said. “But I also think we often don’t do as good a job as we could to better understand diversity within other communities of color, as well — the Latinx community, the Black community.”

#### **4. Solidarity is about the practice of shared learning, shared goals, shared power.**

“People need time to learn about one another. They need time to teach one another. They need to share power equitably. They need to have common goals,” Vincent shared, whether those goals be cleaning up a community playground or carrying out a statewide campaign.

These three practices — shared space to learn, shared power, and shared goals — set the stage for solidarity practices that can transform people and communities.

“Obviously, with the Asian-American community, we are worried about our own diversity, and linguistic diversity, in

# Your Turn

## Your Turn

Vincent talks about building shared space to learn about each other: why is this an important strategy? How can you create those shared spaces, physically or virtually?

---

---

In this Solidarity Story, we learn about a campaign to preserve affirmative action that is nearly 25 years old. When you think about your own social change work, how can you build your capacity to work on long-term campaigns, even those that aren't immediately successful?

---

---

Asian Americans are often used as a wedge, to sow divisions between communities of color. What are some ways in which this happens in your community? How could you resist or change that narrative?

---

---

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