

**“Addressing Anti-Asian Racism Perpetuated by the Coronavirus Pandemic Through Children’s Literature Programming”**

**United States of America**

**Connecticut College**

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*Summary*

This summer I designed and led youth programming to promote dialogue and awareness about Asian American issues. Through my project, I contributed to a social learning environment in which children can foster positive racial identities and be armed with empowering knowledge to be changemakers who disrupt the status quo, in order to progress towards a more peaceful and equitable society for all.

*Project Description*

This project was developed organically. In my first year of college, during the height of the pandemic, news about anti-Asian hate crimes circulated through my intimate circle of friends and family. However, I felt frustrated and confused at the time because these issues were not being discussed in mainstream media.

At school, conversations with John McKnight, former Dean of Institutional Equity and Inclusion, and Professor Ayako Takamori of East Asian Studies helped me come to a critical epiphany; I realized that the general lack of representative education necessary to combat AAPI racism contributed to the rise in anti-Asian sentiments perpetuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as by the rhetoric of national leaders. As a result, I did an independent study to begin addressing the issue of racial tension and ignorance through my studies. The independent study provided the dedicated time and space necessary to analyze academic literature and existing children’s books with a focus on Asian Americans. This exploration informed my original plans for the Davis Fellowship, which was to integrate my self-published children’s book on anti-Asian racism into community-centric programming.

I made adjustments to my initial plans by emphasizing the programming and events aspect of the proposal rather than working on the implementation of a written and illustrated book. Such changes were made because I realized that it would be more fulfilling and productive to focus on collaboration by building on the existing work of community partners. This logic further embraces the ethos of Davis because investing in community ties strengthens mutual goals for sustainable peace.

For the majority of my summer, I collaborated with children’s librarians and local Chinese teachers to host eight programming events titled “Challenging and Embracing the Lunchbox Moment: Your Cultural Food Matters.” According to Professor Derald Wing Sue of Columbia University, microaggressions are everyday slights, insults, and invalidations that people of color experience in their daily interactions. Microaggressions can be tied to the “Lunchbox Moment” phenomenon, which refers to a shared experience of judgment, marginalization, and shame that Asian American youth often face when they bring cultural food for school lunch. My library programming centered literary circles and arts activities as a means to discuss microaggressions and the Lunchbox Moment with grades 1-5 children and their family members. Within my discussions, I aimed to empower audiences by tying historical influences and contemporary politics to the discrimination and cultural isolation underlying the Lunchbox Moment. I also emphasized the significance of ethnic foods to culture and family to encourage audiences to seek pride in themselves and the foods they enjoy. My summer of library events culminated in a pop-up art exhibition titled “Who We Are and Oh, The Places We’ll Go” at the Firehouse Gallery in Milford,

Connecticut. As publicized through its mission statement, the gallery serves to create space, celebrate, and amplify the artistry and talent of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) student artists from Connecticut and beyond. “Who We Are and Oh, The Places We’ll Go” was an intentionally provocative title— a specific reference, fervent critique, and reclamation of harmful, racist representations produced by Dr. Seuss, a renowned American author and cartoonist. The gallery was a community event that applied my library programming to greater contexts, championing the integration of AAPI contributions, experiences, and histories in classrooms. It is my conviction that prioritizing diverse and inclusive materials in youth education is to work towards a more peaceful society. I conducted my Davis within Connecticut and specifically my hometown of Milford because established relations allowed the process to be quite seamless. It was also of personal significance to be able to connect and relate with kids that grew up in similar environments to me. Connecticut librarians, Milford Arts Council, and Milford Photo, as well as community mentors were supportive, in terms of providing insight and resources that contributed to the success of my project.

### *Reflection*

Peace implies tranquility, order, and freedom from disturbance. In an inequitable world, we aspire to build greater peace; accomplishing this first requires the courageous acknowledgement of discomfort and conflict. From there, we can practice compassion to understand differing perspectives in order to bridge divides, promote social cohesion, and improve public health and wellbeing. My project functioned to create inner peace amongst Asian American youth by empowering them to be proud of themselves and understand how greater social dynamics shape their lived experiences. My project also aimed to create collective peace by shedding light on often common and unsaid experiences within a community context, while emphasizing the importance of improved education curriculums. Through my work, I learned more about how art and literature can be used synergistically as powerful education tools. I questioned the role of art as well; what is the difference between high and low art, what makes art matter, and how can art communicate in ways words cannot? Most importantly, I learned about delegating and shared responsibility to ensure successful programming. Prioritizing collaboration helped to prevent the emotional toll and fatigue often associated with DEI work. When I would feel symptoms of “diversity fatigue,” I reminded myself of my initial intentions behind proposing this project; that is, to instill my vision of a better society I could picture my younger self thriving in.

This project motivates me to continue learning about and addressing Asian American issues that ultimately affect all community members. My mentor this summer, Yukiyo Lida of Parent Community Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Group reminded me that sustainable, impactful change requires both top-down and bottom-up efforts. I intend to explore such approaches further by applying my insights this summer to the completion of my children’s book. I also intend to partner with organizations like *Make Us Visible* to advocate for curriculum change as a preventative measure against anti-Asian bullying and violence. This project has inspired me to keep asking difficult questions as a means to begin innovating and pursuing uplifting possibilities. I want to continue doing work that informs, inspires, and moves people into action because when we collectively join together, peace becomes all the more attainable.

### *Personal Statement*

To address the proliferation of anti-Asian violence, I worked with children this summer through self-designed outreach programming and events focused on cultural pride in the AAPI community as a means to inform, empower, and progress towards a more equitable and peaceful society. It is imperative to ensure that the materials and resources used to educate children are intentionally inclusive and representative of all populations; this is best achieved through strategic collaboration, creativity, and compassion. - Olivia Loo