

Let's Talk Vietnamese Community (recorded September 21, 2020) Audio Transcript

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AKEMI: My name is Akemi Chan-Imai, I'm the Program Manager of Oakland Asian Cultural Center. Today's conversation is part of OACC's Open E.A.R.S. for Change project that seeks to build stronger allyship among our API audiences with black communities and invite folks to engage activate and rise up to create a more diverse anti-racist culture. To learn more about OACC on this project I invite you to visit our website at www.oacc.cc.

I want to start off by asking you all to briefly introduce yourself and your organization for anyone listening who is not familiar with you.

DR. JENNIFER TRAN: My name is Jennifer Tran and I'm the executive director of the Oakland Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce. And I'm an Oakland native, and my background's in ethnic studies. I teach at Cal State East Bay and we've just been involved in a number of initiatives over the last few years and the work has only kicked up since the pandemic and the BLM [Black Lives Matter] movements.

JOSIE NGUYEN: Thank you for having us here today. My name is Josie Nguyen and I'm with PIVOT - The Progressive Vietnamese American Organization. Our mission is to engage and empower Vietnamese Americans for a just and diverse America through civic engagement mainly by supporting policies and candidates that are in line with our values. I serve on the board and I handle our social media.

VINA VO: Hi everyone really great to be in conversation with you all today. My name is Vina Vo and I'm a member of PIVOT. For those who are-unfamiliar with PIVOT, we're an all-volunteer organization. So it's really a labor of love and work that we all do--beyond just our day job. It's really amazing to see how many people, how many Vietnamese Americans across the country have come together to put together this organization that has been really an action for about 4 years now after the election. we have really coalesced around mobilizing more Progressive Vietnamese Americans in politics engaging and empowering folks around that. So the work that I've been doing specifically and more recently is, I've been organizing around battling anti-blackness and promoting anti-racism within our own Vietnamese community.

AKEMI: All right, thank you so much. My first question I wanted to start with Dr. Tran. What has been the conversation in our local Vietnamese communities regarding Black Lives Matter?

DR. JENNIFER TRAN: So since we work primarily with Vietnamese business owners in Oakland. For a long time, we have been focused, like centered, around community activation as a way to have alternative models for community safety. In Oakland were always thinking about how can we have more dialogue in the community and with the uprisings that was a moment in which we were able to capture, like a larger audience, and particularly young and Oakland residents who wanted to contribute to the conversation. And that's been around, kind of quieting the noise a little bit around the vandalism and the looting which was very prevalent, and think about what is our common ground. And our common ground when we think strategically for Vietnamese businesses is, yes, like we are not pleased with some of the consequences of the uprisings but at the same time there's no question that we are against police brutality.

Talking about BLM has been kind of triggering for folks because their livelihoods are immediately impacted. Using the opportunity prior to BLM and right now to say this is a time for us to demand more from our elected officials, more from our Public Services, and less about blaming and scapegoating different communities.

So particularly around anti-blackness in our communities and other predominantly immigrant communities, you know, we've been trying to think of it as: This is not just an Asian issue, but like, immigrant issues as well, or refugee issues in terms of what they come to this country with and thinking about opportunities, possibilities, meritocracy. And how a lot of it's about disappointment of how a lot of poor communities are not served.

AKEMI: You know, you are talking about finding the common ground so that business owners can really connect and feel that connection with Black Lives Matter and understand how it's, it's all a commonality that we share.

DR. TRAN: We're moving it from the individual, thinking about individual racism, to more systemic and structural racism. I mean, we're here with PIVOT, but pivoting the conversation from individual to systemic racism. Grasping the narrative in terms of "we all want the same thing." Black communities want to live with dignity, respect, quality education. Equal protections from this pandemic, right? And so really breaking down that, what they in terms of activists and community members want. The same thing that poor low-income Vietnamese and immigrant communities want and when you look at Oakland, and when you look at urban cities, our cities have been stratified based on who is deemed valuable and who is not valuable. And I really like the work that folks like PIVOT and other organizations have been doing in terms of providing kind of like a dialogue, a script, for people to begin testing those conversations out.

AKEMI: So I wanted to turn it to Vina and Josie and I'm particularly interested in hearing if there was a certain turning point for PIVOT to become even more outspoken about anti-racism and anti-Blackness in Vietnamese communities?

VINA: The turning point for PIVOT I think, was really, like most, not most, but like a lot of other organizations on this year really culminated with a death of George Floyd. But it wasn't only the death of George Floyd but also, you know, there was a string of deaths within I think three short months. There was Ahmaud Arbery, Nina Pop, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade. And it just, almost like every day you woke up and it was another black person who was murdered by police officers or vigilantes. And I guess it was put against this backdrop of the pandemic as well. And we started to see all of these systemic inequalities come out and you know, the death of these individuals isn't anything new to our, our nation and our nation's history. Within PIVOT, a lot of the members, they do their own work outside of PIVOT to combat anti-Blackness and to, and have voiced their opinions and have written op-eds and things on that. But as an organization, we didn't really have an effort really concentrated on dealing with this and I think that was really a breaking point for us and realizing that if we were truly trying to fight for a progressive democracy and a just America, that we needed to address anti-Blackness within our own community.

The approach that we're really taking is just really figuring it out within, like learning about the history of anti-Blackness, understanding internalized racism, understanding the difference between individual, systemic, institutional racism, understanding the difference between power and harm, and all of those elements that really come together to create all these issues within our society. So I think what PIVOT is now, is just really in that learning phase and ensuring that all of our members all across the country have that chance to learn, reflect, in order to thoughtfully act and react.

And because we're spread all across the country, we're all coming in from very different states

and cities and viewpoints and upbringings. And also, I think proximity to the Black community. That's also another important thing to point out [that] perhaps allows us to have a bit more empathy and to build a greater understanding. So for some Folks who have never lived around black people or know black people, they have a very different and skewed perception of what that community is like and rely on media or things that they see and to think about those communities.

JOSIE: So I'm just going to piggyback off of all those great things that Vina just said, you know as a progressive Vietnamese-American group, we've always supported anti-racism and anti-blackness efforts. As Vina mentioned, when we were founded in 2017, just a couple of months after Trump's election, it was very important for us to make civil rights a key priority in our platform, on our platform. The days and weeks following George's death was very emotional for many as you know, and we saw it reflected in our social media community and even within our organization. As an organization, we tried to provide informative and educational posts on issues such as systemic racism, police brutality, anti-blackness. It also helped us analyze our role in perpetuating that system as well. Many of us are refugees, immigrants, or their children. Vietnamese Americans or Vietnamese people have a history of denouncing injustice and fighting oppression. We also have been complicit in America systemic oppression and perpetuating the model minority myth. For many of us, it was the first time that we really learned about the connected history between Blacks and Vietnamese Americans. Specifically, how the civil rights activists in the '70s such as Bayard Rustin advocated for Southeast Asians to come to America. That was not something that many of us knew about, you know, we didn't know about the role that civil rights activists played in helping Southeast Asians in that regard or how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, all of that actually led to a change in immigration laws that allowed us to settle into the U.S. after the war. So it's very important for PIVOT to help not only educate ourselves but educated people who are listening to us and making sure that we understand why it's important to stand in solidarity with BLM.

AKEMI: My next question, this might be also to Josie because I was interested in learning more about PIVOT and your social media outreach strategy. I was looking at some of your posts in the early summer, a lot of it was focusing on providing bilingual resources and toolkits for younger folks to be able to communicate better with their Elders about anti-racism and Black Lives Matter. So I wanted to maybe hear a little bit about how you were strategizing and why it was important for you to focus on this demographic.

JOSIE: One of the earlier posts that we had, and probably one of our most liked and most shared post was actually something that we reposted from Amanda Pham. Her IG handle is @aphamphotos and it was a post where she and her dad had translated phrases and words to Vietnamese to help us talk about racism with our Vietnamese speaking elders. We started to get so many messages from younger folks expressing frustration and sadness that their parents didn't support BLM and the issues at hand. How can how do we understand the hypocrisy that we are seeing in our community? Like on the one hand, like at the same time that all of these protests around the killings of black people were going on, Asian Americans were decrying racism and hate crimes directed our own communities with because of COVID-19, but at the same time, how is it that so many elders offered no solidarity with those who were protesting the lives of the loss of Black lives? And so, we wanted a way to tell our elders that if we want people to show for us, then we have to stand in solidarity with others. We really wanted the Vietnamese community to understand how the civil rights leaders, particularly Black civil rights leaders, stood in solidarity with us, and

we wanted to remind our elders that we should be there for them now. You know, we should stand up for Black lives not out of a debt that we owe to anybody, but just out of decency.

While we did see a lot of frustration amongst the younger folks when they were talking to their parents, we also saw a lot of uplifting stories and one of my favorite ones is another one that was also widely shared on social media. [It] was this older Vietnamese father who was probably a bit more conservative until his children started talking to him about BLM and all the protests that were going on and trying to dismantle all the lies and the myths about how the protests were really violent, and all that stories and stuff and even explaining why violence may even be necessary in certain cases. He actually eventually changed his mind and really became to become a supporter of BLM. As an organization, PIVOT really wanted to be able to help facilitate that conversation because we were getting so many requests from people asking for talking points and Vietnamese and English and one of the things that we did besides providing the talking points as we also refer them to other groups that were being formed while all of this is going on groups like the Vietnamese Solidarity and Action Network. They provide a safe place on Facebook for people to share resources and stories or just a place for people to come and commiserate about their conversations that they were having with their relatives. There's another group called [Vietnamese], they have been providing these really well written pieces and that are very timely that they've translated from English pieces to Vietnamese. Those of us who aren't very well-spoken Vietnamese can share it with our relatives as well because they are just getting so much disinformation from Fox News or these other Vietnamese quote "media outlets" and as part of our election efforts, one of the things that we've also been doing is we created a project called vietfactcheck.org and it does exactly that. We are fact checking all the things that the GOP or Trump or Biden or whomever is saying that may not necessarily be correct, and we would just want to be able to help our elders and our family members see what the truth is, you know from a more unbiased standpoint.

AKEMI: Could you share some of the key issues or projects that you are currently working on?

DR. TRAN: In the beginning of the pandemic, we started working with all the other ethnic Chambers of Commerce to support small businesses and after about four months of lobbying and pushing, because [I] think it was like over 90% of Black Americans and Asian Americans weren't able to participate, and we're not thinking about people with like limited English language. We've been focusing on equity, and racial equity, and how do we achieve racial equity. So that's at the small business level and working with community organizations to build an East Oakland Alliance, with the Black Cultural Zone, the Unity Council, and how is it that we can unite the flats of Oakland, and I think that circle has been really generative just because we all like each other, you know, respect each other, we challenge each other. And the last few years, the bus rapid transit system has cut through about 9 miles of East Oakland, Around International [Blvd], we know as East 14th, that has been displacing small business owners at a more disproportionate rate than ever. Using these larger issues to unite immigrant and communities of color, a lot of us have relationships with community members and like I said, trying to move from a place of the pain points to a place of empowerment and deeper dialogue. So, really showing up for Good Good Eat, working with the Chinatown Chamber around Streetfest, and then Black Cultural Zone and East Oakland Collective around Akoma Market on Sundays. And really thinking about how we can support Fruitvale right now. [It] has the highest concentration of COVID cases in the county, so I think that what we've been working on as placemaking and placekeeping during this time. And one thing that we're not losing sight of is, how is it that we can continue to advocate for more affordable housing during this time? ...supporting policy-wise the repeal of Prop 209 as well.

AKEMI: Vina and Josie. I wanted to ask you the same question. What are some key issues or projects that PIVOT is currently focused on?

VINA: PIVOT has really been focusing on the upcoming election and not only presidential election, but also House and Senate. We've really been working up for this for the last four years just to mobilize more Vietnamese Americans to donate, to support, to get engaged, get informed around this, so our elections work. I think [we have] seven different projects. I'll try to name all of them.

One of them is really around voter registration and just getting in, providing voter protection. So getting more Vietnamese Americans to sign up to vote today, excited to go out to the polls, and to know all the rules and regulations that come with it. We have a bilingual resource that we send out to hopefully get to provide more language support for people to understand when the deadlines are happening, what mail ballots will look like, how to vote, and how to vote early. So that's one of the projects.

The other one as you mentioned was trying to fight disinformation. We have...like Facebook posts and Facebook groups from other Vietnamese groups out there, that have promoted a certain type of disinformation. So what we're trying to do is provide a counter to that in Vietnamese. We're really shifting to providing more bilingual resources so that our network is out to more folks in an effort to get more people out to vote.

We've also produced a video series with prominent Vietnamese celebrities, artist, influencers, and politicians, to get people to see how important their voices some of the people that are producing the video or some of the folks who actually record the videos for us like famous Vietnamese celebrities, you know, they even said that "I didn't think my voice matter as a Vietnamese American I didn't think it counted. But you know, I know it does and I know it's important for me and for my family to go out to vote" for this video series.

We're really excited about sharing that at the end of September and it will just be a way to you know, mobilize people, engage people, make this something that lets our voice matter and let your voice count.

We also are producing a bilingual voter guide to compare how Biden and Trump compare on certain policy issues like education, climate change, immigration, health...

We've also wanted to provide ways for people to take immediate action if that's something that they wanted to do. We've created a donation portal where if people donate through the PIVOT portal, it counts towards, it goes directly to the campaign, but it shows that campaign that the Vietnamese American voice and the Vietnamese American dollar is there to support their campaign. We have that real stuff and matching programs. So for example, if someone were to donate \$100 to the campaign, PIVOT will match that \$100. We also have some remote canvassing opportunities. Canvassing is a such an important way to engage our community, ask them to vote, give them the information they need in order to make informed decisions or just basic logistics information. So we have those opportunities where we provide the training and support to help folks get out and vote.

And then I want to bring it back to specifically our work to fight anti-Blackness. It's just really starting out like even though civil rights, civil rights is a huge pillar of our work feet getting really deep into what anti-Blackness means and how it has seeped in a community and how we can fight it is critical and it's important to name. So the work that we've been doing there is just really around education and learning so that our members can take that with them to the work that they either do with PIVOT or outside. And I think it's really important really critical to recognize that this sort of work happens at an individual level, but then has to happen at a really local and community levels. I think the work that Dr. Tran is doing is amazing, and that's where I really think the most impact is. Where you can actually see the lives of people change and you can you know, be in community with folks and it's not just an intellectual exercise. I think that's the challenge that I'm seeing with a lot; personally, like this in my own networks is that it becomes a

very intellectual activity. You learn a lot of definitions you learn about what anti-Blackness is, hypothetically, but if you're not living it and you're not understanding it and you're not committing to some form of action, then it becomes purely an intellectual exercise and you're not truly living that sort of anti-racist life and living these principles. But then you have to have that balance as well of you need that education. You need to be informed, you need to deal with your own internalized racism and oppression before you ask, so I see kind of two realms like some people keep it very intellectual and then some folks want to take action immediately.

And I think that you can actually cause more harm if you take action immediately without recognizing the issues that are at play. So I just want to kind of call out our, a member of PIVOT who's really been helping me think about this work and really shaping this work: her name is Nikki Chow, and she's an activist out of Seattle.

And so we've been really thinking about how do we get really intentional about this work with it? How do we also help people think about how they can affect their community? As I mentioned, we have folks coming in from all over the country. So how do they take this education and then take action, take initiative, in their own organizations and community wherever they're from.

AKEMI: How can listeners support your work at this time?

VINA: If folks are interested in being a part of our organization, you don't have to be Vietnamese, I just want to put that out there. We are a network of Vietnamese Americans, but you don't have to be Vietnamese to join if you feel compelled by the cause and the work that we're doing just to join. We're all volunteer-based and we'd love to have more and more people come. There's plenty of things for us to do in preparation of the election so you can visit our website and join as a member and we'll get you right start get you started on any projects that you may be interested in.

Another way I think to support is through donating through our campaign portal elections-wise. I wish this wasn't the case, but the money that goes into campaigns helps pay staff, helps pay outreach materials, things of that sort. So another way to support is through our donation portal and ensuring that Progressive candidates get the dollars they need to support their campaign.

AKEMI: Thank you. Dr. Tran, what are ways that listeners can support your work?

DR. TRAN: Actually building community across organizations is very important right now because I think that seeing is believing, you know, and when you see diverse communities coming out just because of the relationships, it becomes very organic. We've always been very resourceful people, but volunteering time in terms of how is it that you can support business. One of the challenges that we have is that most of our Vietnamese young leaders are not bilingual, right? And so how can we support businesses and community members when the heart is all there, but the communication is lacking? So that's something that we could use support on just like, how is it that we can expand the scale given the capacity or limit based on you know, where people are at right now. [It] is a really wonderful opportunity for groups like PIVOT, OACC, and other like mono-ethnic groups to think about how we can continue to impact and have these critical conversations within our communities, but also like kind of change the images; how, what would like a multi-racial organization that is community led, what's that look like? I'm not quite sure. Because that's something based on the community's decision, you know, but that's something that we have to think about given that Oakland is very integrated.

AKEMI: I wanted to ask each of you, what is one final takeaway that you wish our listeners to have in their mind? How can they make the difference? How can we make a change?

DR. TRAN: I think it's really important for us to remember that we want to move beyond a moment and build movement. For people who are fired up right now and have never learned about this, how is it that maybe the previous generation can animate like the new leaders, you know? Because we have a lot of new volunteers, people learning a lot, and I think because the older generation might feel jaded, I'm talking about like progressives perhaps, but this is a time where that support would really help fuel people's sustainability and just desire to know that this work is hard, this work is a labor of love, oftentimes all volunteer run. And because of the nature of community organizing, we're bound to run into some moments of tension and difficulties. But how can we be really committed to this longer road to justice and freedom?

JOSIE: Dr. Tran, I really want to thank you for all the work that you're doing in the community because you are the ones that are out there talking to the people and really getting through and I think that's much more important than just us, you know, sitting here with our social media posts and telling people here's the here at the talking points. So what you are doing is very, very important and I really want to thank you for that. I think my takeaway is this recent survey from API Vote and AAPI data that showed that Vietnamese Americans is the only Asian group that is going for Trump. I think the numbers are 48% for Trump and 36% for Biden and the rest is undecided. Our goal right now is to collect our people and try to convince them that, try to convince the 48% that is supporting Trump and the 16% that's undecided that Joe Biden and the Democrats will support anti-racism no matter what race you're talking about. But a big part of that is getting the 48% and 16% on board with the notion that racism against any ethnic group directly impacts us as Vietnamese Americans and dismantling white supremacy directly uplifts our people. We just want people to get out and vote. That's the main message from us.

VINA: I think really during this time really preserve your energy to care of yourself and kind of figure out where your priorities are and channel it towards that. I've heard a lot of people having conversations with their family members and some of them are very painful and hurtful, and if it is draining your energy to the point where you can't fight the fight elsewhere, I would encourage you to perhaps re-shift that energy and re-shift that direction towards something that maybe could make an impact.

My grandfather for example is a Trump supporter. We've had actually a very cordial conversations about it, but at the end of the day, I know that he is not going to change his mind and we've had our conversation we have agreed to disagree on a lot of things. And so my energy is going to be put in various places where I think I actually can make an impact. When Josie was sharing that survey, I'd like to go after the folks who haven't decided yet, who don't know how to vote, who don't think their vote matters. I just encourage anyone listening to protect yourself and your energy and channel it in the way that you think will give you some sort of joy and give you some sort of hope.

AKEMI: All right. Thank you so much. That was such a wonderful note to end our conversation today and I hope that our conversation spurs more dialogue for anyone who's listening and wants to get involved in your work. So once again, I want to thank all of you. Thank you. Dr. Tran, Vina and Josie for sharing your perspectives and more about your work.

[outro music plays]