

Referring to himself as the "undisputed unofficial Asian American photographer laureate," Corky Lee understood the power of visibility in the fight for political, economic, and social equality for marginalized groups like the Asian American community.

Born and raised in Queens to a father who owned a laundry and a mother who was a seamstress, Corky became politicized while working as a young community organizer fresh out of Queens College. A history major, an emerging artist and son of a World War II veteran and "paper son," Corky joined the Basement Workshop, the first Asian American political and arts organization in New York City founded in opposition to the Vietnam War, in the 1970s. Combining his love for photography with activism at a time when the Asian American movement was getting underway to his untimely death in 2021, he inspired many nationwide — artists and non-artists alike — with his unrelenting and increasingly sophisticated "artivism." Disturbed by the missing or stereotypical images of Asian Americans in the recounting of American history or issues of injustice, he photographed countless protests, rallies, funerals, festivals, and community events spanning 50 years. Often unpaid and on his own initiative, he documented the everyday struggles, pulse, and joys of the Asian American immigrant community. In high school, Corky was troubled to learn that thousands of Chinese laborers built the transcontinental railroad, but history books and museums were void of their faces. His greatest contribution to photographic justice was the fulfillment of his lifelong dream to reenact the infamous 1869 photo of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in Utah in 2014 with scores of Asian Americans featured, some whose ancestors were the invisible railroad workers.

An iconic role model nationwide, Corky taught us through photography to portray the most vulnerable, to reclaim our identity, and to define ourselves. He challenged us to constantly capture the AAPI struggle for equality in our streets, the workplace, at the polls, and within our own families. Unassuming and straightforward, he made his legendary mission clear. In order for the Asian American experience to both have its rightful place in history and to impact present day policy making at every level of government, we must be seen and our stories told.

Indeed, my treasured memories of working with Corky underscored his mission. For the 9/11 pictorial book by the Organization of Chinese Americans, *Voices of Healing, Spirit and Unity After 9/11 in the Asian American and Pacific Islander Community*, Corky was the photographer and I, one of the writers. The purpose of the book was to record the loss, heroism, and resilience of the AAPI community as a result of 9/11. Photographing the victims' families was heart wrenching, but Corky was in control, guided by his mission. He gave clear yet gentle instructions to them — where to look, how to sit, and what mementos of their loved one to place in the background for the photo shoot.

Ten years later, Corky's photos highlighted again the ultimate price paid by an Asian American in the name of patriotism. Private Danny Chen, a 19-year-old Chinatown son was found dead in 2011 in Afghanistan after weeks of unrelenting hazing and racial

maltreatment by his supervisors. I was President of OCA-NY, the lead organization advocating for justice for Private Danny Chen. At his funeral and every annual commemoration since, Corky was there, camera in hand. His photos of Danny's grieving parents and the community outrage implored America to question, "What does it take to be an American?"

The 21 artists in the exhibition "Corky Lee on My Mind" knew him as their friend, mentor, or colleague. Their photos chosen to honor him say a "thousand words" about the impact he had on their lives and for generations to come. For AAPIs, this exhibit is affirming. We were undeniably there — from the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, to fighting in U.S. wars abroad while being interned at home, to saving lives as first responders during 9/11 while being labeled terrorist in addition to perpetual foreigner. Fast forward to the spike in anti-Asian hate crimes as a result of racism and xenophobia related to COVID-19. In this checkered photographic timeline, we see ourselves in the past, present, and future. Pride, culture and tradition weave openly and seamlessly throughout the exhibit, a testament to Corky's belief that integration, not assimilation, is the key to mutual respect.

This exhibition will withstand the test of time. AAPIs are continuing to fight both COVID-19 and its violent backlash while trying to economically survive. As we inch forward transitioning to a majority minority country in 2045, "Corky Lee on My Mind" challenges everyone to look beyond stereotypes, go deeper, and embrace each other as equals, individuals, and humans. Corky would want each of us to translate that challenge into action. His legacy is alive when we are inclusive in our work and home environments valuing individual and collective perspectives. We honor Corky when we are visible in all occupations, including the media and government; serve on community boards; and speak out against injustice anywhere.

Rest in Peace Corky. Your foot soldiers will carry on your message of visibility, inclusion, and equality.

Elizabeth R. OuYang
Civil Rights Lawyer, Educator, and Activist

Ms. OuYang can be seen holding the sign, "Corky, We Love U," in [Alan S. Chin's photograph](#) in this exhibition.