

HENRY LO

My name is Henry Lo. I have lived in the city of Monterey Park for about 15 years now. I was born and raised in Chinatown. My family later moved to El Sereno in Northeast Los Angeles. I am a council member for Monterey Park .

‘There was a lot of cautious optimism.’

The morning of January 21, 2023, Lunar New Year's Eve, started out as a very hopeful and exciting moment for my community. For us, it was the first time since 2020 and the global pandemic in which we were able to hold an event for Lunar New Year. It was a very joyous occasion because we felt we had turned the corner on a lot of challenges.

For me and a lot of folks in the community, it was a new dawn, a new day, after going through a lot of uncertainty. During the depths of the pandemic, we saw a rise of anti-Asian sentiment. Locally, in many of our communities that had large Asian populations, we would hear anecdotally of people being harassed or witnessing on the news people being physically assaulted. It was a scary moment. As the [COVID-19] infections went down, and it appeared people were safely able to gather again, there was a lot of cautious optimism.

I remember that day there was a very celebratory mood. You saw a lot of people on the streets. And, for me at least, I felt a lot of gratitude that we had made it this far. I think many people out in the crowd felt that this was a reward for everything we had endured. Here was our party to celebrate a beloved community cultural event being able to happen again, but also the eve of a Lunar New Year. For cultures that observe Lunar New Year, it's a time of renewal, a time of turning the page. I think the morning felt like better horizons are ahead of us. For me, because I was in my final week as Mayor [of Monterey Park]¹, I felt it was a day of celebration for myself as well. I was patting myself on the back thinking, *well, we made it through the year! I am ready to pass the gavel onto the next mayor. I can say, “Job well done!” to myself.*

¹ Henry Lo served as Monterey Park Mayor from December 2021 to January 2023.

Earlier in the day, we had a very successful and festive ceremony for our Lunar New Year event. I didn't realize something wasn't right until that evening. I decided to go out with some friends, and we were out at a bar in West Hollywood. I remember I was having drinks, running into people I hadn't seen for a while because of the pandemic. I remember that it was a fun moment. I thought, *this is great. It's New Year's Eve and I'm out with friends.*

'There's a gunman loose, protect yourself.'

The shooting occurred around 10:20 p.m. Within 10-15 minutes after that—I'm still at this bar — and people who know me start coming up to me and said, “Hey, did you see this?” And I said, “See what?” People start showing me tweets from people who were back in Monterey Park saying, “There’s a gunman loose, protect yourself.” And I remember thinking, *wait, what is this?* Especially when it comes to social media, I thought, *is this an exaggeration?* Within moments, my phone just started exploding. The intensity started. Texts started coming in saying, “Hey, something's going on in the city. What's going on?” I realized something terrible had happened and I remember my exact words were, “Oh, s--t, I need to go back.” I remember those who were showing me the tweets and the messages at the bar had a look of horror on their faces. It all processed fast. I remember running out of that bar and not even saying goodbye. I remember texting my friends, “I need to go. Something's happened. I think there's a shooting and I need to go back.”

On the way back, I was on the phone with my City Manager trying to get more information. As I had a chance to get in my house and sit down on the couch, that's when I started realizing, *okay, this is really serious.* Even on the news, all they could say to the incident was “stand by.” I couldn't get any details.

By 3 a.m., I'm getting phone calls left and right from everyone asking me for a statement, which I didn't have then. I remember sitting in the dark, in my living room, on the couch, hearing the buzz of helicopters and sirens and the acceleration of police cars, and my phone ringing. I told myself, *I need to go into City Hall ASAP because once the world wakes up there's going to be a lot of questions, a lot of shock, and a lot of answers.*

'Is this really happening?'

The moment the sun came out, I went to City Hall. It was a very surreal moment. It's New Year's Day and I thought, *is this really happening?* I remember driving past it (the Ballroom where the shooting occurred), seeing the yellow tape. You could still see police cars. That's what I remember – it was still a crime scene.

That morning was a blur. I swear it felt like within an hour [I was] standing along with other community leaders in front of City Hall. There were probably 50 cameras asking, “What's going on?” I'm

standing there with everyone, tearing up. As I am listening to all the facts, I'm also in my head thinking, *oh my God, what am I going to say?* Because as much as I am processing, I am experiencing shock, fright, and anxiety about what's going on. When it was my turn, whatever I was feeling up until the moment I stepped onto podium, I had to gather my thoughts and say something with reassurance to the community and restating what little I knew about the information at the time. We didn't have a name [of the shooter] yet. There were probably four briefings throughout the day. I think not until the third [briefing] did we identify the name, and it was disclosed that he had gone to downtown Alhambra [after the shooting].

It was still Lunar New Year's Day and a lot had already happened between 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. But I'm like, *oh my God, I got to call my mom*, and I say, "Hi Mom, Happy New Year. By the way, I don't know if you heard the news, but something happened, and I can't come home." Here's the funny thing: my mother felt that somehow, *it happened in Monterey Park and my son is Mayor, but it probably doesn't really involve him*. So, she asked, "What time are you coming home?" I said, "I don't know what time I'm coming home." She's like, "Why not? It's New Year's Day." It's an important holiday. It's a time of gathering for families. I remember saying, "Mom, I'll call you later. I can't come home. I'm sorry, but you guys celebrate on your own."

'It seemed so senseless.'

For almost an entire year, I never mentioned his name. He committed such a heinous crime; I felt that he doesn't deserve the right to have his name acknowledged. When I spoke publicly, I always mentioned the 11 victims, never him. But by that next morning, we did find out [his name]. He had taken a weapon he had owned for many years and fashioned it into a semi-automatic weapon, taken it to Star Ballroom, started shooting people left and right. Then [he] decided to go to the Lai Lai Ballroom in Alhambra. Lucky for the community, it was closed. When he got there, he was confronted by another man who disarmed him and probably saved a lot of lives. Throughout the day, we were all trying to figure out a motive. Everyone was seeing things piecemeal: *okay, we found out a name. Okay, we found an age, I think he was in his 60s. He had a connection to the ballroom because he had met his ex-wife there. He had friends there, so he had a connection*. But there was no real reason as to why he did what he did, and it seemed so senseless. And then, probably into the late afternoon, we heard in real time, along with the media and the community, that they had found the van [the shooter] was in thanks to surveillance cameras and he had committed suicide. I remember when we did that afternoon's press conference, we felt the need to reassure everyone that he didn't hurt anyone else while he was still at large. It was quite a sense of relief. But that was short lived because there was still the lingering question of what to do, how to make sense of everything that happened. There are still the victims that were killed, their family members who now have to deal with the aftermath,

the community. For me, *how am I going to process everything and then be able to articulate this to the community and the world?*

I don't think I've had a chance to check in on myself even though it's been a year now. Who knows, maybe I'll have to seek counseling at one point. But I will say that the moment where I did let my guard down was later that evening, Sunday evening. By that point I felt like it was time to go home because we'd already done our press conferences, the shooter was identified and [confirmed dead], so I thought okay, *it's like 10 or 11 p.m. It's still Lunar New Year's Day, and I still promised my mom that I would come over for dinner.* For my mom, she was happy I'm home. But for myself, the whole 24 hours really hit me as I was sitting down for dinner. I'm thinking to myself, *you know what, I am here with my mother doing something so normal, so basic, as having dinner with a family member during a holiday.* It hit me at that point that we have 11 victims whose families have now been shattered, not to mention the bystanders, the whole community that's in shock. That's when it really hit me hard.

'I was still on autopilot months later.'

Monterey Park, it's always been viewed as a safe, suburban community. To the Asian American community, it is very important because it's been written in academia as the first suburban Chinatown, so many people have some connection. You go to events to meet people, you always hear someone say, "Oh, I grew up there," or "My relative or a friend lives there." It has a lot of cultural, historic significance. Knowing that, I realized I didn't have time to mourn. I didn't have time to process. I need to think fast and compose my thoughts and start getting in front of the camera and start reassuring the world and the community, so pretty much was on autopilot. I was pretty much glued to my iPad at my desk at City Hall doing countless interviews.

It was a lot of weight on all of us as council members and leaders because we shared a responsibility to continue to talk to the media, to the public. But at the same time, [thinking about] what can we do with our limited capacity as a small municipal government to start this pathway of recovery, to make sure that not just the victims, but the community had a way to process, to heal, to be able to not cope with this alone. Also, speaking out about the larger issues that this incident amplifies – gun violence in America, domestic violence, all of these issues that come with the trauma being a refugee from war. All those issues, which this incident amplified, and how to really speak about those issues and address them. I was still on autopilot months later, only giving myself the capacity to process enough so I was able to respond publicly about what to do.

In hindsight, there were things we could have done better. I know the trauma response from the County, especially for the victims, was pretty rapid. But I know the community thought they were being

kept in the dark. When we think about those pressers (press conferences), maybe they should have been bilingual, having a moment where one of us was able to conduct responses in [other] languages would have been helpful to the community. But it wasn't mobilized in a way that helped reassure.

I will do my best to carry on.'

Recorded at:
Alhambra,
Los Angeles County, CA
05/17/24
5:00 pm

When I look back, everyone at that moment was like, "How are you keeping it together?" "I don't know how I'm keeping it together. I don't know." I didn't have time. Well, it's been over a year now. We've had our vigil. We've had a chance to reflect and continue to make sure that we have the resources to help the community because we know recovery does not happen in months. And we continue to ask, while also doing the business of the city, what else can we do? So that's an ongoing project. I don't know. I feel like sometimes I'm still on autopilot. Maybe I don't have time, or maybe I have to make time for myself to process everything. Maybe at some point it's going to manifest itself in some way. But at the moment, just like last year, I tell myself, *I have a task to do*. I have many tasks to do, and I will do my best to carry on.

