

JOHN YI

My name is John Yi. I've lived in Koreatown for the past 13 years. I commute to work in Downtown LA on almost a daily basis. I take the subway and bus almost every day. Public transit is a big part of my life. My commute is only five stops. It's short – on a bus 20 minutes, train 15 minutes. It's incredibly convenient for me. I enjoy public transit. It's a real source of joy for me, not just a mode of transportation. Given my background, activism, and running for office, it's also a statement for me to use public transit.

'I heard stories about it, but I didn't see it personally affecting my life.'

I was hit. I was hit at the 7th [Street] Metro station. This was in the fall of last year [2023]. It was on the street level as I was entering to go down the escalator onto the platform. I was leaving my office, which was literally a block walk.

To give a bit of context, during the pandemic it was rough. There were a lot of drug users on the subways, a lot of mental health crises going on, and not a lot of subway riders. So, it was this vacant space. People who are marginalized often occupy vacant space, and it is oftentimes people taking transit who see the frontlines. And with all the AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) hate [starting in 2020 around COVID], I definitely was a little more wary. But it didn't stop me from using public spaces. It didn't stop me from taking the subway. It didn't stop me from taking the train. I felt confident in these areas because I had been so familiar with it. It's not like it was a new thing. It was the intensities that changed during the pandemic.

I heard stories about AAPI hate but I didn't see it personally affecting my life as much. I think I could attribute it to that I'm a male. I'm a little broader set so I feel like I carry a little more confidence with me. And there's never been any incidents before. I never particularly felt like I was a victim of it.

On the day this happened, I was heading home like any other day. Then I see this disheveled guy walking toward me. I didn't think much of it because I've been in those situations before where people play a game with pedestrians where they try to approach you to see if you react. What I've learned is you focus on yourself, you keep going. I thought it was one of those situations. But he kept walking toward me and then rolled [his] fist into a ball and held it back. And then he swung. And I saw his fist. At first, I was like, *oh my God, that's going for me, like he's going to hit me*. It was one of those surreal moments, when time went really slow, and he hit me in the face. And I laughed. That was my first reaction, like, *what the heck just happened?* My nose hurt. It wasn't like I was bleeding, but it hurt. And my initial reaction was laughter like, *oh my God, that*

really happened to me, and I saw it coming. For a while I was thinking, *wait, what do I do?* And then I actually went to look for him. I don't know why I was looking for him because I don't know what I would have done. I needed something to do. Then I thought, *I need to find the authorities. Find the police. That's their job.* I went down again to the platform on the subway. I saw two police officers standing there and I said, “Hey, someone hit me on the street level.” Their reaction was, “Well, it's going to be your word against theirs because we weren't there to witness it.” A part of me thought, *I guess that's true. Unless there are cameras, how can we prove it, right? I can say anyone hit me at that point.* I remember I acquiesced so quickly. I remember later I thought, *why did I let that go so quickly? Why didn't I seek more recourse?*

I think it's a cultural thing. I didn't chip it off as being Asian American, but I took it as is. *Like, what can I possibly do to get justice from this?* I realized, at that point, that I can't get justice from this, so I've got to move on and figure out what else I'm going to do about it. Do I want to drag myself into pursuing a case against someone who's clearly far more vulnerable than I am? As a pedestrian advocate, we talk a lot about public spaces being the frontline of our social crises, working class families seeing it first versus anyone else. I was like, *alright, it's okay. I can't do anything.* So, I went up. Even [as] I got to the platform, I was like, *I don't want to take the subway because I don't feel safe.* I wanted to get out of there. And then it started really hitting me that I was assaulted. Someone actually hit me in the face, and there's going to be no recourse about it. After I had no options of actions to take, I realized, *how do I feel about it?* And I texted KADC (Korean American Democratic Committee). We have a chat group we're all on. This is my second time where something happened to me, and I messaged the group.

I know what it feels like to be assaulted.'

Another hate crime happened to me in Chinatown two years before. I was at a bar drinking with a friend. There were these two white guys, who were clearly drunk, talking to the bartender who was Asian. The guy ordered a drink, then as the [bartender] walked away, he said, “Me love you long time.” So, I turned to him and said, “You know, you can't say that.” And he said, “Shut up f---t!” and walked out. I wasn't assaulted, but I thought, *I can't believe this is happening.* It really pissed me off. It was one of those moments where I think back and wish I did more. I wish I said more. This is before there was a greater level of activation in me as an Asian American. Who knows, maybe if this was a few years later, I would still have paralysis. But I wish I'd done more. It was like feeling blindsided. I mean, who still says that? And the f---t part, how do you even know I'm gay? You're right... but I was dressed in a work suit. How could you even tell? I remember, for weeks following, I kept playing through my mind what I wish I had said to him had I been back there. And that's when I texted KADC the first time.

So, for this second incident, I texted KADC, “Hey, I just got hit at the subway station. Can you believe this happened? I need someone to tell the story to.” I guess I realized in my head that I thought this was an AAPI hate crime because I told a bunch of other Asian Americans. I messaged David, my partner, as well. One of the [KADC] Board Members, Caroline, called me and she was like, “Where are you?” “I’m downtown around the subway station.” And she’s like, “How are you doing?” “Oh, I’m fine.” But then I started crying and I didn’t expect that at all. In a way, I know what it feels like to be assaulted. I know what it feels like to be publicly humiliated, to be hit by someone, to have absolutely no recourse. And commiseration is the only thing that you’re left to turn to. I cried on the phone with her saying, “Yeah, I got hit.” I was laughing and crying. And she’s like, “I’m going to pick you up and I’ll drive you home.” And the feeling of having someone there with me was so comforting. It made me cry more because I felt like I had been through so much. And you also realize how lonely this must feel if you have to suffer in silence. Then I got angry.

I carried that shame with me.’

For about two months, I never took the subway. I stopped taking the subway because of what happened. If I wanted to take the subway, I would have to enter through another Metro exit. But the closest one was where I got hit and I didn’t want to risk myself seeing that guy again or other folks who hung around out of embarrassment. After I got hit, there were a number of people there and no one said anything. So, I was embarrassed to carry my own shame about it. And why should I carry shame when I’m the one assaulted, right? But I carried that shame with me. I didn’t want to go there because *oh, that was the guy that got hit*. So, for a good few months, I intentionally did not take the subway.

Eventually, I did go back. With time, I was able to process this contextually – knowing that I’m a transit rider, that I’m not the only one this happens to, that I’m part of a larger people (Asian Americans) going through this together. I’m not suffering in silence on my own. I think that helped me process the grief. If this was by myself, if this was like 10 years ago, it’d be far different. I probably wouldn’t have told anyone. Would I have gone back to the Metro as quickly? Would I have been more fearful of public spaces and public transit? Probably, yes. Being in the collective helped me process it. I’m an activist. I’ve been in these circles and talk about these issues. But pardon me, I was also f---ing pissed. At one point, I was like, *if this guy dies, I’d be totally okay*. That’s how angry I was. But I’m also the activist and the person who understands these things. You have this feeling like, *this is what I stand for. I can’t let this bring me down*. Yet you have the human, natural part of you that is angry, like a fury.

'It is community that gets you through it.'

With time, eventually I talked about it to people a lot because I wanted to share the story, but also it fit into the narrative of my work. I'm a pedestrian advocate and we're always talking about the importance of public spaces and public safety. Just because there's police, doesn't mean there's safety. So, I think sharing the story with other people like, *yeah, I too, was a victim of this. I was a victim of AAPI hate*. I use my story to tell others about AAPI hate and the importance of public safety in public spaces.

Actually, this made me have a far more nuanced position on police officers. I get it now when I talk to Korean seniors, and they want police officers in the subway station. It made me more sympathetic to those kinds of demands. A by-product of that incident is that it made me understand there's a bit more nuance when communicating and understanding what safety can look like, and reimagining what that safety is. There could be a divergence on that and understanding how to communicate from both sides to understand each other.

After these two incidences of trauma – being assaulted and the verbal harassment – it's very clear the common denominators. I texted a group of people I trusted and loved. It is community that gets you through it. My body told me I needed to get this out because I would explode if I sat by myself, if I had to suffer in silence. Being Asian, culturally, we don't talk about this stuff. We keep our mouths closed. We don't share what's happening to us. I'm realizing this right now. Sharing is good. It's like, when that happens, there's a fire [that] sits in you and you have all this smoke that comes out of the fire. And you have to release it somehow, right?

In both situations, I was looking for recourse. Is there a way to explore how recourse can happen that doesn't require someone to make a court case to prove that they've been a victim? What if it was something like Stop AAPI Hate (a nonprofit organization that tracks self-reported incidents of hate and discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States), but for the County¹?

'Make people feel supported and heard.'

What if the police officers had said to me, “You know what, I understand there's AAPI hate going on.” If police officers did a training where all the officers were trained about AAPI hate, how it's prevalent. [If they said,] “We're sorry you're going through this. Here's a resource line. You should report your

¹ 211 LA is a community-centered system that offers a way to report hate incidents. It is not affiliated with law enforcement. 211 LA only shares reports with partner agencies providing hate prevention, advocacy, and counseling services, as well as the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations. – lavshate.org/report-hate

Recorded at:
Koreatown,
Los Angeles County, CA
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8:30 a.m.

incident.” Look, I'm not going to get justice in the court system. I'm not going to get financial compensation. But if that officer had given me a small card and said, “Call this number. You should report your crime even though we can't give you recourse,” my whole life would have been different, right? If the police officer, someone in authority who I immediately look to for recourse, can provide me with a clear outline, then for me, there is a larger system at play here that considers my experience, understands that this has happened, and can put me into a space to let it out.

I have incredible faith in government. If the government can do things right, we can do incredible things. I do not feel like solving hate can be done merely through social activations. Government is a key player in this space. And we need more action from them.

