

## Supporting Survivors with a History of Incarceration: Interview with Eddy Zheng and Ben Wang Asian Prisoner Support Committee

*[Kaitlin Kall](#) of the Vera Institute of Justice and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims spoke with Co-Directors Ben Wang and Eddy Zheng of the [Asian Prisoner Support Committee](#) (APSC). APSC provides direct support to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Asian and Pacific Islanders (API) in California and works to raise awareness of the growing number of API community members facing imprisonment and deportation. Eddy's personal journey from incarceration to healing and freedom is chronicled in the documentary [Breathin': The Eddy Zheng Story](#), which was directed and produced by Ben.*

### **How was the Asian Prisoner Support Committee established?**

**Ben:** APSC was founded in 2002. Originally, the organization came together to support three Asian American individuals who were incarcerated in California: Eddy Zheng, Rico Riemedio, and Mike Ngo. Eddy and the others had been advocating for the integration of Asian and Asian American ethnic studies into the college in prison program. Due to their advocacy, they were sent to solitary confinement. A campaign to free them from solitary was coordinated by community leaders and defense attorneys, which then became the APSC. The first 10 years was all volunteer run; we functioned as a grassroots organization. Since 2017, we've had full-time staff. We provide reentry programming, programming in prisons, and we work to support people in immigration detention and facing deportation.

### **What type of reentry support does APSC offer?**

**Ben:** We provide concrete services such as helping people get identification, sign up for healthcare and other social services, and locate assistance with legal and immigration issues. We provide a free bicycle to each person for transportation through Ke Lam, APSC Reentry Coordinator. We also have a community ambassador program, which employs people to work in and give back to their local communities.

### **What type of programming do you offer currently incarcerated people?**

**Eddy:** We created a program inside San Quentin Prison called Restoring Our Original True Selves (ROOTS). It's modeled on an ethnic studies curriculum, and we created it with the help of API leaders incarcerated at the prison. It takes a culturally competent approach to addressing intergenerational trauma. It's been going for six years and is very successful; it always has a waiting list.

### **Facilitating healing from historical and individual trauma is central to APSC's mission. What types of trauma and victimization histories have your participants experienced?**

**Ben:** A lot of people in our programs were impacted by war and in some cases genocide, like in Cambodia. In our classes, being a victim of violence, particularly at a very young age, is a common theme. Many have witnessed gun violence firsthand and have lost loved ones in shootings. Sometimes we see people whose crimes were directly connected to that victimization or the impact was so great that it set people on a path to incarceration.

Domestic violence is also an issue. Many have experienced physical, sexual, and emotional childhood abuse. It's very common for our participants to have witnessed the male figures in their home act violently against their mothers. We discuss how this has impacted their lives and their concept of masculinity. Toxic masculinity is a core issue that people work to unpack in our programs.

### **How can cultural and ethnic studies help facilitate healing from victimization and trauma?**

**Eddy:** We use cultural strategies to address trauma, building on an ethnic studies approach of learning about your heritage and cultural traditions. Because of the [model minority myth](#), it's very disempowering for the refugees and immigrants who feel like they don't fit into this stereotype. We take a culturally competent approach to addressing longstanding and intergenerational trauma.

**Ben:** Related to intergenerational trauma, learning about one's community history can be healing. In particular, it helps our participants to better understand where their parents came from. In many households, parents did not discuss the trauma of war, genocide, and refugee camps. Hearing from community elders can

help our participants better understand their parents and their upbringings. By educating people about the historical trauma and oppression their communities have experienced, this can open a door for them to better process their own trauma and victimization.

### **Why are multilingual services so important for the API community?**

**Eddy:** The API community is very linguistically diverse and many, especially refugee populations, do not have fluency in English. When we talk about cultural competency, language access is really important. In the Asian American community, many don't talk about issues such as incarceration, LGBTQ identities, mental illness, or domestic violence. Because of this silence and cultural shame, culturally competent services for these issues don't really exist for us. Most existing services for these types of issues are only offered in English and therefore, it's hard to seek help for these things because of language and cultural barriers.

### **Why do you think healing from historical trauma and victimization should be a more central component to reentry?**

**Eddy:** We come out of prison with the trauma of being isolated from the free world, from experiencing violence and victimization, and from being looked at differently due to the stigma of being formerly incarcerated. But there hasn't been a lot of attention paid to creating culturally competent spaces and programs that heal these types of traumas, whether it's overt trauma or insidious trauma that people carry with them. A lot of formerly incarcerated people are carrying these traumas. And while they may appear like they're functioning, many are struggling with shame and stigma. We need to provide culturally relevant ways for people to transform, heal, and be whole after incarceration.

*To learn more about the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims and other available resources, please contact [reachingvictims@vera.org](mailto:reachingvictims@vera.org).*