



Say hello and I will smile

by Irene Kai, Monday, February 22nd 2021

*"Despite all the challenges, I remain hopeful as I think about rebuilding an even stronger, more inclusive, more resilient Oregon."*

— Governor Kate Brown

I immigrated to this country from Hong Kong when I was 15, living in New York Chinatown. I lived in London while pursuing my MFA degree and traveled to many countries for business around the world. Wherever I went, I was identified as an American. I spoke English with an American accent. I dressed like one and had a very open attitude. Even when I went back to China and spoke fluent Chinese, they still asked if I am visiting from America.

In the U.S., I was told on countless occasions to go back to where I came from.

There was an ease living in big cities. The exposure to many different cultures through schools, work and food made everyone appreciate the complexity of being different. When I first encounter new acquaintances, my attitude is curiosity that promotes self-awareness to appreciate my own uniqueness. We are all in the same boat.

I came to Ashland 24 years ago. First, I noticed the "look" when I walked down the street with my Eurasian children. For the first time since I immigrated to this country, I was very self-conscious of not being white.

I currently teach at Rogue Community College. I have encountered older white male students who were outright hostile and refused to take instruction from a nonwhite woman. There are laws to protect us from discrimination, but it is difficult to articulate microaggressions.

I was invited to a gala event outside of my usual circle. I sat at a table with other guests. An older lady who sat next to me gave me that “look” and asked why I was sitting at the table and if I worked there. This is not an uncommon occurrence. I had work staff ask me if I worked at a facility when I was touring with the owner.

Rebuilding our community takes all of us, especially given the history of Oregon. Our state was America’s first and only state to begin as “whites-only.” The original constitution banned Black people from the state, and the law stayed in the constitution for well over 100 years.

Cultural literacy is not a concept but a practice. Having a Black Lives Matter sign on your lawn is nice but it doesn’t explicitly exempt you from being a racist. It is your daily action that shows your intent. People are affected by your actions. Each one of us carries memories of our family that go back hundreds of years whether we are conscious of it or not. The memories dictate our attitude and world views.

As recently as 2019, when I organized the Ashland Global Peace Conference, a small group of Ashland community members opposed one of the guest speakers at our conference. I was viciously attacked by this group on social media, and they threatened to crash the conference.

Ashland is a small town; the toxicity of dominance and power grabs adds to the stress of our struggles from the economic instability caused by the pandemic and wildfires. The history of — and still ongoing — racial injustice put so much added stress on the Black, Indigenous and people of color in our community. As a woman of color inspired by Gov. Brown, I want to do my share to rebuild a more inclusive and resilient community.

This article marks the fifth anniversary of the Culture of Peace column in the Ashland Tidings. We are more isolated now than ever with the pandemic, and it is time for us to get to know each other more. I take this auspicious opportunity to invite you to know our community better by introducing different Black, Indigenous and people of color in our community in upcoming columns.

When I traveled, whether in Africa, Europe or Asia, I didn’t speak the local language, but the first thing I encountered was a smile. It is the universal language for “I am happy to see you.”

When you see me out and about, say hello and I will smile. I am happy to see you. I mean it! Let’s get to know each other.

*Irene Kai is co-founder of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, Flame Keeper of the World Peace Flame in Ashland.*