

Leading the Way

From awkward teenage immigrant to Harvard grad, one woman finds inspiration in an organization which mentors young Asian American women to aspire to something higher.

STORY Sharon Chae, Executive Director, ASPIRE

I was 12 going on 13 when my parents and I immigrated to the United States. Until then, I had always relished being an only child, but I craved an older sister figure as I struggled to assimilate into this strange culture where people looked, sounded and acted so differently from the way I was taught to look, sound and act. I was young enough to learn and adapt the “American” way quickly, but I still yearned for a role model who understood exactly what I was going through as I navigated myself through the strange world of junior high and high school.

My parents, though well meaning and supportive, often failed to understand what I was going through as someone new to the world of American teenagers, resulting in tragicomic incidents like the ban of black pants from my wardrobe because they thought black pants were only worn by “bad girls.” Enough time has passed now that I can laugh over these memories, but to a 15-year-old girl who wanted to look cool, this was no laughing matter. I wished that someone could tell my parents that being a good student had nothing to do with black pants, and that this was not Korea, where having your hair fall more than an inch below your ears could result in detention.

I know that these misunderstandings are common among Asian American girls and their parents, especially among those who are first-generation immigrants. We are torn between the Asian ideal of being the conservative, obedient daughters at home and the American

ideal of the confident and fashionable teenage girls at school. We face the misconceptions our parents harbor about American society, and the model minority myth that assumes that we are automatically smart and well put-together when we may feel anything but. It is little wonder, then, that Asian American girls between the ages of 15 and 24 have some of the highest rates of depression

Boston, but by then I had found my footing as a student and was itching to get involved in something meaningful.

Later that year, a classmate told me that ASPIRE was hosting the Asian American Women in Leadership Conference, and I was immediately intrigued by the concept. It was — and is — rare to see an event held exclusively for Asian American women, and this con-

school where there was a room full of successful women, sharing their stories about overcoming the cultural misconceptions of their parents and the model minority myth, how many moments of heartache and anxiety could I have spared myself and my parents? Freed from such heartache and anxiety, how much more confidence would I have felt about going after my dreams and goals?

Fast forward a year — I am now serving as the executive director of ASPIRE. Our core program, the Youth Leadership Program, was expanded last year from four girls to nine Asian American high school girls, who gather each week for mentoring, leadership training and career guidance. This April, our conference team and I hosted the 2007 Asian American Women in Leadership Conference, held at my school. The theme of our conference this year was “Meaningful Leadership: Shaping Our World.” We wanted this conference to be an opportunity where Asian American girls learn that leadership is not only about attaining status and economic wellbeing for themselves, but about leveraging our positions of leadership to give back to the community, and to shape the world we live in.

Our keynote speakers, Helen Zia and Jeannie Park, challenged us to be fearless about achieving our dreams, but to also keep lifting and encouraging each other as we go through our journey toward leadership. Zia, a renowned activist and author, urged us to “get Confucius out” of our system, to speak up against the injustices we see in the community. Park, the executive editor of *People Magazine*, taught us that while stereotypes limit us, we do not have to abandon who we are in order to overcome them — often, a bit of irreverence, a strong work ethic and a sense of humor can do the trick. Our speakers, mentors and panelists gave their day to help their younger sisters aspire to a better future, and inspire them to do the same to the next generation of women. What, after all, is a better definition of a role model than that? ✿



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHARON CHAE.



Left photo: Back row, from left to right: Nellie Hsu Ling, founder of ASPIRE; HeeWon Lee, coordinator; Mae Bunagan, co-chair; Sharon Chae, executive director; Martha Conover, assistant director; Erica Lee, YLP director. Front row: conference volunteers. Right photo: The 2007 ASPIRE conference.

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and suicide than any other ethnic group. This is a problem that has not been addressed adequately in our society thus far, and that is where ASPIRE comes in.

I first found out about ASPIRE (Asian Sisters Participating in Reaching Excellence) last year, as a first-year graduate student at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Summer was approaching, and I was reflecting on the irony that despite the fact that I had come to a school dedicated to public service, I had felt far too busy to serve the community around me. I was new to

ference, held in the theme of “Leadership and Visibility,” was an even rarer opportunity for Asian American women of different ethnicities, generations and backgrounds to get together and create the connections and relationships that we so often lack. More important than the specific content of the panels and the speeches, however, I saw a tremendous potential in providing an opportunity for the younger Asian American girls to come and form relationships with older, professional Asian American women. If I could have attended an event like this in high