

Impact Statement

Erin Cho, Grade 11

Corky Lee: *The Lens into Discrimination*, 2025

Watercolor, Gouache, Graphite on cardboard panel, 11 x 14 inches

Independent Study, Bellevue, WA

Unsung Hero: Dr. Norman Borlaug

Corky Lee once said, “I had to think that every time I take my camera out of my bag, it is like drawing a sword to combat indifference, injustice, and discrimination and trying to get rid of stereotypes”- and he did just that. His raw photos of freedom marches not just for Chinese immigrants but for other groups of immigrants as well, shown in his 9/11 photo, which showed Muslim figures standing in solidarity, wrapped by American flags, in the face of a tragedy. In the end, he even gave his life for his cause- he died of COVID-19, most likely contracted when he joined the throng of Asian American marchers in response to increased xenophobia that came with the pandemic.

As a result, I wanted to show his dedication with references to two of his famous photographs, which both depict protesters advocating for their rights in monotone, showing his influence in these problems in the past, and some referencing the more recent protests closer to today, to show how his work continues to inspire future generations. I specifically chose to draw figures that are presumed to be a part of the COVID-19 protests to act as a tribute to his work.

And yet, despite his profound photographs and activism, I didn’t know of Corky Lee until I scrolled to his name on the Lowell Milken Center website. I had heard of other examples of photographers inspiring change in my textbooks, such as Lewis Hine, but never on a figure that was majorly founded on defending and representing people like me- Asian Americans. Perhaps, if I knew of Corky Lee and the many other activists who looked like me and advocated for my rights, I would feel more represented and heard...

Really, I didn’t know that people not only stood up for “no taxation without representation” or the Great Depression, or Black Lives Matter, but also for Asian rights as well. In public schools, at least, we aren’t principally taught about different cultural groups or the enclaves that are formed by immigrants from other countries, rather, learning about American history from the perspective of Constitutional Rights or general facts about Asians as a whole. In my AP history classes, I learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the impact that they had on the construction of the transcontinental railroad, but not about the more recent impacts that happened to Chinatown, or the COVID-19 protests. And yet, his existence and his mark in history increase my trust in humanity and will continue to do so.