Virtual Town Hall Examines Anti-Asian Racism

The session suggested strategies for combating racist acts against Asians and Asian Americans.

April 20, 2020
By B.L. Wilson

Asian Americans have been spat on, verbally assaulted and physically attacked in more than a thousand race-related incidents in the United States as a result of fear evoked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We recognize that many of the Asian members of our community are being subjected to some of the most vile and dangerous expressions of xenophobia and racism, which is completely unacceptable,” said Elliott School of International Affairs Dean Reuben Brigety II.

He addressed a virtual town hall, titled “Anti Asian-American Racism and Strategies for Inclusion,” in the wake of COVID-19 in observance of the university’s Asian Pacific Islander Heritage month Wednesday afternoon.

“These circumstances will require all of us to demonstrate a level of resilience, compassion, creativity and determination,” he said. “Just as difficult times can bring out the worst in people, they can also bring out the best in people.”

Moderator Kylie Stamm, Elliott School diversity program manager, thanked Dr. Brigety for his presence on a panel that the Elliott School organized in collaboration with the School of Medicine and Health Sciences and GW’s Multicultural Student Services Center.
Alexa Alice Joubin, professor of English and international affairs, women’s studies and East Asian languages and cultures, provided a historical context for the discussion. She said connecting the language of disease to racism is not a new phenomenon. For example, it was seen in an 1886 soap advertisement “for kicking the Chinese out of the U.S.,” she said, and dubbed “yellow fever” in reference to white men who have a fetish for Asian women.

Dr. Joubin said the language is associated with a history of discrimination against Chinese that made it into U.S. law, including the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Cable Act that prevented Chinese from becoming citizens even when they married U.S. citizens.

It will take all of our cognitive ability, analytical reasoning “to concentrate and harness our resources to combat disinformation,” she said, “Our greatest fight is about fear.”

GW alumna Emma Rafaelof, M.A. ’17, a senior manager at the Information Technology Industry Council who specializes in U.S.-China trade relations, said disagreements over responsibility for COVID-19—President Donald Trump has called it “the Chinese virus”—has precluded the ability of the two economic superpowers to work together “loosening supply chains or sharing valuable medical information and research data.”

She said not all U.S. policies targeting China have been racially biased but the pandemic has “elevated the level of misinformation and xenophobia,” influencing policies that keep China out of the medical supply chain and impose travel and visa restrictions.

“A lot of [international] students are now left in limbo trying to plan ahead, and they don’t know what will be coming in the future,” Ms. Rafaelof said.

Gabriel Young, a GW senior who serves on the Elliott School Council on Diversity and Inclusion, said students are stressed by these events.

“This leads students to feel pressured and wonder how they can get involved,” he said.

Adrienne Poon, assistant professor of medicine in SMHS, said, “Despite all of this fear, hysteria and targeting, members of the Asian American community have been rallying to get medical supplies to hospitals to protect health care workers including in the local DMV area,” and reminded the audience that the pandemic was having a disproportionate impact on African Americans and Latinos groups in the United States.

“[The contributions of Asian Americans] send a strong message,” she said, “that we in the Asian American community are part of the fabric of America.”

Grace Henry, SMHS director of Diversity and Inclusion Team and adjunct assistant professor of medicine, said, “I want you to remember, this is racism. We’re talking about a specific group. … the issue we are fighting against is racism.”