Testimony for Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission
LOB Hearing 2/11/09

Please take a second and think about all the people and things you hold near and dear to you—your spouse, your children, your job, your home, maybe even your favorite food, your favorite clothes, your favorite place to get coffee in the morning after you've dropped off the kids at school.

Now think of having to leave of all these things behind because of circumstances out of your control, like war or poverty. Things get so bad that you have to leave with only the clothes on your back. You have to flee to another country, where you don't know anyone, don't speak the language, have no money, and no job, but need to make a living.

Nearly all Asian Pacific American families have faced a version of this story, at one time or another. This is the story that is behind the image of the "model minority." This is the story of the Asian Pacific American doctors, lawyers, nannies, restaurant workers, and dry cleaners who you might pass on the street without giving a second thought.

As a licensed clinical psychologist of Asian descent (I'm one of about three in this state), I've counseled the most devastated in this community. I've heard the story of a refugee woman whose husband was "disappeared" by political forces in South East Asia. She herself was detained by government officials and raped repeatedly in prison cell. By a miracle, she managed to escape and flee to the U.S., leaving her children behind. Here she works as a nanny and sends money home to her children. She suffers from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and has frequent nightmares and flashbacks of her rapes. Through sheer will and love for her children, she has applied for political asylum and hopes to bring them here.

I've also heard the story of an elderly woman and her son who had to flee war and subsequent poverty in Vietnam. These two witnessed their family being killed by gunfire in their village, right before their eyes. The son's father was an American GI who was also killed in the war. For two year they lived in crowded, dusty refugee camp where they shared a small tent and ate only one bowl of rice a day. They were one of the lucky ones who were brought to the U.S. Now, they reside in a moldy basement for about $200 a month. They speak no English, and the son works menial jobs to help pay for his mother's health care. She has diabetes and clinical depression. The son still manages to find time to organize a support group for families of American GI's lost in Vietnam.

As fellow parents, spouses, and as caretakers to our elders, I am asking you to please see beyond Asian Pacific Americans as "model minorities," and to listen to our stories of immigration. I am asking you to establish an Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission to address the needs of some of the most vulnerable in our community. Thank you.

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