

Critical Connections as Foundation for Achieving Justice

"In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections." - Grace Lee Boggs

When I close my eyes and think of the word “justice”, Grace Lee Boggs’ quote describes it all. Justice is situated in American histories beyond what is often taught in our textbooks. It is of everyday heroes past and present - parents, students, and community members across race, class, abilities, and gender identity - working collectively building not only critical mass but critical connection for and with their community. These unspoken - and thus marginalized- stories serve as a foundation of what achieving justice is for me and for the role I strive for in my community.

Achieving justice begins with history. What comes to mind is first my favorite freedom fighter, Yuri Kochiyama. When Malcolm X was shot, it was Yuri who cradled his head. Yuri is most widely known for being outspoken against the World War II arrest and internment of Japanese Americans in conditions that literally killed her father. Yet, when I think of Yuri, I think of her taking over the Statue of Liberty with Puerto Rican citizens to draw attention to the movement for Puerto Rican Independence. This is a little known fact for most. This incident reminds me that achieving justice is not only fighting for your own community but also about bridging people and movements. I started a blog post last year to share stories and events that made an impact on the world. It’s written by me for kids. Here is my blog post web link:

<https://catalystforchange.edublogs.org/2019/06/13/hello-world/>.

I also think of Grace Lee Boggs. Grace Lee and her husband James were fierce advocates for Black Power, and the couple laid the intellectual foundation for combating racial and urban struggles during one of the most active social movements in U.S history. Grace Lee Boggs, even after the death of James, built and extended the ideas they had forged together through Detroit Summer Community during the collapse of the auto industry. The Detroit Summer Community Organization encouraged mural painting, dancing, and urban gardening to create community sustainability. It was about the community accounting, and addressing, multiple human needs, not just one at the exclusion of all others. At a time when there was so much suffering, Grace and the Detroit Summer Community rejuvenated not only their community but other communities that were going through hard times. Grace Lee is particularly special to me because she is Chinese American just like me. This particular quote from Grace Lee “we are the leaders we’ve been waiting for” reminds me that we all need to lead and take action to make our community a better place.

My inspiration is not only in the past but also in the histories that are being made now in our own Orange County community. Justice is being fought daily by those around me. Orange County community organizations like the Orange County Justice Fund inspire me. Their actions work to provide legal representation for the most vulnerable members of the Orange County community. A collaboration of attorneys, law professors, and grassroots leaders ensures that no Orange County resident is forced to defend themselves without an attorney. Last Christmas, my family and I raised \$500 to donate to the fund instead of buying holiday gifts. They are one of the many organizations, VietRise, 18 Million Rising, ACLU, MiseducAsian, that model for me how we need to work collectively towards taking action and achieving justice.

At school, I hear other students gay-baiting each other during PE and lunch. Last year, I saw my city council pass an ordinance to defy California Senate Bill 54: the California Values Act. In each of those moments, I was overwhelmed with fear and anger. Fear and anger are dangerous things and the greatest barriers to achieving justice. These two emotions can control you. War, hatred, and scapegoating emerge from fear and anger. It is anger and fear that led to the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior, John F. Kennedy, and Abraham Lincoln. Each of these heroes were pushing for societal changes to end segregation, gain equal rights under the law, and keep our country together. As history reminds us, we recoil from differences of others. Thoughts of the unknown are scary and lead us to take actions out of fear. These fears make logic disappear and bring out the worst in each of us, causing our country and community to be divided.

My strength for action begins with love. I love how I can speak English and Chinese and my best friends all speak their own native languages. I love how I can embrace my neurodiversity and be accepted for who I am. I love how Chinese Americans, my ancestors, accounted for ninety percent of the Central Pacific's labor force that built our Transcontinental Railroad. I love how communities' historical foundations, like the origins of the term Asian American, inspired by the Black Liberation Movement, are born to unite our community.

Overcoming obstacles to justice begins with cross-cultural solidarity and collective action - recognizing that the differences in our community are strengths and our individual struggles and the health and safety of our communities are interconnected. Working with groups through coalitions, collaborations, and partnerships to dismantle systems that continue to harm our communities will benefit everyone. Community leadership can range from young people to elders and that all should be cultivated, honored, and uplifted. That means I am a leader too.

Being a leader is knowing all people's histories, the cultural histories of our ancestors, the histories of our community, and how our communities and each cultural histories are intertwined. All of our lives are intertwined and affect each other negatively and/or positively. I seek justice for my community through my actions. In the last year, I have spoken up repeatedly at city council meetings and even in front of the news press to defend sanctuary for my city. At school, I weekly attend our school's Gay Straight Alliance Club to serve as an ally and build a safe community for my friends. My family and I actively volunteer and spend our holiday money (instead of buying gifts) to support local community organizations. Most of all, I read. I read about all of our people's histories and about the social justice leaders of our past and of our present. It is knowing our connectedness that reminds us that it is not just critical mass but critical connections for and with community that serve as a foundation for achieving justice.