

Council helps Asians maintain home culture in America

By Fauziah Varusay
Of the Emerald

Vern Ho is 42 years old and in the prime of his life. A second-generation American Chinese, he is a successful business consultant in Eugene. Yet he believes something missing in his life.

"I am a Chinese yet I can't even speak the language nor know much about my culture," he said.

Misa Joo is a 41-year-old teacher at a middle school in Eugene. To her, being a third-generation American-Japanese is more than just demographics.

"I am an American-Japanese, not American-white. There is a difference, and I just cannot forget my heritage," she said.

Ada Lee left Hong Kong more than 35 years ago. She and her husband came to the United States and decided to make it their home.

Since then they have raised six children, all American born, own a couple of restaurants in Eugene and have a business consulting firm.

But the Lees did not leave behind their Chinese background — they made sure it was passed on to their children and their children's children.

"It was a golden opportunity for my husband and me to come here and to start a future. But that did not mean I had to forget my family and my homeland," said Lee, 56.

Ho, Joo and Lee are only three of the growing number of the more than 2,500 Asians and Pacific Islanders in the Eugene/Springfield area who feel strongly about preserving and learning about their culture — not only for themselves, but for future generations as well.

Together with individuals from the Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai and Pacific Islander communities, the three make up the Asian Council for Eugene/Springfield. Each member represents his or her own ethnic community.

The council was set up with goals to create a positive image

for the Asian community, to promote Asian heritage of each ethnic group, to promote Asian services and businesses, to provide a conduit for Asian information and resources and to act as a coordinating body for Asian groups.

"We also hope to share with the Eugene/Springfield non-Asian community our culture and way of life," said Ho, who is also the council coordinator.

The council was formed two years ago after a couple of Asians met during the summer of 1985 to discuss the feasibility of such an organization, Ho said.

"A number of established business people like Ada Lee and myself are often visited by new incoming Asians to Eugene," Ho explained. "They wanted counsel on setting up businesses, legal advice and so on. We then thought of forming a proper organization to help these people."

Besides, Ho added, the Asians already living here wanted their children to know about their culture and to share it with the rest of the community.

Although the council was formed in 1985, it became official only last September.

The council sponsors the Asian Celebration every year and also holds potlucks, kite festivals and sends members to educational institutions to talk about their culture, professions and life as American Asians.

Not all is smooth sailing for the council, however. Ho and his team of 12 (representing eight ethnic groups) did not foresee the problems they would face in attracting members.

"Believe it or not, the problems are ideological. For instance, there are two different Korean groups here, and they do not get along very well," Ho explained.

"The Indonesians are divided between those of Dutch descent and those who aren't. The Chinese from mainland China

and those from Taiwan aren't friendly with each other.

"Then there are the pro- and anti-Marcos groups from the Philippines. We have a tough time crossing the political borders and concentrating only on cultural," he said.

And on top of that, the newly arrived immigrants keep away from too much involvement in the council.

"Many of them left behind sad and bitter memories of their home countries. Coming to the United States was a clean break for them. They felt that by being too close to other Asians, their past would be rekindled," Ho said.

These families wanted to be "real Americans," which means learning no other language except English and practicing no other culture but the American.

"We also do not have representatives from all the various ethnic groups yet. Asian Indians, for example, are not on the council. We have yet to approach them. The problem is, not all of them have an ethnic group to belong to first," Ho said.

Despite these teething problems, the young council has managed to survive.

"We cannot give up," Lee said. "Every group had its problems, and ours is no exception."

The council also promotes itself in other parts of Oregon. Quite recently, an agency in Portland that helps American families adopt Asian children contacted the council for help.

"They wanted to learn as much as they could about the culture of the child they were going to adopt," Ho said.

Also, the recent increase in business ventures between Oregon and Japan, China and Southeast Asia have added to the importance of the council.

Many business concerns call on the council to provide information on the countries.

The council is not the only organization that represents

American Asian interests here, however. Joo was one of the pioneering members of the Asian Culture Center, which later became known as Asians Together.

The group, formed several years ago, is composed of professionals mainly in the field of education.

"We were more concerned with the quality of education and life of Asians here. We were also issue oriented," Joo said.

The group has become dor-

mant, however, due to membership decline and others becoming more involved in other activities.

Joo said the group is in a transition period.

"I am pleased with how the council is going. The council is different in the sense that it is more community based, culture oriented and has American Asians of different generations. Asians Together is mainly composed of teachers between 20

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