

# The Asian Reporter

Volume 29 Number 8  
 April 15, 2019  
 ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on the first and third Monday each month.

Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter  
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News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## When they say no

Working is a challenge for everyone, no question. But as a woman, I've been told repeatedly since I was 14 years old what I couldn't accomplish because of my gender. Not by my family. Hell, my mom wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer. And as the eldest sibling, I was always depended on as farm labor, housekeeper, and cook. Despite being mostly an "A" student in high school, my guidance counsellor denied me help finding college scholarships because they were only for boys who played sports.

I attended community college to take my required classes. I majored in theatre and was consistently overlooked as an actor because most roles were for men, and if there were roles for women, they were either ingénues or older women. So between 19 and 21 years old, most of my acting roles were of middle-aged women. There was one theatre teacher who believed in me, though, and he cast me as a goddess in a Shakespeare play. That gave me encouragement.

My mom, who had already been employed at a Georgia-Pacific plywood mill for several years, rarely listened to people denying her opportunities. I remember how she stalked the personnel office at the mill. She knew high-paying jobs existed. It was after Title IX, the federal civil-rights law that passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972 to end discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender, and national origin. Ma probably heard that women were finally being considered to work the high-paying jobs at the mill.

Ma called the personnel office every day for six months asking for one of those jobs. She said she "sweet talked" the secretaries in the office; I'm pretty sure her Taiwanese dialect eventually charmed them. She found success when the mill hired her as a dryer tender. Barely five feet tall and 99 pounds, she spent the next 25 years sending sheets of wet plywood into a machine that fed the drying oven so the pieces of plywood could be stacked at the other end. For a woman with no formal education and limited English, it was a great accomplishment to have work that paid well.

Though the mill wasn't my life's ambition, my mom got me a job there while I was in college so I could earn money to study journalism at the University of Oregon (UO). I thought that being a writer was an open field. When I tried to produce news stories at the community radio station, the editor discouraged me from pursuing radio.

"Women's voices just don't sound authoritative enough," he said to me. "They just aren't that good."

The radio teacher at UO echoed the same opinion, so instead of news reports, I focused on artistic audio pieces that involved recording interviews and editing them into sound collages and fun personal stories. One of those pieces landed me a spot in a prestigious national audio workshop with veteran journalist Leo C. Lee. He founded Western Public Radio and offered emerging women and minority journalists training with professionals around the country. I owe my radio career to Leo. After that workshop, he recommended me to production companies and networks and I ended up selling my audio art pieces to National Public Radio while still in college. Within five years, I produced the *Mei Mei* documentary, which won a Peabody award. After college, though, I still found limitations put on me as a woman.

Acting, though it's changing, is still one craft where it's okay to openly discriminate because of gender and race. But each time I was told I couldn't play a certain type of role, I battled even harder during auditions to prove I could perform those parts. I studied plays by reading scripts and watching them on stage when people discouraged me from writing plays unless I formally attended a "good" college or training program. I learned to direct my own staged readings in order to pique interest in my work by theatre producers and ended up with more than a dozen of my short and full-length plays staged.

Male colleagues often dissuaded me from creating my own radio series. One respected radio producer insinuated that I could not produce mainstream documentaries because my focus was on producing personal or "minority" pieces. It was alienating to go to national conferences and be dismissed by gray-haired male radio producers and station managers in suits who didn't take me seriously.

Rejections and dismissals by patriarchal structures in the fields I've chosen taught me to turn anger and negativity into success. I have always looked for ways around the word "no." It's annoying to still have to swim upstream so often. I think back to my mom and how she persisted in fighting for her job. I owe her my spirit, resilience, and drive. And I believe in the importance of mentors and allies such as Leo C. Lee. That's why I continue to mentor young people, so hopefully they have it a little easier than I did.

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*Wondering what events are going on this week? Check out The AR's event calendars, on pages 10 & 12!*