

# Who killed Kenneth Chiu? Racism in Orange County, California

By Kat Kaneko Avila

I didn't want to write this article. I didn't want you to find out I had already forgotten about Kenneth Chiu the day after I read he had been stabbed to death by a racist deaf-mute neighbor. There were plenty of reasons NOT to forget him. Firstly, it was the bizarre details. (How many deaf-mute murderers have you heard of?) Secondly, the incident happened only 15 minutes away from where I live and work; and thirdly, the murder victim has the same first name as my younger brother.

It reminded me of what my family went through years ago ...

It could have happened to me or you or someone close to us because you know how we all look alike. (Ha, ha. This is where you're supposed to laugh in the movie.) Maybe I wanted to block out the horror of what had happened and how this hate crime made me recall some of my own bitter experiences with prejudice in Orange County.

Kenneth Chiu would have become another dust-covered footnote in the garage of my mind, except that a friend of Kenneth's cousin Billy Chen posted Billy's grief-filled message about Kenneth's death on the Internet.

The facts about the murder are as follows: Seventeen-year-old Kenneth Chiu was attacked when he returned home around midnight after dropping off his girlfriend following dinner at the Chiu residence. Kenneth died an hour later from his knife wounds at about 1:15 a.m. on the morning of July 30th this year. He was killed by his next-door neighbor 20-year-old Christopher Charles Hearn. Hearn is deaf and mute; he was described in a news report as "dangerous and out of control" by a former long-time next-door neighbor. First-degree murder charges were filed with special circumstances of lying in wait and killing because of ethnicity.

In the decade they have lived in their Laguna Hills neighborhood, the Taiwan-born parents of Kenneth Chiu experienced incidences of racially based harassment and vandalism, none of which were reported to the police.

It reminded me of what my family went through years ago in nearby Santa Ana when rocks and tomatoes were thrown at our house, racially offensive stickers pasted on our garage, and our garden hose cut in half because my mother is Japanese. We didn't know any better either to report the acts to the police.

The Orange County Human Relations Commission states only eight of the 122 documented hate crimes in 2000 victimized Asian Americans. But I believe many Asian Americans do not report hate crimes, especially recent immigrants, of which there is a substantial portion in Orange County from Vietnam, Korea, and Taiwan. This underreporting may occur for reasons related to culture, level of English-language skills, and lack of knowledge.

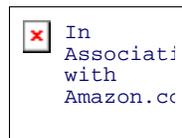
Besides the unwitting coverup of hate crimes through silence, the strong streak

That doesn't

[Back to Home Page](#)

[View TOC](#)

[E-mail this page to a friend!](#)



In  
Associati  
with  
Amazon .cc

## Issues

[A Model Minority with a Learning Disability?](#) by Linda Rho

["Let's think for a moment . . . what if English wasn't the child's deficit?"](#)

[Omega Tau Zeta: A new sisterhood and their work to help fight ovarian cancer](#)

[Operation Babylift by Kelly Jackson](#)

[The Check is in the Mail: Anatomy of Bush's Tax Refund by Wena Poon](#)

## Check Out These Pages!

[Making Things Heard: Writer/Editor Vickie Nam](#)

[It's All in the Touch: Massage in Chinatown](#)

[Q&A, He said, She said, but Mama said](#)

[Between the Covers with Irene Kim](#)

[A review of A Wild Sheep Chase by Haruki Murakami \(Translated by Alfred](#)

of ultraconservatism that runs through

Orange County politics contributes to an environment where hate rhetoric and violence against populations of non-European origin can flourish. Some in-my-backyard examples of this ultraconservatism against Asian Americans are State Assemblyman Gil Ferguson's (R - Newport Beach) 1990 resolution contending racism had nothing to do with the forced evacuation and internment of Japanese American families during World War II (some stupid people still can't tell the difference between soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army and ordinary U.S. citizens) and U.S. Representative Christopher Cox's (R - Newport Beach) infamous report (as chairman of the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial concerns) that reinforced doubts about the loyalty of Chinese Americans, thereby justifying the illegal cruel imprisonment of scientist Wen Ho Lee.

News and entertainment media are supporting players to local hate rhetoric as well. After reinforcing sentiments that Asian Americans can't be trusted through their coverage of the Wen Ho Lee case, television and newspapers used the American spy plane scandal to create a flag-waving nationalistic fervor built on a revived xenophobic hatred of the Chinese and, through conflation, all Asians and Asian Americans.

Then Disney, whose theme park fireworks can be seen nightly from my mother's house, released PEARL HARBOR, a movie whose billboard advertising was as inflammatory as the Orange County-based California Coalition for Immigration Reform's "Welcome to California - The Illegal Immigration State" billboard. Those warplanes weren't flying over any Hawaii I know (my father was stationed at Pearl Harbor); they were threatening white middle-class America. In the movie itself, you would have been hard-pressed to have found any Asian American or Pacific Islander faces in an island nation that supported an indigenous Hawaiian monarchy only 50 years earlier before it was overthrown with U.S. support. What you found in the Disney movie was the framing of a new set of racial tensions - European Americans and African Americans united against Asians, though Asian Americans died in friendly fire at Pearl Harbor and served heroically for the U.S. in the Pacific and Europe. The movie also ended with the cliched notion of "payback," which is at the root of many hate crimes against Asian Americans (you hear different rantings depending on whether you're perceived as Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese).

Racist attitudes in Orange County run deep, partly a legacy of the anti-Asian history on the west coast of the United States. They are so ingrained that it prompted a close Irish American friend of mine to innocently ask, "Can you trust them?" after I told her about the large number of Asian engineers that worked at my company. That doesn't mean these attitudes can't be changed, but it will take more voices speaking up to challenge them.

Billy Chen's message on the Internet for his cousin ended with, "I want to know where specifically he [Hearn] cultivated that word [racial slur found carved on Kenneth's father's car] and that hate and anger, and I, again and again, want visibility for asian americans/pacific islanders and hate violence." It means we can't forget hate crime victims such as Kenneth Chiu, or Thung Phetakoune (murdered this July in New Hampshire), or Thien Minh Ly (murdered January 1996 in Orange County), or Vincent Chin (whose murderers were acquitted and never spent a day in jail, but whose death united Asian American activists across the country). We do what we can to promote our communities so we don't become contributors through our apathy and passivity to the unacceptable status quo.

Birnbaum)

**We would like to hear from you!**

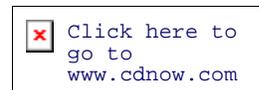
If you have any comments or questions, please send an e-mail to: [writeus@jademagazine.com](mailto:writeus@jademagazine.com) or Write Us!

[A Message from JADE](#)

**Subscribe to JADE Magazine On-line! It's Free!**

e-mail:

Submit



---

Kat Avila has an M.A. in Communication from University of California, San Diego, and is of Japanese and Mexican-Indian ethnicity. She has a website devoted to Chicano/Latino theater and Asian-American theater at <http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>. Feel free to drop her a line at [kavila0@sm.ivc.cc.ca.us](mailto:kavila0@sm.ivc.cc.ca.us).

Reproduction of material from any jademagazine.com pages without written permission from the author is strictly prohibited. (c)2001 Copyright Kat Kaneko Avila. All rights reserved. [DISCLAIMER](#)