


# Memory of Vincent Chin: A Community's Call to Action Against Hate



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As brutal as hate crimes are, they can be catalysts for social change, a demand for communities to respond. U.S. history is filled with such events: The lynching of Leo Frank in Georgia in 1915 sparked the creation of the Anti-Defamation League. The murder of 14-year-old Medgar Evers in Mississippi in 1955 helped to mobilize the Civil Rights Movement. The beating of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 was a turning point for the Asian Pacific American movement.

On June 19, 1982, Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American, was celebrating his upcoming wedding—friends had thrown him a bachelor party at a club in Detroit. Ronald Ebens, a White autoworker, and his stepson, Michael Nitz, who had recently been laid off from his job at an auto plant, began trading insults across the bar with Chin. Ebens and Nitz were yelling out things like, “It’s because of you that we’re out of work!” A fight ensued but was quickly broken up, and the different parties went their separate ways. Ebens and Nitz subsequently spent 20 minutes driving around the neighborhood looking for Chin. They caught up with him in the parking lot of a restaurant. Nitz held Vincent down while Ebens beat him with a baseball bat. Chin fell into a coma, and four days later he died, only five days before his wedding.

The murder of Chin reflected the anti-Asian sentiment in the United States at the time. The U.S. auto industry was struggling, and thousands were losing jobs as factories closed. The two autoworkers blamed Japan for their problems and mistakenly thought that Chin was Japanese. Ebens and Nitz were found guilty of manslaughter. Each was sentenced to three years’ probation and fined \$3,000. Federal civil-rights cases were brought against the two men, to no avail. And in the end, Nitz was cleared of all charges and Ebens’s conviction was overturned.

The Chin case was a watershed moment for Asian Pacific Americans. Perhaps for the first time, the various ethnic groups who trace their ancestry to the different countries of Asia—China, Japan, the Philippines and many more—rallied to fight for the Chin case as a united group. Helen Zia, a longtime activist, states, “For the first time, we considered ourselves as a race, a minority group in America that faced discrimination and had to fight for our civil rights. [This] case marked the beginning of the emergence of Asian Pacific Americans as a self-defined American racial group.”

## LESSON PLAN

In what ways can a violent or criminal act be a catalyst for positive action in a community? Why is it that so often a negative act must occur in order for something positive to happen? Find a newspaper article that reports on a community’s positive response to a hate crime.

Reference: [www.asianweek.com/061397/feature.html](http://www.asianweek.com/061397/feature.html)

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