

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Richard Lui: My dad was pushed to the ground in San Francisco, too. I said nothing

Richard Lui

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A man holds a portrait of late Vichar Ratanapakdee (left), a 84-year-old immigrant from Thailand, who was violently shoved to the ground in a deadly attack in San Francisco, during a community rally in February. Damian Dovarganes / Associated Press

Vichar never missed his morning walks. Daily exercise enlivened the 84-year old. Until that Thursday. An assailant ran across the street, and threw the grandfather to the ground, fatally injuring Vichar. “I never see him again,” said his daughter. Vichar’s family calls it a hate crime.

Five years ago I felt the same pain. Anger, exasperation, and disgust.

At 82, my dad also loved his walks. Like Vichar, he called San Francisco's skinny streets home. Dad, (Bàba as we'd call him) waved at everybody, smiled and said hello. Coming from a big Asian family of 13 siblings, he's always been outgoing. And even with dementia, he never forgot his walks. Left on Anza, two blocks to buy doughnuts, one block to get a Subway sandwich, then back home up the hill. Shop owners knew sweet Stephen would come every day. "You're so good," he'd tell them.

Then the hospital called. Bàba was there. "He pushed me to the ground, and I couldn't get up. That person ran away," He couldn't understand.

You see a lot of sweet, good people every day. They are weak but strong. You want to guard them but don't want to hover, because you know it makes them weaker.

This time I wanted to hover. I should have been there. Sure I had my dream journalist job in New York. Ten hours away door to door. But was it worth it?

Today, my dad lives in a nursing home, just blocks away from where Vichar lost his life. My dad's Alzheimer's has now robbed him of the ability to eat or speak. He can't walk anymore, not down the hall, not down to get his sandwiches and doughnuts.

When I see the assaults on video of Vichar and other kind people who are older, I cry. Why are we this way?

In recent weeks, many Americans seethe with me. All at once the spike in hate crimes leaves us with huge unanswered questions. My dad can't defend himself. So that is why they attack? Of the dozens of incidents in recent weeks, one person died, many gravely injured and in hospitals, and communities need answers. Why are hate attacks up 20 times?

We're living through a selfish pandemic. Hate is now cheap. Who cares what you think — my view is what's right. I can go after age, race, gender or sexuality — they aren't as human as me. They don't deserve America like me.

This is the first time I've told my dad's story. In a way, I'm part of the problem. Journalists like me are supposed to keep us accountable to our American democratic values. But I couldn't and didn't tell my own story. I didn't know if it was racially motivated or not. I didn't want to know.

Tell your stories. Everybody. No matter your color, your language, your family, your love. Tell it. Loudly. We need to understand America's birthright is about others, about selflessness. This land is made for you and me.

And this too — share stories of folks not like you — the ones who inspire.

Like Jacob Azevedo, who saw the video of Vichar shoved to the ground. He saw an opportunity for solidarity. So he took to social media, offering to walk with anyone through Oakland's Chinatown who felt unsafe. "This is important because this community just needs healing," he told CNN. Hundreds of volunteers now walk with Jacob.

But Jacob, you're 26. You're walking with 70- and 80-year-olds. You're Hispanic American and walking with Asian Americans. The image isn't right.

That's why it is.

In a recent study from Stanford University, researchers measured the stress levels of participants meeting people of different backgrounds. The result was surprising — the stress of prejudice was gone after three face-to-face meetings.

So do the Jacob. Walk with people who aren't like you. Make a list of those you think you'd never spend time with. Then walk with them. Build your "I'd Never Be Seen with" EQ and IQ.

I'm starting to do the Jacob more too. Little by little, I'm learning how not to bystand, and how to upstand. Sorry Dad, we can be better.

Richard Lui is an anchor for NBC News/MSNBC. This piece is adapted from his upcoming book, "Enough About Me: The Unexpected Power of Selflessness" from HarperCollins/Zondervan, available March 23.