Interview with EunSook Lee (AAPI Civic Engagement Fund)

Jessica Kantor
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Jessica Kantor: Can you introduce yourself and your organization, and talk about the problem that you are addressing with the organization? How are you responding to it?

EunSook Lee: My name is EunSook Lee. I'm with the AAPI [Asian American and Pacific Islander] Civic Engagement Fund. It's a constituency-based fund and a collaborative fund, and the problem we're addressing is that Asian Americans historically have been disenfranchised, largely because there's been an underinvestment in enabling them to participate [in civic life]. They've not been a priority for campaigns, or for foundations, or for different entities to turn them out to vote. AAPI faces barriers to civic engagement. For example, a significant number of Asian Americans have limited English proficiency. If information about elections is not available in their language, it hinders their ability to engage. Asian Americans are also new Americans. Many of them are recent immigrants, and lack having generations of experience with US civic engagement. Often, they're unfamiliar with the process, and without appropriate support, they will struggle in their effort to participate.

Sometimes it's also about feeling like an outsider. There is a question of how we, as a country, promote multiracial democracy and create institutions or an environment that allows everyone who lives in it to feel like they have an equal voice in shaping policy solutions. That's the big problem, and there are different ways we can address it. We need more organizations locally around the country that can work with communities and help them participate, and that can help educate and organize communities. We need local versus national organizations because the particular makeup of the AAPI community differs substantively in each city and state within the U.S..

AAPIs are the fastest-growing racial group in the country. There are about 26 million AAPIs now, and the rate of their civic engagement is increasing even faster than the population rate, so there's a lot of potential there. They've also changed a lot. It used to be that the AAPI voting population was composed largely of people over the age of 50, many of them seniors, but now the AAPI

electorate is younger than the general population. Because of the profound demographic changes in the AAPI electorate, local civic engagement organizations are more relevant and effective than ever. Our fund, for example, funds 60 groups in 20 states, and these groups are all very different in their makeup. You have organizations in Wisconsin that are Hmong-led, so they work with the Hmong community. You have Filipinos in Arizona and also in Las Vegas. It's important to have local AAPI organizations because they know best what that community needs, including the languages that they speak.

The other reason local is so important is because there's a vast difference between how Filipinos in California see issues compared to Filipinos in North Carolina. We know that from the data we've been gathering. We need to message differently for communities by geography, by language, by generation, by age, by gender. That being said, we as a fund also know that a stark data point is that less than 1% of all US grant-making goes to AAPI communities. That's been the same data point for three decades. Very little goes into supporting Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. That's why our fund was created: to raise funds to support local AAPI communities.

While national AAPI organizations are an important part of our ecosystem, they may not have the don't have the tentacles and the capacity to work locally. [Supporting local communities] is our primary goal and the reason why we exist as a fund. We're a national fund that's funding locally, which is rare. As a collaborative fund, we have the capacity to fundraise from local to national donors and make informed, general operating grants to a spectrum of groups. Moreover, outside of AAPI groups in major cities and states such as New York and California, there are few to no local sources of funding. We are thus a vital funding source for AAPI groups in smaller cities and states such as Iowa or Kentucky.

We are a collaborative fund, so we fundraise for the community, we leverage resources, and we aggregate them. We're therefore able to provide more substantive grants to local groups, and in some cases, to groups that may never have had any other funding support. That [lack of funding] works against civic engagement, and it's the problem we were created to address. We're not the solution in itself because we're only helping to resource the organizations. The organizations themselves have the more challenging imperative to provide services and programs to meet the needs of the community, while also asking them: "Did you register to vote? Do you know what issues are important in making sure voters turn out?" I think we're an essential piece of an ecosystem that's needed in the AAPI community.

Jessica Kantor: You mentioned that you're working with groups who are then providing direct services to the communities. How do you engage with the communities? Is it always through these third-party groups? Do you have representatives in all of these states?

EunSook Lee: There are different models, and the model we use depends on the type of organization. We're not a chapter model, we're not an organization. We chose to be a fund very deliberately and explicitly. Before I started working with AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, for the last 20 years or so, I worked in local AAPI organizations of different sorts. In other words, local AAPI groups existed before we formed, however, they've been gravely underfunded. What we want to do is work with longstanding community leaders and organizations and help them strengthen their muscle around civic engagement. Some of the groups we work with didn't necessarily have access to the mainstream tools and were not part of state civic engagement tables.

We are clear that we do not provide direct services or do direct work. Our groups execute, and we resource. We're in regular communication with our groups, as it's crucial for us to know what they need, but it's up to them to decide what issues they need to work on and how they execute that work because there is more than one way to win and pass policy. It depends on the constituency. We fund groups in LA, for example, of formerly incarcerated adults, and they're working for policy around issues around deportation, [or rights for the] formerly incarcerated, which is a threat to some.

In some cases, it's not always about turning out the most number of people for an issue. It could be something different. It could be a narrative campaign. It could be about shaping how people see the issue or about building a coalition if you're working on immigration. It's really up to the organizations to decide on the issues and the tactics, but it's our role to ensure that they have the resources and the technical assistance they need to be successful. For example, many of our groups don't have access to voter data, which costs money, or they don't have access to organizing tools to use the voter data. In those cases, we'd pay for a subscription, and groups that want it can get it as a part of their grant.

Some state groups are C3, which is nonpartisan, and they might decide they want to do more political work or ballot initiatives, so we help them set up a c4 organizational arm. We help them access legal counsel and technical assistance. We have direct contact with them because all the groups that we fund are part of a network, and we have annual convenings and irregular meetings three or four times a year. We help convene them, but look to grantees to identify the topics they want to focus on.

They also have their own methods and strategies. It's tricky to create the right conditions for local organizations to thrive.

There are other entities who have chapters, or who are in alliance with organizations and then utilize resources together. It's not that they're not as successful as us, but for us, this is probably the best method we have found to build local capacity.

Jessica Kantor: How do you pull in the local organizations that you work with? Do they come to you and apply, or do you have someone who's constantly researching different cities, different states, different communities, and then reaching out and saying that you have resources for them?

EunSook Lee: When we first started, we commissioned third-party research on the demographics of the AAPI electorate. You may know what you know, but it's also important to look at the census data and the voting data. So we hired a firm to look at the AAPI electorate and identify where they are growing in number, relevant congressional races, that sort of stuff. [We also looked at] projections because when we started, certain states were not seen as priorities such as Georgia. So we commissioned research [to complement the] body of knowledge our organization already had.

There are also other national organizations that we know, and we asked those who were willing to cooperate to share information about the local groups they know. That meant holding a lot of interviews and reaching out to groups that we had heard of and getting to know them. I can't remember exactly, but I'd say we talked to about 60 or 70 groups around the country, which allowed us to [understand and in a way assess them. It's always interesting because you have organizations that have name recognition, but when you open the curtain, you realize, oh, they don't have paid staff. So one realization was that many groups may have executed successful campaigns but they had low capacity or were volunteer-run.

We've always been invitation only, but in terms of funding the groups, we had wanted or expected to fund a certain set of groups with around $100K as a starting grant. The groups were too small for those kinds of grants, so we ended up reducing the initial grants to $50K, and for some groups $75K. In the beginning, we did flat numbers, so everybody got either $50K or $75K, depending on their size. We only funded about 20 groups the first year we did the grants, and we did extensive research. Our approach was data-driven. We now have on hand someone who does demographic data on request, so we're always improving our data knowledge.

We've also created a website with the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge called movementhub.org, and it has all this census data about AAPIs that's disaggregated by race and ethnicity, along with core information about their numbers, poverty levels, languages, and so on, so our groups can learn a little bit about the demographics of the AAPI community. Let's say, for example, we're funding in Kentucky for the first time. I'll need all the data on Kentucky. What are the top five ethnic groups? What's the language? We have an infrastructure set up, and we're now at the stage where our grantees will say, have you heard of so-and-so? Then, maybe we reach out, have an interview, and decide if we can fund them or not.

We have an ongoing process for learning about new groups. But I think where we have evolved is [fund distribution]. We started by giving everyone the same grant amount, and I think that made sense at that moment. But in the 10 years that we've been doing this, some of the groups to whom we gave $50K are now very significant in their state. One of the organizations in Georgia is now an anchor for immigrant rights work, and they have a budget of $5 million. They were very instrumental in the 2020 race for the Senate. Now, our grants are tiered. We still have grants for groups we're just getting to know at $50K, and then we have groups that are getting $125K and other groups that are getting $250K. By doing that, we're showing that our groups are growing organizationally.

There is a development ladder. If groups can do more and be more impactful, then we should fund them for that. It does help for organizations to feel like there's somewhere or something they can aspire to, and I don't mean just for money, but for being recognized, for being high performing. What we're also doing is convincing donors that you can't keep organizations stuck at a $50K grant. Even $250K is not a lot. Our communities, and that includes Black and Latino communities, are often very, very underfunded, and the grants are always small. We're hoping that by doing this, we're adequately funding our groups and we're indicating what is an appropriate level of funding for the groups themselves.

Jessica Kantor: How are you measuring success for the fund itself? Are you measuring success according to the success of the local groups, or do you have your own measurements?

EunSook Lee: I think success is both qualitative and quantitative. Some of it is about our own success. How have we grown? And then, of course, some is about our groups. The quantitative factors are things like the fact that we gave $30 million plus in grants in the last several years, or the number of groups we funded, and in how many states, and so on. [We also have] numbers that show diversity, representation, and growth. The other thing is what our groups succeed in accomplishing. For instance, in the example I just shared about Georgia, their budget grew from $250K to $5 million. They went from this size to that size.

There is external data as well. It's not just like, hey, we know we worked. We also can show that through research. We have third-party validated data from Catalist that shows in 2020, the highest increase in the rate of turnout was Asian Americans, over any other racial group. I think that shows success.

I also think success is when you are able to pass policy that improves people's lives. In Illinois, they got the TEAACH Act passed, which allows for Asian American studies in high schools. That was something one of our grantees, Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago, worked on, and

now they're working to help train the high schools [to implement the curriculum]. They're also trying to create a Midwest coalition of Asian American groups to help other groups pass something like the TEAACH Act in other cities.

This is something new that our groups are doing because times change. In 2020, offering ethnic studies or Asian American studies was not articulated as a priority. I think after COVID, and the rise in anti-China sentiments and anti-Asian violence, we're asking: What are the solutions? An antidote to bias, prejudice and ignorance is knowing the community itself, knowing their history. The other solution is changing policy. Our groups are very aware of being careful to change policy in a way that doesn't criminalize other communities because that's not helping or protecting any community. Success shouldn't be something I have to tell you. It should be something you know because you see applied in your own locality, like the implementation of a living wage. Then we can say, our community was a part of it. Our organization was part of it.

There should be some things that are also externally known. Even though we say it is up to organizations to determine the issues and figure out how to work with the community and make sure that they turn out to vote, we have this fortunate position of knowing what all the groups are doing. We can help by sharing that knowledge and using it to help and support other organizations. For example, when we think about 2020 and everything that happened with anti-Asian violence and racial justice uprisings, we ask: What can we do to help give our organizations a lens to understand all the events cohesively?

When we had our 2023 gathering, we went to Montgomery, and everyone visited the EJI [Equal Justice Initiative] and toured the museum to understand the history of slavery and incarceration. Those kinds of experiences help [foster understanding]. We can play an influential role. We can help our organizations understand their experience without singling them out as particular to Asian Americans by helping them understand them in the context of the experience of other communities of color. We can be influential there, which leads to success.

Jessica Kantor: What are some lessons you've learned over the past 10 years? In particular, what are some things that you may have tried that didn't work, that others could learn from? Did you immediately know that you just wanted to be a fund, or did you first try to get into the community yourself?

EunSook Lee: I worked as an organizer for many years, so I came to this position both with knowledge about what it takes to organize and awareness that there are not enough resources for the work. I never came at it with the assumption that funders should be doing the work. I don't think that's the right approach. I think that when an organization or a group of people work on an issue, they should work on it because they believe in it. I don't think you can get anything done

without a commitment to and a belief in the cause. I don't think funding is needed for that. I think having experiences individually can be an enriching part of it because I don't think organizations and what they seek to achieve should be prescribed or bound by funding.

I have my own experience as a grantee, and I've never felt that I should in any way accommodate a funder. Instead, I felt I should make sure that they wanted to fund us. How can they see that we do align with their priorities, and in a way that would allow us to accomplish all we wanted to do in our community?

Prior to our founding, I worked on a campaign for the 2012 elections where we received one-time funding for a project to fund Asian American groups around the country. That ended up being like a pilot to the fund we have now. The funder, Sue Van of the Wallace H Coulter Foundation, came in about four months before the election and said, “I have one million dollars.” It was a rapid execution where we funded groups that had never been funded before. We did this for three months, and there was a noticeable impact. That donor and other donors were subsequently interested in continuing the work. They said, “Maybe we should do something ongoing.”

I'm sharing this because I think that philanthropy as a whole consistently struggles to figure out the best way to fund communities. Is it by having a distinct Black-specific fund and AAPI-specific fund, or is it by merging these funds into a multi-racial one? There's a challenge in terms of whether the fund is race-based, constituency-based, or gender-based. It's not that one or the other is right. Whatever a fund is set up to do, it has to be made up of individuals who know how to reach specific and diverse communities strategically.

I think we survived because we insisted that if you want an AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, the solution isn't just funding Korean, Hmong, or Vietnamese and ensuring access to high quality tools, but by enabling groups to determine how these resources would be used. Furthermore, we’ve layered our funding by offering relevant support with narrative and research.

Even now, if you look at the voter data, more AAPIs are unidentified than identified. In other words, you have 2.7 million people in the voter data who we think are Asian, but we don't know what ethnicity they are. That means that if you're a Vietnamese organization trying to reach out to Vietnamese people, and you print out one hundred thousand posters, it's possible that you're wasting resources and time by mailing them to people who are not Vietnamese. The communities are similar in one way, but so different in terms of what issues they care about, or what religion they follow. I think we continue to survive because, from the beginning, we have been saying you need to have cultural competency, to advocate for better tools, to do better research, and [to change] the narrative.

Within a few years, we also started talking about racial justice and how racial justice works within the AAPI community because there are differences between East Asians and what they experienced and Southeast Asians and South Asians and Pacific Islanders. I am not going to tell you the whole history of our fund, but we went through different iterations where we kept tackling the question of how we can be a viable fund that isn't just about civic engagement the way some funders would think it is. We're not episodic. We don't come up every four years and turn out people for four months and then shut down because our community can't turn out that way.

Jessica Kantor: It sounds like what makes your approach distinctive, and what has kept you guys in the game for longer, is that you're constantly evolving and you're constantly asking how you can stay helpful and resourceful for the people that you're working with. Are you facing any kind of unique challenges that you haven't been able to overcome that others might be able to learn from, aside from funding?

EunSook Lee: Some things we are currently working on, which are new and different [are challenging], like how Asian Americans are identified in voter data. It has to do with the question of whether that can be resolved if there were more attention and resources put towards improving the data, but it's just not been a priority. What's interesting though is that more funders are now interested in supporting that initiative. In 2012, we made the first effort when we validated and created 10 ethnicity models to help gauge the likelihood that a person is Korean and not Chinese. That was a very difficult project because, throughout the whole process, nobody understood why it was important. Even after we created the model, everybody was asking, "How do we know if it's even useful?"

In my opinion, it never got used as well as it could have. But this time around there are a lot more people nodding their heads. For example, I just talked to some folks who work in the Arab American community and they're saying the data on the identification of Arabs is also poor. Right now we're piloting an effort to go much more localized, so we're building an ethnicity model of Filipinos in Arizona because they're the top population there, and a model of Indian Americans in Michigan. We're putting a lot more money into those cases than we ever did in the 10 [original models]. We're going very deep. We've also learned to finesse our argument.

In Michigan and Arizona, races are very tight in terms of the margin of victory, so being able to identify and reach even 10,000 Indian Americans or Filipino Americans could be important for those groups. Filipinos have a different challenge than Indian Americans because Filipinos are often confused as being Latino. So how do you build a right model for Filipinos and [a different right model] for Indian Americans? We're working on that project, which is one challenge. We're also doing polling and promoting better polling practices.

The last thing is more about narrative, which is not easy, but is probably one of the most effective ways to shape Asian American civic engagements. How are we perceived? How do we perceive ourselves? How do we motivate ourselves to turn out and participate? Asian Americans are the youngest group in the electorate, but they are also seen as the least motivated group. If that is the case how do we motivate them to turn out? What are some of the messages or tactics we can use? There is an anti-China rhetoric that you hear from both parties, and it's a similar rhetoric we heard during the pandemic.

China, Chinese Americans, Asian Americans, it's just a quick conceptual jump. When we hear anti-China rhetoric, our concern is that it's going to feed into anti-Asian sentiments. Because of our experience in 2021, we recently commissioned qualitative-quantitative research of White, Latino, and Black voters in battleground states. We just released it about three weeks ago, and it got some coverage in the media. We shared it with policymakers, and we met with the White House. One thing that voters of all races think is that it's politicians who are creating the anti-Asian sentiments and that it's political rhetoric that creates this environment of anti-Asian violence, so we're sharing with them. What they see is that China is not the problem. What are we doing [to stop this dangerous rhetoric and the ensuing violence]?

Voters want solutions. If there's a concern about the economy, for example, what are we doing about supply chains? That's why we did this research and why we're sharing it out. We have messaging and talking points and so on that we're hoping people will use. I think on a similar note, Asian Americans are often red-baited when they run for office. It doesn't matter who it is. It happened in 2022, with Jay Chen in Orange County. I've seen races when an Asian American ran for mayor or city council and they were labeled as Communists or foreigners. That affects their ability to run effectively, and it also negatively influences voter perceptions and the Asian American community. These are just examples of my point that changing the narrative and influencing the story is not an easy task. Honestly, we're still trying to figure it out. What are the best ways to reach people, beyond the choir we're preaching to already?

Jessica Kantor: It sounds like helping change the narrative and control the narrative means changing the perception of everybody, not just the communities that you normally work with.

EunSook Lee: Yes. When Asian Americans are portrayed, there's an invisibility problem, but when they're visible, the way they are portrayed is also a problem. I think it feeds into our sense of belonging in this country, and the rights we have to participate. I think that's important to address.

Jessica Kantor: Have you ever thought about funding, or do you fund, Asian Americans who are interested in running for office?

EunSook Lee: We have both a C3 and a C4, so we have a nonpartisan entity that Skoll funds. One thing I didn't mention is that 96% of our groups are led by women. We point out that women are the leaders in our community, and when they decide to run for office, they face greater hurdles. We've hosted different sessions, with elected leaders and AAPI women elected. We've also done a report on advancing AAPI women's leadership and about why it takes a woman. You have to ask a woman 50 times to run for office, whereas men think they're born to run.

Then there are the challenges of fundraising. What we've done on the C3 side is created a sabbatical fund that's designed to help staff who need to rejuvenate, figure out their course in life, and so on. On the C4 side, we have a program called Power AAPI Women, which is designed to offer listening sessions with elected women and where we ask them, "What are the challenges you face? What is it you need?" These listening sessions will inform future work in this area, while making sure not to duplicate or replace programs that exist.

Jessica Kantor: How do you see the work that you're doing evolving over the next five years?

EunSook Lee: We're a collaborative fund that started off as a C3. I mentioned that we have a C4 now, and we're fiscally sponsored. We are expecting to go independent within two years, so we're spinning out C4 sooner because just the way C4s and C3s work. You can operate as a C4 without having actually gotten papers to be a C4, whereas with a C3, it can take a whole year to receive IRS approval. So we are filing for both, but we can do our C4 sooner, and next year is an important election. So we have a C4 and a C3, and we're expecting to go independent. We also have a PAC. We've done PAC funding before, but this time around, we want to do it on our own. So organizationally, we hope to be stable and durable and to have a steady budget in the next five years.

What I mean by stable is that funding has in some ways been more erratic than we would want it to be. In 2021, we saw a surge of funding because everybody felt something around the anti-Asian violence, but we've actually seen our funding dip each year since, so we're trying to keep it at a certain level. We want to grow and become independent because the one thing we failed to do while we grew was to make sure we have a stable infrastructure. We've been very lean, and so we're trying to address that in the same way we're telling our organizations to have a stable infrastructure.

There are different types of funds. There are funds that call themselves working funds, and they do the work. We're not one of those, and we're very clear that it is our groups that should be leading on the work. We would like to build our infrastructure, so in five years we'll be independent. We'll have a strong C3 and C4, and a lot of our programs would have been successful enough by

then that we'll see a lot more organizations, like New Virginia Majority, Filipino Advocates for Justice, or Asian American Advancing Justice-Atlanta in the next five years.

Jessica Kantor: That's wonderful. Thanks so much for speaking with me, EunSook.

Jessica Kantor is an independent journalist specializing in health, human rights, and social impact. Her work can be found in Fast Company, Healthcare Quarterly, The Las Vegas Review-Journal, and others. She is a living kidney donor.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*