

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Young Kwok 'Corky' Lee

Chinese American photojournalist, activist

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Background Information

Born: September 5, 1947, Died: January 27, 2021

Young Kwok 'Corky' Lee was born in Queens, New York. He was a first generation Chinese American. In his family, Corky was the first to attend and graduate from college. He graduated from Queens College with a bachelor's degree in American history.

Resistance

As a teenager, Corky saw a photograph in a textbook that bothered him. He wondered why a famous 1869 picture of the Transcontinental Railroad opening excluded Chinese workers. Corky knew that Chinese immigrants made up the bulk of railroad workers during the time. As he got older, Corky continued to notice a lack of visibility of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in mainstream media. He became a photojournalist to make sure that there was a record of Asian Americans and their place in American history.ⁱ Corky wanted to reclaim the histories of Asian influences in society by using photographic justice. Lee carried a camera around his neck and photographed the everyday lives of Asians in America. During his career, he captured the diversity among Asian communities. Over time, Corky Lee was also known for his photographs of immigration legislation and civil rights protests. Police brutality in Chinatown had been a growing issue. In 1975 various demonstrations began. Lee famously captured a picture of a bloody and beaten man being led away by police.ⁱⁱ His picture was a New York Post's front-page news story that resulted in public outrage. In response to the brutality, 20,000 people marched to city hall demanding reform. During Lee's 50-year career, his photographs appeared in newspapers and magazines, Asian American history books, art exhibitions, and documentary films.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2015 he co-founded 21 Pell Street, an organization that holds free cultural and community events in Chinatown.

Achievements

Since 1988, May 5 is recognized as "Corky Lee Day" in New York City. Corky received the Susan Ahn Award for Civil Rights and Social Justice for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, from the Asian American Journalists Association in 2009.

Essential Questions

1. How did Corky resist against Asian underrepresentation and exclusion in history textbooks?
2. What effect did the New York Post's use of Corky Lee's photo on their front page have on New York City?
3. ***“Every time I take my camera out of my bag, it's like drawing a sword to combat indifference, injustice, and discrimination, trying to get rid of stereotypes.”***
 - a. What does this quote mean to you?
 - b. How can images be used to tell stories from a different perspective?

ⁱ <https://caamedia.org/blog/2021/02/24/photographic-justice-rest-in-power-corky-lee/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/nyregion/corky-lee-dead-coronavirus.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Corky-Lee/634256>