

Jeannie Mai Grew Up Too Aware of Asian Racism, And Is Standing Up to Hate in America Now

"Racism is just a form of bullying and making someone shrink in their skin. You need to stop it in its tracks when somebody is getting hurt."

BY DAVID YI / APR 21, 2020



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The rise of COVID-19 cases has exposed another virus: anti-Asian racism. It's been reported that there are now more than 1,100 weekly public incidents of harassment both verbal and physical directed at Asian Americans. And that's only those that have been reported. Beyond the Chinese-American man who was attacked by several people in San Francisco, the Asian-American man and his two young children who were brutally stabbed at a Sam's Club in Texas, and the Asian-American woman who was doused with acid outside her New York City home, many more incidents around the world go unreported.

But amid the darkness is Jeannie Mai, the Emmy Award–winning cohost of *The Real* who's become a singular voice and light for Asian Americans everywhere. A former makeup artist and fashion critic, Mai has emerged as not only a powerful advocate, but one of Asian America's *only* advocates. She's fearlessly called out racist and xenophobic sentiments on her social media feeds, and penned an essay for *People*, unabashedly bringing awareness to anti-Asianness. With it has come backlash from irate followers who've attempted to silence her.

Some have commented about how they believe Asians deserve these attacks, while others have aired their ignorance, writing about how all Asians are born with the coronavirus. It's obvious that at a time of COVID-19, racism has become acceptable, uniting the left and the right. It doesn't help that the president has referred to the coronavirus as the "Chinese Flu," while members of the Republican party have reportedly joked it's the "Kung Flu."

Of course, none of this is new for Asian Americans. From the biggest mass lynching in America being Chinese immigrants in San Francisco, the Chinese Exclusion Act becoming the United States' first xenophobic act passed against an entire race, and the internment camps of the 1940s forcing Japanese Americans to be relocated, to hate crimes like 1982's senseless murder of Vincent Chin by white supremacists and South Asians being targeted after 9/11, Asian Americans have always been forced to defend their existence. It doesn't help that the so-called "model minority" myth is one that purports Asians are successful only because of white supremacy.

But Mai isn't sitting back and letting it happen again. For the undeterred on-camera personality, standing up to truth and power has always been part of her brand. It's why she's amassed more than 2.2 million Instagram followers. It's apparent that she connects with her fans on an authentic level.

On a recent Friday, *BAZAAR.com* sat down with the change-maker to discuss her advocacy, why it means so much to her, what being an Asian American means in 2020, and what she's doing to inspire an entirely new generation of advocates.

I'll never forget when I was attending middle school and walking home. My dad bought a Datsun for my aunt to drive to and from work. There was a word spray-painted on it, and it said, "Gook."

I stared at it and thought, What does that mean?

I was with my Latina friend, and she said, "I don't know, but it doesn't look good." I had no idea.

I'll never forget, three houses down, another family that was Latino started laughing and saying, "Damn, might as well change your last name, because that's what you are, Chink. Your parents are FOBs [fresh off the boat]. Why are you trying to have an American name, when your parents know what that means?"

I had no idea what FOB meant. As soon as I asked my dad what that meant, my aunt, whose car that belongs to, walked out with a bucket, soap, and scouring pads for dishes. She went to work, trying to scrub it off.

I said to my aunt, "What are you doing?"

And she said, "Why are you standing there? Clean this up."

They didn't quite understand what it meant either, though we knew it wasn't a good word. But for them, it was all about survival. It was carry on with business.

“I have dinner to make, I have to get to a job in a couple of hours, we have things to do, clean it up!”

And that is when I realized I started to adopt that filter. When I went through life, started dating outside the race, I started adapting. I would hear racist things all the time.

My other aunt got spat on.

She walked in the house one day and my cousin came over to get her clothes. It was full of something that looked like mush and Kool-Aid.

“What is this?”

She nonchalantly replied, “I got spat on crossing the street.”

I said, “What? Here in San Jose?”

“They spat on my face, just wash it. What are you going to do? Go after them?”

She had that survival mentality that she had to keep it moving, she had things to do. [Like many Asian immigrants], it’s not in our nature to revolt against things. Immigrants don’t rally with their friends, they don’t picket. They’re survivors and think about how they can secure the money, take care of the family, make sure they have jobs, and that’s it.

The problem is that that mentality came with me as I grew into an adult. I realized I repressed it so much and thought, I’ve always been racially attacked, but why haven’t I ever said anything? It’s why today, with my platform and now that I’m known, I’m realizing I can’t carry that mentality anymore. The more I stay quiet or blasé about racism, the more I’m allowing people to get hurt, who don’t speak English or have an avenue to talk about it.

How I find the courage today to speak up is I go back to my aunt who was spat on. My grandmother who was once pushed by an American inside a Ranch 99. Or my makeup artist who was recently berated in Culver City, told to go back home because

she has a virus. I know they're not going to stand up in that moment, and I think about them. You have to connect to that every time you see something and you feel scared and your heart palpitates. If you can't stand up for yourself, do it for that person who doesn't have that same moment as you.

When Jeezy posted about our engagement, it was interesting.

My fans know me, and they've grown up with me. Jeezy's [Jay Wayne Jenkins] fans don't know me. There's also a lot of people who are angry that he's dating or marrying outside his race. On his Instagram, I saw comments such as, "You're going to catch that Corona," or, "You're going to marry that sushi roll?" When it comes to comments on the 'gram, it's laughable. It's way too easy to type this on your phone. They would never say this in person, and if they did, we'd handle it at that time. It's too easy to type and press send.

But in real life, people do think these things. People think that because I'm part Chinese, I have the coronavirus inside me. There are people who think that if you eat soy sauce, you'll catch the coronavirus and won't use it. There's just too much stupidity.

At the end of the day, I check it when we have the ability to have this space. I don't encourage people to pop off in their comments. Instagram isn't real life. It's not a real place to have a dialogue. If people really had an issue, they know where to find me, where to email me. I have a whole contact on my Instagram page or a phone number.

Racism is just a form of bullying and making someone shrink in their skin. You need to stop it in its tracks when somebody is getting hurt. You absolutely need to stand up and speak out. And Instagram comments? Grow up.

We have to understand for right now, people feel very isolated and afraid. Not only that, but we have leaders who continue to call the coronavirus the "Chinese Virus" and an Internet calling it the "Kung Flu." When people are afraid, people need someone to blame. It's psychology. I'd tell other Asian Americans to start with

empathy to understand why people are like this even if it isn't right. Understand that people are thinking, "Who did this to us? Who took away my business? Who locked me in my house?"

That's why it's important for us in our homes, text messages, and the 'gram, to check people if there are any racist jokes or off-colored conversations. That will lead to rants. Rants lead to hate. Hate leads to vicious acts. If you think about a joke and it seeps into you, it attaches to you, and later on, it strums up some emotions not always positive at all. It's important to check it when you see it.

When it comes to the coronavirus, we are going to get through this and past it. Please use this time to be mindful about the conversations in your household, or in your house. Check your aunt if she says something racist. Stand up for Black and Brown people. When someone says something about other Asians, check it. Stop it in your home. Racism is taught. Period. Don't segregate yourself because you're Korean and they're Japanese. Ally with your brothers and sisters. We're only stronger together.

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