Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a well-known activist who made a huge and direct impact on discrimination, especially towards people who are black. He is admired and consistently recognized for how he helped reshape a racist system that existed in our country. Unfortunately, that racist system has not been completely reshaped. It still exists today and its prominence can be seen when looking at what Asians have experienced, especially during the peak of the pandemic. I, myself, am one of those Asians who have been treated unfairly just because people don’t know who to blame when a deadly virus is going around.

The first time I experienced racism due to the pandemic was when I was sitting down in a bus seat. I saw a guy around my age look me directly in the eye and walk towards me. My friends didn’t notice it or pay any mind but I was a little thrown off by it. He caught me looking at him and instantly looked back to what I could assume were his friends. He walked a bit faster, pushing people a little to get to the back of the bus, where I happened to sit. Making direct eye contact, he said “Since you’re Asian, did you… y’know… start the pandemic?” I looked at him with surprise and shock written all over my face that someone would have the audacity and twisted courage to say that to my face. He instantly followed up his offensive statement with another, “Do you have COVID?” “No, of course not” I said, “Why would I have COVID, me being Asian plays no part in that.” He just laughed like he told the funniest joke in the world and I had the most hilarious response. He, still laughing, just went “Yeah, yeah!” and turned, walking back towards the group of people he was looking at before. I turned to my own friends, who had their mouths open in disbelief. One of them looked concerned and upset while I could see the other with a look of pure anger all over their face. My concerned friend instantly checked up on me and apologized for not saying anything. A polar opposite, my other friend suddenly stood up and yelled at the guy, “You think you’re so funny? I hope you know how racist that is!” I sat there, saying absolute nothing.

Something about the notion of actually standing up for myself scared me and I would never have the courage or the guts to say that to someone. It was partially because I wasn’t a big fan of talking to someone I didn’t know, but I also was afraid that because they were saying something racist straight to my face, they would not be afraid to get physical either. This fear continued to follow me throughout the pandemic, anytime I ever experienced any kind of racism or slightly offensive act, I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t know how to be more like my friends, able to speak up in a time where injustice was happening. A lot of the time, I was just experiencing dirty looks or death glares, which is also how most acts of racism committed against me started out. Sometimes, they ended there. I never knew if it was actually targeted toward me or if it was just someone having a bad day, misdirecting their anger towards a stranger. I never wanted to find out.

Yet another time I experienced an injustice was when I was sitting down in a mall cafe. I had noticed a teenage guy giving me a dirty look. He glanced at the COVID-19 sign and then back at me. Pulling his mask up, he caught me staring at him and confused and instantly changed his focus to his phone. I decided to ignore it and opened my book to work on my summer reading, pulling out the papers for the homework and a pencil. Starting the book, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the same guy was getting out of his chair. He was heading in my direction but the exit was the same way so I ignored him and continued to read. He sat down next to me,“You think you’re so funny?” I sat there, saying absolute nothing.

Time and time again, something similar happened. It was true that I wanted to stand up for myself. If I could have, I would’ve screamed and yelled and told them to stop and that I was just an innocent kid. It felt so unfair to me that people would look at me and instantly associate me with something so bad and horrifying. I felt targeted over a pandemic that was never even started by Asians; it had only originated in an Asian country.

Now, I recognize that I have the power to change people’s perception of COVID-19 and Asians. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.” I feel as though if I stand up for myself and other Asians, I can help make a difference just like him. Spreading awareness about the discrimination that grew out of the pandemic is something that is important to me. Talking to adults about the issue is one way that I know I could combat this issue. Ideas and beliefs are often passed down from person to person; if I start with conversing with adults, they are likely to spread it to their peers and younger people. Another idea that I thought of to spread awareness, is social media. Even a simple repost of important information gets the word around. Making sure that I am an accurate and correct source of information is another. Misinformation causes people to not trust any sources about essential causes. If I help de-root the false assumptions that people created, maybe I too can make a difference and help prevent more injustice from happening.

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