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Hate's harms persist 25 years after Raleigh murder

By Andrew Chin

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RON CHAPPLE STOCK — Getty Images/Ron Chapple Studios

A racially motivated murder in Raleigh 25 years ago led to the first federal conviction of a person for hate crimes against an Asian-American.

On the night of Friday, July 28, 1989, Chinese-American restaurant worker Jim Loo, 24, of Cary and six of his

friends met to play pool at the Cue 'N' Spirits on Atlantic Avenue in Raleigh. Lloyd and Robert Piche, two brothers drinking at the bar, confronted the group, referring to a brother who had died in the Vietnam War, making threatening gestures and challenging the men to fight, using such names as "slanty-eyed gooks," "black pajamas" and "rice eaters."

Lloyd Piche, who made most of the racial remarks, also made kung fu gestures, pretended to fire a machine gun at the group and tried to recruit another white bar patron into the dispute. Throughout the harassment, Loo's group remained quiet and tried to ignore the Piches.

The Piches left the bar and waited in the parking lot. When Loo and his friends came out, Robert Piche attempted to club one of Loo's friends with a shotgun, then used a handgun to threaten another of Loo's friends and strike Loo in the head. Lloyd Piche also took part in the attack on the group. Loo collapsed to the pavement, where a broken beer bottle pierced his head. Two days later, Loo died from brain injuries.

Loo's death caught the attention of national Asian-American organizations, which were determined to avoid a repeat of what they saw as a miscarriage of justice following the 1982 killing of Vincent Chin. During Chin's bachelor party at a Detroit-area nightclub, autoworker Ronald Ebens and his stepson Michael Nitz had shouted at Chin and his guests, "It's because of you little (expletive) that we're out of work," referring to the loss of car manufacturing jobs to Japan.

Later that evening, Ebens and Nitz bludgeoned Chin with a baseball bat until his head cracked open. Chin was buried on what would have been his wedding day. Chin's killers were sentenced to three years probation and a \$3,000 fine for manslaughter and acquitted of all civil rights charges. According to Justice Department official Jack Keeney, jurors might have acquitted Ebens of civil rights violations because they concluded Ebens' attack on Chin's person was not specifically intended to interfere with his enjoyment of the nightclub. Ebens and Nitz never went to prison.

After years of unsuccessful advocacy in Detroit, national groups such as the Organization of Chinese-Americans and the Asian Law Caucus were determined to mobilize quickly in Raleigh. Working with local leaders, they organized the Jim Loo American Justice Coalition to attend the trial and provide legal and linguistic assistance to Loo's parents, and they pressured the Justice Department to bring federal civil rights charges against the Piche brothers.

The Piche brothers were convicted in state court. Robert Piche served 10 years of a 37-year sentence for second-degree murder and assault, and Lloyd Piche served three weeks of a six-month sentence for assault and disorderly conduct.

Lloyd Piche, like Chin's killers, could have evaded significant prison time. In federal court, however, Lloyd Piche was tried and convicted of violating the civil rights of Loo and his friends to enjoy a public facility, with death resulting, and incarcerated for six years – the first time an Asian-American's civil rights had ever been vindicated under U.S. hate crime laws.

When all Asians look alike to a killer, all Asian-Americans are forced to live in a state of heightened vulnerability. Unfortunately, despite the success of the Piche prosecutions, technicalities in federal and state hate crime laws continue to hamper efforts to redress or even acknowledge the terror inflicted on an entire population when a victim is targeted on the basis of race, gender, religion or sexual orientation.

For example, the 2002 killing of N.C. State University graduate student Lili Wang, in circumstances similar to Elliot Rodger's May 23 gender- and race-motivated murder spree, was never investigated or counted as a possible hate crime, due to the narrow wording of the North Carolina ethnic intimidation statute.

In the wake of the Santa Barbara killings, thousands of women have recently borne witness to the pervasive everyday terrors that hate crimes inflict within our borders, even as our leaders more actively legislate against threats from international terrorism. Twenty-five years on, all North Carolinians should honor the memory of Loo by supporting the enforcement and strengthening of the state's hate crime laws.

Andrew Chin is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina School of Law in Chapel Hill.

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