

## **AN ASIAN VOICE, RAISED AGAINST ABUSE**

*YPSILANTI WOMAN DEFIES A CULTURE OF SILENCE TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT VIOLENCE IN HER MARRIAGE AND HER COMMUNITY*

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Light has returned to the face of Jin Sook Hong, like a glow sent by God.

Smiles appear, unforced, on her lips.

Sparkles dance in her coffee-colored eyes, reflecting a joyous, deep faith.

Faith that survived a torturous, 11-year marriage in silence.

Faith that withstood a husband who prodded her torso again and again with a kitchen knife, who threw her to the ground while she was pregnant and who hit her on the head so hard with a coffee canister that she needed 10 stitches.

When her scalp healed, he smashed it again.

Same spot.

More stitches.

The scar remains. But more important, so does she - vibrant and vivacious and no longer voiceless.

Hong, a classically trained vocalist who relishes religious hymns, will take a break May 8 from performing arias and arrangements by Schubert and Strauss to recount how she lived through a marriage filled with violence.

"All those years, music was my medicine," says Hong, 52, a slender, 5-foot-2-inch woman with a rich mezzo-soprano voice. "I put all of my sorrow and pain to God."

The event, at the University of Michigan School of Music, aims to raise awareness about abuse in Asian families and the Ann Arbor organization called New Visions: Alliance to End Violence in Asian/Asian American Communities.

For Hong, a native of Korea who lives in Ypsilanti Township, it will be a celebration of survival. But she also hopes it will touch other women, perhaps Asians like her. She wants to encourage them to break a silence about domestic violence that tends to affect Asians more than other ethnic groups.

Like many Korean and Asian women, Hong told no one of the physical, emotional and psychological abuse she suffered.

She thought it was a wife's duty to keep quiet.

She believed that if she did tell, people in her close-knit community in South Korea would gossip.

They would ostracize her. They would blame her.

For years, she longed for someone who would understand, someone who would help.

### **Statistics are elusive**

People of Asian and Pacific Island descent make up one of the fastest growing minority groups in the country and in Michigan. As the population grows - the number in Michigan rose from 104,983 in 1990 to 179,202 in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau - so has the need for help in dealing with particular domestic violence issues.

Among the challenges: convincing Asians that the problem exists and getting them to discuss it openly. Language and cultural barriers can also impede Asian and Asian-American women from seeking help through mainstream channels.

Studies on domestic violence among Asians and Asian Americans have become more prevalent. But the results cannot capture the full reality of domestic violence in these communities.

For instance, the number of Asians and Asian Americans who said they were victims of domestic violence was much lower than other ethnic groups, according to a nationwide study of domestic violence published in 2000 by the National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The study said the low numbers were due in part to Asian and Asian-American women not admitting that they had been abused.

"There's definitely underreporting," said Chic Dabby, director of the Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, a national resource center in San Francisco. "We can certainly say that without hesitation.

"There's the whole issue of recognizing and admitting that there's a problem," she added. "It's a problem everywhere, but it's a deeper problem in Asian communities, partly because of the extent of victim-blaming that we see and hear about. It's seen as something like, 'Maybe she was provoking this.' "

Denial, Dabby says, also comes from a model minority myth which purports that all Asians and Asian Americans are intelligent, professional and polite - and therefore could do little harm to other people.

"Asian groups buy into that," she said.

Sang Kim, choir administrator at the Korean Presbyterian Church of Michigan in Farmington Hills, which Hong attends, said that image of success affected him, too, especially when Hong shared her story with him.

"I was shocked," said Kim, 49, of Troy. "I never thought it would happen to her like that because she was highly educated. I thought professionals didn't suffer."

### **Joy turns to despair**

*He's so perfect! So handsome and kind and humble! And I would be the wife of a minister? The wife of a minister!*

*Wouldn't that be nice?*

Those thoughts sprang like sunflowers in Hong's daydreams.

Hong, then a sprightly, strong-willed 23-year-old in 1970s South Korea, had just met Kyung Chin, a young assistant pastor at her father's church.

*The wife of a minister!*

*I would be loved and cared for and safe.*

That was, after all, how Hong grew up.

Born in Kangwon-Do, a mountainous province east of Seoul, Hong had the closest of relationships with her father, Soon Woo Hong, who has been a Protestant pastor most of his life.

Every day of her childhood, Hong's father would grasp her thick hands and tell her she possessed beauty and talent and could do anything she wanted.

"All my dreams, everything, I would talk to my father," Hong says, eyes shining at the memory.

When she told him she wanted to pursue vocal music as a career, he supported her without question.

When she told him she would marry Chin after a three-month courtship, he backed that, too.

While Hong and Chin dated, everything seemed promising.

They talked, held hands, took walks. He sang to her.

On Jan. 19, 1977, he gave her a diamond ring. They married a little over a month later, on Feb. 24.

That night, the horror began.

It started with never-ending questions.

In their bedroom, Hong was baffled as her new husband interrogated her about the Bulova watch she and her family had purchased for him as a wedding gift.

A few weeks earlier, as they were picking out the watch, Hong's mother had made an offhand remark about the price.

She said something like, "Wow, it's expensive," Hong recalls. At the time, Chin had said nothing.

On their wedding night, however, he pressed his new wife again and again: Why did your mother say that? What did she mean? Why didn't she like the watch?

The questions, Hong said, were irrational.

The questions did not end.

"I was crying the whole night," she says. "He never let me sleep. That was just the beginning. That was just the beginning."

Within days, the hitting started.

### **Culture of silence**

During her marriage, Hong experienced the cycle of violence common to thousands of domestic abuse victims: a build-up of tension by the abuser; an emotional, sexual or physical lashing out; an apology and a promise to change, and a honeymoon period of sweetness.

After that, the tension takes over and the cycle begins anew.

The influence of their culture, though, distinguishes Asian and Asian-American victims.

Almost all Asian women, especially immigrants, come from backgrounds that for centuries have followed a collectivist philosophy - that emphasizes the good of the group over the individual. That means family plays an enormous role, as does an abused woman's fear of rejection from it.

Usha Ari, a social worker who has counseled victims of domestic violence, said anxiety lurks in South Asian women that speaking out will wreck the lives of their children and bring shame on themselves.

"You are respected because you are someone's wife," says Ari, 48, of West Bloomfield, who works at Common Ground Sanctuary in Pontiac and has often opened her home to South Asian victims of domestic abuse. "There is a social status and the thought that if you are not married, you are probably nobody."

The force of family often makes it much less likely that an Asian woman will seek professional counseling.

Neel Pandya, 26, who did an internship with New Visions, says few South Asians discuss domestic violence.

"It's just taboo," says Pandya, a graduate student at the U-M School of Social Work. "It's kind of like sex at the dinner table. You just don't talk about it."

### **Help at last**

Hong never said anything about the abuse.

Not the first time her husband hit her.

Not when her two sons were born.

Not when Chin told her she was ugly or accused her of looking at other men or smacked her in front of the children as he drove them to church.

She did not dare tell her father.

"I thought that nobody would believe this because he was so good on the outside," she said. While they lived in South Korea, Chin allowed Hong to get her master's degree in vocal performance, which projected the image of a supportive husband.

But inside their house, the abuse never ceased.

Hong, who so loved to sing, never chirped a practice note in front of her husband, worried he would use it as an excuse to beat her.

"It was a dungeon for 11 years," she says.

Yet, one thing blossomed during that torturous time - her love for God. During the most hopeless moments, Hong would recite to herself from Romans 8:35: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"

Over and over, she thought, "Nothing can separate me from the love of God."

In 1988, Chin moved the family to the United States so he could enroll in a theological graduate program at Drew University in Madison, N.J.

Hong carried the verse from Romans, and the hope of escape, with her across the Pacific Ocean.

"I thought in America, I would get help," she says.

Shortly after arriving, she pleaded with her sister-in-law, who also lived in New Jersey, for aid. But to protect her brother, the sister-in-law offered none.

After a few weeks, Hong went to stay with a sister in Boca Raton, Fla., for six months, thinking she would never go back to her husband. But she did, realizing he would not relinquish her children, who were 8 and 10 at the time, and hoping he would change.

Yet after a particularly violent attack in July 1989, she decided to end it.

After Chin left their apartment that morning, Hong snatched a \$100 bill, her driver's license and a coin purse. Thinking only of the need to get away, she stepped through the door.

She walked and walked and did not stop, not even when she felt her husband's invisible hands reaching out to hold her back.

As she kept going, Hong remembered a clinic where she had taken her sons for vaccinations. She would go there.

Once she arrived, she showed a nurse the bruises on her chest, as dense as leopard spots. The nurse called the police, who took her to a hospital emergency room.

From there, Hong headed to a women's shelter house in Morristown, N.J., where she wondered whether her sons, who were away at summer camp, could join her.

Hours later, with the help of a social worker, they did.

During her stay at the shelter, Hong joined a support group of survivors, where she finally felt free to recount her horror.

"It was, 'Ahhhhhhh,' " she says, heaving a deep, cathartic sigh. "It was not just me. There were blacks, Koreans, Asians, Hispanics, whites. We were all healing."

Nowadays, in the entrance closet of her home, Hong keeps a multicolored pastel quilt, replete with bunnies, which she received at the shelter.

There, she had experienced an epiphany: "It was the first time I realized it was not my fault."

Hong left the shelter after a month and took a train with her sons to Detroit, landing at another sister's home in Madison Heights.

She worked at a coffee shop, trying to get off welfare, though the lack of money didn't bother her.

"Those were the most happiest moments to me because I had freedom," Hong says. "It's like, 'Even though I don't have enough money, we don't fear anyone.' So many women fear."

About a year and a half after she arrived, with the help of the Legal Aid Society, Hong divorced her husband.

"I told my sons that Jesus was my new husband and he was their new father," she says.

Finally, Hong was ready to tell her father in Korea. She spoke every word of her story into a tape recorder and mailed the tape overseas.

He listened, and he understood.

Hong later quit the coffee shop, earning enough money teaching students to sing that she could return to school herself.

In 1994, she obtained a second master's degree in vocal performance at Oakland University and then, in June 2000, Hong finished her doctorate in vocal performance at U-M.

Hong's stroll across the commencement stage, grasping her diploma, marked the highest point of her life, she says, because she had come so far from her days as a battered woman.

"I tasted God's love," she said of that moment. "He had put me in a safe place."

## **Epilogue**

It has taken 16 years, but Hong feels ready to speak to strangers about the ordeal that was her marriage, especially to those who need help.

She feels prepared to trust a man again, too, because even for those with strong faith, life can get lonely.

Hong says she has found a man at church - her first boyfriend since her divorce - who treats her with kindness and consideration and love.

Nowadays, Hong's voice rings strong, in her life and work at Albion and Washtenaw Community colleges, where she teaches vocal performance.

Earlier this month, on a serene Sunday afternoon, Hong sat at an ebony Kawai grand piano at her church in Farmington Hills, surrounded by about 20 of the choir members she directs.

Toward the end of their practice, she led them in a Korean rendition of the hymn "The Lord's Prayer," composed by Albert Hay Malotte.

Hong rehearsed her group, tapping on several keys. Once in a while, she belted out a few notes.

They followed her, learning by ear.

Toward the end of practice, she stopped playing. She looked at them with intensity, then with tenderness.

"Smile," she told them, and pointed to her own beaming face.

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#### TO LEARN MORE

\*New Visions: Alliance to End Violence in Asian/Asian American Communities  
[www.ssw.umich.edu/newvisions/VIsions/734-615-2106](http://www.ssw.umich.edu/newvisions/VIsions/734-615-2106) or  
[newvisions@umich.edu](mailto:newvisions@umich.edu)

\*Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic  
Violence [www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/default.htm](http://www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/default.htm) 415-954-9988, ext. 315 or  
[apidvinstitute@apiahf.org](mailto:apidvinstitute@apiahf.org)

\*Asian/Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Project [chnm.gmu.edu/dvrp/](http://chnm.gmu.edu/dvrp/)

\*Michigan Battered Women's Clemency Project [www.umich.edu/~~clemency/](http://www.umich.edu/~~clemency/) or  
contact [Jacobsen@umich.edu](mailto:Jacobsen@umich.edu)

\*National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Intimate Partner Violence Fact  
Sheet [www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/ipvfacts.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/ipvfacts.htm)

\*National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and  
Prevention "Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of



Violence Against Women"www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles1/nij/183781.txt If you need crisis help

\*Michigan Asian Indian Family Services 24-hour line: 888-664-8624  
www.maifs.org/index.htm

\*Help Against Violent Encounters Now (HAVEN) 24-hour line: 248-334-1274  
www.haven-oakland.org/

\*Domestic Violence Project/SAFE House 24-hour line: 734-995-5444  
www.dvpsh.org/index.php

\*Detroit Police Department Rape Counseling Center and Domestic Violence 24-hour lines: 313-833-1660 or 313-833-9813

\*Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence Domestic violence service providers in Michigan: www.mcadsv.org/general/centers.html

'Creating New Visions'

4:30-6 p.m. May 8

Britton Recital Hall, U-M School of Music, Ann Arbor

Sponsored by New Visions: Alliance to End Violence in Asian/Asian American Communities.

Classical singing and speech by Jin Sook Hong; Vidyanjali Dance Troupe of Hindu Temple Rhythms; and reception.

Free; donations welcome

Reservations by Thu.: 734-730-0913 or newvisions@umich.edu

ILLUSTRATION: Photos by AMY LEANG/Detroit Free Press

CAPTION:

Hong, behind the piano at church, draws strength from her faith.

Jin Sook Hong, far left, leads the sopranos from the choir at the Korean Presbyterian Church of Michigan in Farmington Hills: Sung Mi Hong (left center), Misook Kim and Kim Chong Un.

Hong keeps a multicolored pastel quilt that she received at a shelter for abused women. There, she experienced an epiphany: "It was the first time I realized it was not my fault."

CAPTIONWRITER: Classical singer and voice teacher Jin Sook Hong at home in Ypsilanti Township. Hong will discuss surviving an 11-year abusive marriage at an event next month sponsored by an Ann Arbor group that combats violence in the Asian community.

MEMO: SEE RELATED STORY BY CHAN, PAGE 3G.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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