

Asian American restaurant owner says pandemic-fueled racism closed his Richmond restaurant of 18 years

“Go back to your country,” the customer yelled. “Take the disease with you.”

It was April 2020. After closing for weeks due to the outbreak of COVID-19, Yong Shin had just reopened K-Town Kitchen & Bar for takeout and delivery. Like other Richmond businesses, in addition to installing Plexiglas service windows and taking other precautions, Shin’s restaurant was requiring people to wear masks.

The first customer to walk in that day refused, prompting the angry outburst at the Korean American restaurant owner.

This wasn’t the only racist comment Shin would hear over the course of the pandemic. Incidents like this involving customers and delivery drivers often arose on a near-daily basis that first year, according to Shin. The following year, they persisted roughly two or three times a week.

These encounters usually played out the same way: Some person would become enraged by the restaurant’s mask policy. As the situation intensified, Shin would come out from the kitchen to de-escalate. The onslaught of racist verbiage would begin.

“At that point, I became like the Asian punching bag,” Shin said.

The verbal assaults ranged from slurs like “chink,” “China man” or “ching chang chong,” to nicknames like “Bruce Lee,” to chants of “kung flu” as people stormed out the door, to

the more common refrain: “Go back to your country” — a phrase uttered so frequently that, to Shin, it began to sound like a line people had been taught to recite.

Another disgruntled customer reported K-Town to the Virginia Department of Health. The health department’s records from June 2020 reflect that the customer accused Shin and his employees of not wearing masks. However, as Shin was told from the inspector who fielded the complaint, the customer also accused the restaurant of “serving cats,” an accusation founded on overtly racist tropes about Asian-owned restaurants.

Every incidence of racism “made me question everything about myself,” Shin said. “It took a piece of my soul out of me every time.”

The anti-Asian sentiment he endured throughout the pandemic, accompanied by the death of two family members and his father being diagnosed with cancer, led to Shin’s decision to close the restaurant. The last Friday in February marked the end of K-Town’s 18-year run.

“I just couldn’t take it,” he said.

Things weren’t always so bad for Shin and his restaurant.

Born in Korea, Shin has lived in the U.S. since age 4. He and his family have been Virginia residents for almost three decades. In 2004, after attending Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Shin opened his restaurant near campus. Originally called Mama’s Kitchen, the restaurant was the first Korean restaurant downtown. The restaurant, eventually renamed K-Town, moved to its Fourth Street location in 2016.

“Outside of the pandemic,” Shin said, “we were really thriving, and I’ve always felt like a part of this society, you know?”

It’s not as if Shin has never experienced racism as an Asian American before. Prior to moving to Virginia in 1992, he spent most of his childhood in the Midwest, where he recalls being exposed to much worse.

But for Shin, Richmond had been a welcoming place. It was a city he’d come to fall in love with. And his restaurant was a fixture in the community, a popular spot among the downtown work crowd.

The pandemic marked “such an extreme turnaround. ... You just felt like the world was just turning on us,” Shin said of the hostility that he and other Asian Americans suddenly faced.

The only other time he experienced anything of this nature in RVA was, interestingly enough, during another pandemic: the outbreak of the H1N1 influenza virus in 2009. But that was relatively short-lived, he said.

When those anti-Asian sentiments started to resurface this time around, Shin came to the heartbreaking realization about his beloved city: “Racism never left.”

During the pandemic, an increasing number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders nationwide have been targeted with hate crimes and other racially motivated acts, including verbal harassment. Despite their ties to this country, they have been blamed for the inception of a virus thousands of miles away in East Asia.

AAPI Data founder and professor Karthick Ramakrishnan told the news website Axios that this behavior stems from subjective notions “of who is an insider, who’s an outsider, who is American and who is an unassimilable foreigner.” Asian Americans, historically, find themselves on the outskirts of American society — the “perpetual foreigners,” as they’ve been called.

Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition established by several Asian American organizations in 2020, cites 4,599 reported incidents against Asian Americans in 2020 and 5,771 reported incidents between January and September 2021.

While only 26.8% of those reportedly occurred at places of business and only 1.6% were reported in Virginia, the coalition concedes that these numbers “only reflect a small number of the hate incidents occurring nationwide,” given that many, especially less well-educated or non-English speaking individuals, do not report such incidents when they occur.

Locally, the picture is even murkier. Pandemic-fueled racism against Asian Americans, including restaurant owners like Shin, is not well-documented.

Will Leung-Richardson, owner of Kudzu RVA, said he too has had a couple of run-ins with racism during the pandemic.

“I feel strange talking about it, with so many other problems going on in the world,” he said.

But it’s something he’s come to expect as an Asian American business owner.

For instance, as retribution for Richardson’s activism on behalf of Asian Americans and other communities of color in 2020, an individual posted a negative online review of Kudzu

RVA, casting aspersions on what this Chinese American-owned food truck and pop-up “might be serving” its customers.

On another occasion, Richardson, when asked by a customer what country he was from, explained that the name Kudzu is a tribute to the staying power of Chinese culture in America — like kudzu vines, “wherever it goes, it’s there to stay, it’s hard to make it go away.” To which the customer replied, “The going away part is the problem.”

For Vanna Hem, a veteran bartender in Richmond and owner of the Cambodian-inspired Royal Pig pop-up, anti-Asian racism was a problem he and others in the industry were dealing with long before the pandemic. From being thrown “dirty looks” to “being talked down to like I’m a second-rate citizen” to being called racist names like “Oriental boy,” Hem, a Cambodian-Chinese American, has seen and heard a lot.

“About three years ago,” he shared, “I had a guy blatantly call me a ‘chink’ to my face” while tending bar at Weezie’s Kitchen in Carytown.

The pandemic merely intensified the situation for Asian American restaurant workers.

“I think, because of the pandemic and because of the racial stigma from this thing, that people have gotten way too loose and way too comfortable with the way that they treat Asian people,” Hem said. “I feel like I’ve been talked down to even more so than I’m used to because I’m Asian.”

Meanwhile, in speaking with eight other Asian restaurants in the greater Richmond area for this article, six of them denied experiencing any racism. Two declined to speak on the subject.

Based on conversations with fellow Asian American restaurant owners, Shin believes that most of his peers, having experienced racism of some kind, remain unwilling to acknowledge it publicly, fearful of repercussions to their businesses.

Del. Suhas Subramanyam, D-Loudoun, a member of the newly formed Virginia Asian American and Pacific Islander Caucus, believes that “folks in the AAPI communities are generally less willing to report” these incidents for whatever reason — be it language barriers, a lack of understanding about what and how to report, or a predisposition to avoid making waves.

The mythical “model minority” that society expects Asian Americans to be, Subramanyam said, is “hard-working” and “not going to make a fuss about any sort of issues that they face.” They’re expected to absorb the blow and keep quiet about it.

At this point, Subramanyam said, “All I have to go off of are anecdotes and things I’m hearing from [my district].”

In Ashburn where he lives, the delegate has personally heard of restaurant owners “who have experienced customers that blurt out racial epithets when they get angry for some reason.” At an Asian festival he attended, a neighboring restaurateur began “shouting racial epithets” at the Asian American owner who organized the event.

“I get it myself, pretty regularly I would say,” he added, “as the only Indian American ever elected to the House of Delegates [in November 2019]. I’ve gotten calls from people who are angry and then they would say that I’m not from here, even though I was born here. ... I’ve gotten people

leaving a note on my windshield when they saw me in the restaurant, saying 'go home to where you came from.'"

The need to better understand the full extent of Virginia's anti-Asian racism problem is the main reason Subramanyam proposed House Joint Resolution 88 during the recent General Assembly session.

The resolution would have tasked the Virginia State Crime Commission with studying, assessing and analyzing "hate crimes and bias-motivated acts" against Asian Americans and any increase in such incidents since the start of the pandemic. "To see how prevalent [the issue] is and whether it's underreported and what we can do about it," the delegate explained.

H.J. 88, however, was never heard in committee.

"The committee that would hear it is the Rules Committee, which is headed by Republican House leadership," Subramanyam said. "And that was the committee that did not docket the bill. With no explanation, they did not docket the bill."

"It was disappointing to see a bill like this that shouldn't be partisan at all — and I don't think it is — have to basically not get a hearing and then die as a result," he said. "If you oppose the bill, then that's fine. ... Let's have a discussion about it and what we can do to make it better. ... This is a much more dramatic way of essentially shutting down the conversation around this issue."

Shin, for one, is eager to get far away from the toxicity he encountered during the pandemic. In fact, he wishes he'd done it sooner.

While he's noticed that the easing of mask requirements and other COVID-19 restrictions these past few months has defused some of the racial aggression, he has already made up his mind: K-Town will stay closed. In addition to uplifting other Asian-owned restaurants in the area, Shin's plan for the future is to start a YouTube channel with educational videos on Korean cooking.

"It was an amazing experience," he said, reflecting on his 18 years in business. "Honestly, I thought I would be doing this the rest of my life. So it still hasn't hit me yet."

"But," he added, "I'm excited to be able to have positive energy every day in my life."