



A Montclair family's commitment to literature, law, and Asian American advocacy

How a Montclair family's passion for poetry and law led to creating one of the largest Asian American and Pacific Islander groups in North Jersey

BY VALENTINA DI DONATO

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL GRABOWSKY, THROUGH THE LENS STUDIOS

AMBER REED AND JUSTIN JAMAIL met in Paul Violi's imaginative writing class while attending Columbia University. "He introduced us socially after hours and became a great friend, and we've been together ever since," Jamail recalls. The couple stayed in New York after college; Reed worked in finance and public education while making downtown theater, as Jamail began the law career that would take them to Tokyo, where their children Oscar and Annie were born.

On returning to New York, Jamail transitioned from cross-border mergers & acquisitions to nonprofit law at the Metropolitan Opera; his colleague Henry Lanman was living in Montclair and introduced the couple to the town. "We spent a weekend here, saw The Pie Store, and we were convinced - we immediately really liked it," says Jamail.

Montclair's lush gardens and rich cultural diversity promised

an exciting new place to call home. "We had just gone through a horrible winter in Brooklyn. The day we moved into our home, our two-year-old was chasing a butterfly in the backyard, laughing. And that's pretty much how it's gone for her since," says Reed. Today Jamail is General Counsel of the New York Botanical Garden, and Reed works as the data analyst for the Montclair Public Schools.

In March 2021, the Atlanta spa gun down broke open a space for Asian Americans in Montclair to begin discussing the anti-Asian segregation they'd experienced before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, including in local schools. A small Facebook group of concerned parents developed into AAPI Montclair, a nonprofit that now advocates statewide for New Jersey's 1+ million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, the 4th-largest population in the nation. Reed, who is Korean



American, has helped lead this development and currently serves as President.

"We owe so much to the Black Lives Matter movement for driving urgent conversations on racial justice between parents and children. But we knew most dialogue about race was still not even touching on Asian Americans and what we were going through during the pandemic," Reed recalls. "There were well-meaning parents around us who would have been mortified to learn their kids were asking Asian kids if they ate bats."

To truly create meaningful progress for Asian Americans, Reed says, we have to tell honest, human stories that foster empathy and understanding, a perspective she acknowledges may be influenced by her background in writing and literature. "Our inner lives are not infinite and our culture can fill them with junk. In response to really dark imaginings of Asian Americans as threats, carriers of disease, or spies for foreign governments, we have to fight for our narrative by telling our actual stories to show our humanity," says Reed. Through events and partnerships with institutions such as the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair Public Library, and Montclair Literary Festival, AAPI Montclair has worked to ensure AAPI stories are told and shared on their own terms.

Along with advocacy and cultural work, education remains an important focus for AAPI Montclair, with its Teach Asian American Stories initiative supporting AAPI curriculum implementation statewide to ensure children grow up understanding that Asian Americans are an important part of American history. "The AAPI community has been here for centuries. From building the transcontinental railroad to advocating for labor law reforms, to the Chinese soldiers who fought for the Union in the Civil War, we have been there. We think that if everyone can learn those stories, we will begin to rid ourselves of this myth of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners," says Reed.

Jamail, who serves on the board of Montclair Local and

helped guide the newspaper through nonprofit incorporation, believes that in towns like Montclair, where there is a strong presence of local news, communities are stronger. "Towns with local newspapers have much better self-government results," he says, adding that at the same time these valuable resources and the conversations they spark will not survive without the financial support of the community.

Reed, who also serves on the New Jersey AAPI Commission, would like to see more Asian Americans vote and run for office statewide, including in Montclair. "To the best of my knowledge, there has never been an Asian American elected or appointed official in Montclair," she says. "But everything can change." ■

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