



CHINATOWN COMMUNITY FOR EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Community Agency, Collective Care: Chinatown LA Mutual Aid During COVID-19

By Milly Chi

July had been California’s most deadly month of the pandemic yet, and CCED organizers Isabella McShane and Oscar Ho were cooking weekly batches of over a hundred meals for Chinatown seniors and families out of their kitchen.



When the City of Los Angeles failed to deliver on promises like sustainable hot meals for seniors and Covid-19 resources, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) and South East Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) took matters into their own hands. They teamed up to provide mutual aid to our community.

Mutual aid is solidarity, not charity. It is not one-sided and donation-based, in which those with resources are the only ones with the agency to give; rather, each community member is essential to the collective well-being and contributes to it.

Historically, Chinatown has had to fight for every single institutional resource that it has today—and the pandemic exacerbated every one of these institutional failures. COVID-19 has severely impacted our elderly and disabled immigrant tenants, low-wage workers, and legacy small businesses, whether it be through furloughs, healthcare needs, or simply just going out to access groceries. “How can you focus on trying to fight for where you’re living when you are worried about food, supplies, or rent?” Isabella said.

When Chinatown’s most vulnerable elders could not go outside to get the groceries and food they needed, CCED brought them fresh groceries and pre-made meals. When Chinatown’s families couldn’t get cleaning supplies, CCED coordinated bulk shipment orders and delivered it to them.

This work is made possible by the tireless labor of our volunteers. Chinatown LA Mutual Aid volunteer network consists of over 100 community members, continuing to grow with time, trust, and community-building. CCED committee leaders and “dynamic duo” Sophat Phea and Isabella McShane serve as the main liaisons between CCED and SEACA.

In the early stages, volunteers focused on sourcing and distributing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), but they later adjusted to cooking and delivering weekly hot meals and responding to individualized requests. Many of the volunteers are also individual meal preparers who cook Asian meals for seniors out of their own kitchens. Along the way, CCED and SEACA strengthened partnerships with legacy businesses and ally organizations such as Off Their Plate, American China Co., Yue Wa Market, APIFM, Asian Americans for Housing and Environmental Justice, and more. Sophat and Isabella are guided by the vision that mutual aid is not only material; it is strategic, long-term organizing, they said. The growth of the All Chinatown Tenant Union (ACTU), made up of five tenant associations representing over 200 families, is a testament to volunteers’ efforts.

“Without mutual aid deliveries, we wouldn’t have been able to keep in touch [with our tenants] as well as we have been,” Sophat said. According to Sophat, mutual aid has expanded his vision for grassroots organizing and the power of CCED, with which he has been involved for the last eight years, since its inception.

According to Isabella and Sophat, they’re challenged to prioritize the needs of the community while balancing limited resources, shifting volunteer capacities, and monitoring a minute-by-minute pandemic.

“We can’t just be giving the seniors sandwiches all the time, which I think is how a lot of people that provide services approach it,” Isabella said. “But you shouldn’t have to take this food that you’re not used to eating just because you can’t afford it. We should be thinking about their needs every step of the way.”

As of January 2021, CCED has delivered a grand total of 4,786 meals. Additionally, CCED has assembled and delivered 2,331 care packages and 1,321 bags of produce. This collective effort within 10 months has reached over 120 families and over 500 community members in total.

CONT. ON BACK →

10 MONTHS

4,786 MEALS

2,331 CARE PACKAGES

1,321 BAGS OF PRODUCE



Uplifting Small Businesses during COVID-19

By Milly Chi

When Golden Gifts Trading Co. owner Allen Wong saw the online response to his fight to stay in his legacy business of over 35 years, he was overcome with surprise.

“Allen actually came to us, and was telling us, ‘my daughter showed me the Instagram posts that you guys made, and it got 600 likes -- wow, there's 600 people that support me,’” CCED organizer Janis Yue said.

As a response to the losses that businesses took due to COVID-19, CCED assembled an ad-hoc small business outreach team to conduct weekly in-person outreach, building relationships and growing a WeChat, email, and Instagram network. By staying in touch, CCED was able to pass along resources regarding financial assistance and rent concerns, include everyone on a virtual legacy small business list and map, and organize alongside community members like the BC Plaza tenants.

At BC Plaza, Allen Wong's storefront is a historic Chinatown staple. His father opened Golden Gifts Trading Co. in 1985, and Allen has continued selling plants and gifts to community members even after his father's passing.

During the pandemic, Allen, alongside his BC Plaza neighbors such as Mrs. Ma of 88 Gifts, and Michael of Go Go, have been fighting the harassment and threats of their opportunist landlord, Jackson Yang. Yang's bullying tactics included cutting off the power for months, chaining and welding the restroom doors shut, forcing tenants to pay rent for an uninhabitable building, and ultimately, plastering eviction notices on their doors.

BC Plaza is another target of the rapid gentrification that has displaced low-income BIPOC Chinatown community members, evicted longtime mom-and-pop businesses, and fueled hyper-policing and surveillance of the most vulnerable. Jackson Yang terrorizes these families and their family businesses to make way for upscale gentrifiers, displacing the working-class communities of color who built and nurtured Chinatown. According to Janis, Yang has had plans to renovate and redevelop the building, and thus forced his tenants into month-to-month leases, leaving the future of their businesses precarious. They were constantly reminded of how they could be evicted at a moment's notice -- and Jackson Yang put his cruelty on full display during a pandemic.

Allen has expressed the psychological toll that this fight has taken on him.

“I haven't been able to sleep at night because I'm so anxious,” Allen said. “At any moment, I think they are going to throw everything in my store out, lock my doors, and I'll have nowhere to go.”

Thank you to our community organizations, allies, and small businesses: Northern Cafe, Simmer N Sip, Jade Wok, Thien Huong Restaurant, East Garden, New Kamara, Hop Woo LA, Off Their Plate, American China Co., Yue Wa Market, EarthMatterz, Papa Ngo's Masks, East Meets West Parent Education Club, Project PPE Act, Everytable, Auntie Sewing Squad, Forward API, Asian Americans for Housing and Environmental Justice, Revolutionario LA, LA United Way, S.T.A.T. (Students Taking Action Together), CCBA (Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association), Yi Mei Wholesale, Visor Movement, SCCLA, Dr Bronner, LA County Public Health, Tito's Vodka, LA COVID Volunteers, A3PCON, MAMA-LA

Thank you to our individual volunteers who prepared meals: Sophia Chang, New Gamboge, Man-Yan Lam, Rachel Allen, Claire Meredith, Willa Lim, Olivia Wu, Janis Yue, Jessie Nicely, Belinda Luck, Sharon Zhu, Kieran de Leon-Horton, Kati Wu, Jintana Williams, Phoebe McMahon, Anisha Hingorani, Jackie Hsiung, Jason Lee, Jasmine Wang, Ivy, Jean Park, Ivy Pan, Debbie Liu, Eri Yamagata, Alannah Campion, Isis Hockenos, Jarret Leong, Lina Law, Anit Liu, and Albie Samreth.



Janis worked closely with Allen alongside CCED organizers Tiffany Lam and Sophat Phea to strategize next steps and connect Allen to resources. But Janis has noticed the collective strength of the three BC Plaza tenants and longtime friends—Allen Wong, Mrs. Ma, and Michael Phan -- relying on each other and speaking out as a united front. CCED organized a press conference in September to rally the community for support. This well-attended event, supported by UCLA community members, speaking out against Jackson Yang's hypocrisy as a big UCLA donor, as well as various community allies, was a platform for the tenants to voice their demands. CCED's online petition supporting BC Plaza also garnered hundreds of signatures.

In big and small ways, the community has truly shown up for the small-but-mighty restaurants, mom-and-pop shops, and family-run salons of Chinatown. These sacred spaces of comfort, memory, and heritage make Chinatown a home. When legacy small businesses in Chinatown suffered emotionally and financially from significant declines in business due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated Sinophobia, community members took up CCED's social media “Bingo Challenge” and CCED created a Coupon Book for legacy businesses to share their meals and gifts with friends and promote the small businesses.

When CCED organized against the private policing of the Business Improvement District (BID), a driving force of Chinatown's gentrification, community members phoned into the LA City Council public hearings, urging councilmembers to vote against renewing the BID license. Small business owner Kenny Phu of Betabel Co., who has been doing business in Chinatown for 30 years, expressed worry about the future of Chinatown as it continues to be overtaken by gentrification.

“Unless the City or [the people] can prevent the purchase of Asian shopping malls and supermarkets by investors, I believe Los Angeles Chinatown will disappear in the near future,” Phu said.

Due to the tireless, consistent efforts of the small business outreach team at CCED, Chinatown has a chance to maintain its neighborhood character, its special shops, its unique wares, and more importantly, allow business owners to thrive again.

920 Everett St. Site Fight: Still Home, Still Fighting

By Bryan Sih

A 6-unit building at the edge of Chinatown and Echo Park is home to refugees, elderly, workers, and students. It has organized into the 920 Everett Tenant Association, becoming a loud voice of protest in the anti-gentrification movement and exposing the brokenness of LA's housing system during the Covid-19 pandemic.

After fighting a series of 60-Day quit notices, the 920 tenants find themselves embroiled with VF Developments and Victoria Vu, a predatory landlord buying up properties across LA and using a slew of tactics to get tenants to vacate the building. Yet the 920 tenants remain in their homes and continue to fight, ramping up their strategies and actions considerably this year. The overarching theme has been building a coalition across different VF-Development owned buildings, bringing new tenants into the fold with a strong solidarity network. Organizers and tenants



have gone door-to-door to VF Development owned buildings and have talked to tenants living in those residencies, alerting them to VF Development's predatory practices (Cash-for-keys, 60-Day-Quit notices, confusing communication, illegal construction) so that tenants understand their rights and are protected.

These tenants eventually all met to discuss strategies to fight off Victoria Vu and VF Developments once and for all, with aspirational tactics, direct action ideas, and lawsuits all being on the table.

There was also considerable support from USC's Student Coalition for Asian Pacific Empowerment (SCAPE), a student group who understood that one of USC's Lusk Center of Real Estate Executive Committee, Jerome Fink, is a financial backer behind VF Developments. SCAPE put together a petition that got over 1,000 signatures and huge social media traction to hold Jerome Fink accountable for VF Developments actions against 920 Everett. With new tenants joining the coalition from across LA and SCAPE's support, CCED and 920 Everett Tenant's Association protested twice at Victoria Vu's residence, bringing their demands right to her doorstep and humiliating her in front of her neighbors, who now know that she is a vulture landlord. These protests were lively, spirited moments of empowerment for the tenants and organizers. There were drums, chants, speeches, and moving testimonies from tenants like Khinn Ung and Edgar.

The 920 Everett Tenant Association and its allies across LA are stronger than ever, moving into the New Year with a renewed sense of solidarity, looking forward to new possibilities to win permanent, affordable housing to those who have made LA home for so long.

No Expiration on Community Solidarity: Fighting for Eminent Domain at Hillside Villa

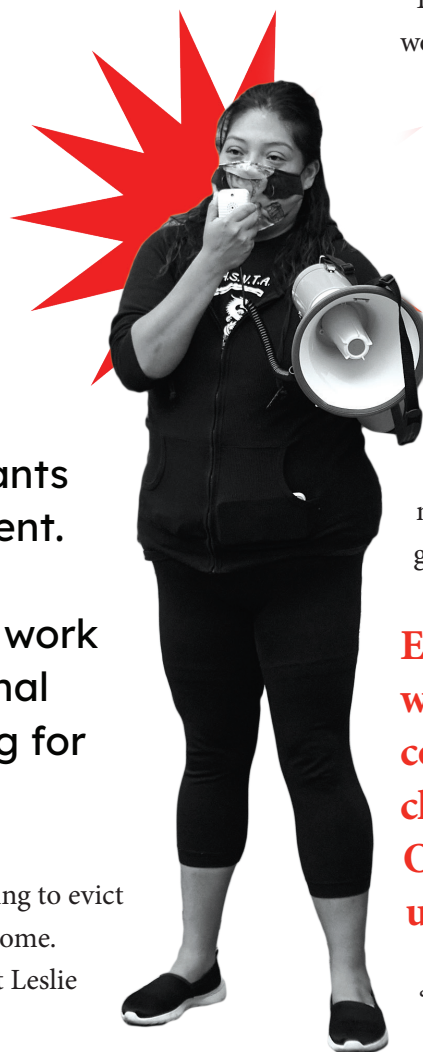
By Dominique Ong

Now, more than ever, Hillside Villa tenants are in immediate danger of displacement. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many tenants have lost their jobs, had work hours slashed, and have faced additional legal or medical bills, often while caring for their children or elders.

Meanwhile, landlord Tom Botz keeps raising rents and threatening to evict the working class community members who call Hillside Villa home. "[Tom Botz is] seeing us as a money sign," Hillside Villa resident Leslie said. "He is not seeing us as humans."

Hillside Villa tenants continue to fight back against both Botz's cruelty and the city's apathy. Hillside Villa has historically been covenant-controlled under a 30-year agreement with the city to keep rents affordable. This agreement expired in August of 2020, leaving longtime community members more vulnerable than ever to abuse.

The sheer greed and ruthlessness of Botz has truly reared its ugly head during a pandemic. When Botz violated state law and planned to double rents last June, the Hillside Villa Tenants Association went door-to-door and warned residents that the increases were illegal before and after the notices arrived. They posted flyers in English, Spanish and Chinese and publicly demonstrated against the illegal rent increase at the courtyard.



"This building is meant to serve the community and house working-class people of color like us, but right now, it is primarily serving to line the pockets of an extraordinarily rich white man from Malibu," a statement from the Hillside Villa Tenants Association reads. "Only strong action by the city can fix this."

Tenants, with support from CCED and the Los Angeles Tenants Union, successfully pushed the city to begin the process of buying the building through eminent domain. Among the actions that took place were negotiations and meetings with their City Councilmember's office, and direct actions and protests that generated media-based momentum and widespread community mobilization for this groundbreaking movement.

Eminent domain has historically been weaponized to displace communities of color, but now tenants and organizers are closer to using it to preserve communities. Only one other locality in the nation has used eminent domain for this purpose.

"Eminent domain itself is a traumatic policy and it's the one chance that we can at least try and do it right once and make an example, so it can be replicated across the country," CCED organizer Annie said.

As the city takes its first steps towards keeping Hillside Villa permanently affordable, tenants and organizers have held the city accountable to seeing it through. When COVID-19 and bureaucracy slowed down the process, tenants and organizers put pressure on the city to use the expiring CARES Act funds for the purchase. Hillside Villa remains militant and hopeful that they can secure permanently affordable housing that will benefit the many people who call it home.

College Station Lawsuit: Community Rejects Project With Zero Affordable Housing

By A. Liu 刘路晴

Just across the street from the Chinatown Gold Line Metro station, a plot of land sits empty on College St. Here, developer Atlas Capital proposes one of the largest gentrifying projects to ever be built in Chinatown: “College Station,” a mixed-use 725-unit apartment project that doesn’t meet community needs and exacerbates gentrification through rising nearby rents.

Of its cushy 725 units, College Station egregiously boasts ZERO AFFORDABLE HOUSING. This is not only egregious because Chinatown’s residents are primarily low-income, but also contrary to the city planning commission’s recommendation that the project designate units for very low-income households.

So how did Atlas Capital still manage to get their project approved? To date, they have spent over \$1.2 million on lobbying and backdoor deals with officials like Councilmember Gil Cedillo. They also sit on the board of the notorious Chinatown BID (Business Improvement District). The BID harasses members of our community who don’t fit in with their gentrified vision of Chinatown, and they police and surveil the College Station site, even tearing down our protest posters in an attempt to silence community protest. Community members turn to each other, not institutional authorities, to strategize for the future of our community. The All Chinatown Tenant Union (ACTU) came to an overwhelming consensus to not accept or legitimize any project that doesn’t offer what we need most of all: affordable housing.

In May 2019, CCED took this battle to the courts by filing a lawsuit against Atlas Capital and the City of LA for violating affordability guidelines. Over a matter of technicalities, the city judge ruled against our case and we lost the

Cancel Rent Protests and CCED

By Bryan Sih

The clear rallying cry in the wake of the pandemic was “Cancel Rent.” Tenants are accumulating huge debts of unpaid rent to their landlords while they face unemployment, with little to alleviate their hardship but a meager \$1200 stimulus check.

Meanwhile, the bills for healthcare, basic necessities and services pile up. Because tenants are cut off from their income due to the pandemic, CCED affirmed that tenants should put their money towards food and medication rather than rent.

CCED participated in many Cancel Rent actions this past year with our allies, mostly in the form of car caravans.



lawsuit. We chose to appeal the decision, a process that will continue for at least another year and delay construction. We refused Atlas Capital’s insulting dealmaking attempts in forms of “community space” and sums of money -- Chinatown is not for sale. Our demand was, and remains, affordable housing. Unlike our corrupt officials, our values and commitment to each other cannot be bought by the highest bidder. According to Katie Wang, CCED organizer, “We’re showing them that people can’t just come into Chinatown and build these luxury developments. We’re making a statement with the hope that it will set a precedent.”

In November 2020, the All Chinatown Tenant Union gathered virtually to vocally oppose unethical developments like College Station through public demonstrations and creative expressions of resistance. CCED will host continued strategy conversations with tenant groups as we progress in our struggle against College Station both in and outside of the courts.

Atlas Capital is just one of many developers who seek to carve up our community for profit. But the commitment of the people to each other—our working class immigrant, BIPOC community—cannot be bought. We are going to fight together for a Chinatown where everyone can live in dignity.

CCED hosted their own Cancel Rent caravan August 10th, 2020 from Chinatown to LA City Hall, in which tenants and organizers showed up in droves to support CCED with signs each unequivocally supporting the demand to “Cancel Rent.” The large turnout attracted the attention of The Black Unity encampment across the street, formed in the wake of the BLM Uprising. They came over and gave their support to ‘Cancel Rent’. Various groups gave speeches reiterating CCED’s demands and telling stories of mutual struggle and uplift, hopeful words for tenants fighting to stay in their homes.

<https://knock-la.com/chinatown-fights-market-rate-development-dd909d79a73a>
<https://la.curbed.com/2019/5/8/18535838/chinatown-college-station-lawsuit-atlas-capital-cced>



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