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Asian American suicide in the spotlight

Jonathan Kuperberg

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Leslie Zeitler's winning essay brings Asian American turmoil to light. Photo: Russell Yip, The Chronicle



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Leslie Zeitler had a weird feeling that she should check on her mom.

"Who is this?" Leslie asked when someone she didn't know answered the phone. "I'm looking for my mom. Where's my mom?"

The county police officer on the line told the 15-year-old that her mom had committed suicide. Almost 18 years later, in 2004, her mom's sister took her own life, too. Then Zeitler, whose Asian American family considered depression and suicide too shameful to talk about, did the unthinkable. She outed her aunt's suicide at the funeral.

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"Suicide is an all-encompassing, all-consuming experience that I don't think there are adequate words for," says Zeitler, now 41 and living in Berkeley.

She found the right words in a piece she wrote for the [Asian American Women Artists Association's](#) "UnderCurrents & the Quest for Space" exhibit at the [SOMArts Cultural Center](#), where photographs, paintings, poetry, videos and essays from more than 30 artists bring light to undercurrents in Asian American society.

"She is getting flak for putting her family's story in the public eye," says [Cynthia Tom](#), the association's board president. "She's saying, 'It happens not just to me but all over the world.'"

Zeitler started writing a little over a year ago after learning that Intersection for the Arts was looking for literary work on the subject of transformation for its blog challenge. In her winning piece, Zeitler wrote about forgiving her mom.

Zeitler used to sing - in chorus, choir, even in a cappella group - but could not perform anymore after her mother's suicide. Singing became too close to wailing, Zeitler says.

She relied on friends and their families, even the guidance counselor and assistant principal at her high school in Arlington, Va. But not her family, who, she said, did not provide her the comfort she needed and discouraged her from seeking counseling. Zeitler at 15 had to plan her mom's funeral on her own for fear that if she didn't do it, there would not be one.

Friend's family

Zeitler eventually moved in with a friend's family. "She's been our daughter for the last 26 years," says [Sally Anderson](#), Zeitler's "adopted" mom.

While having the support of close friends was hugely beneficial, Zeitler attributes her "transformation" first and foremost to finding the right therapist, someone trained to deal with grief and losses to suicide.

After a dozen years of anger and struggle, Zeitler was ready to forgive her mom. She did not want to live like that anymore, did not want to turn into her mom.

Yet Zeitler, who moved to the Bay Area in 1995 to attend a program in social work at UC Berkeley, could not escape her family's tragedies. One afternoon in 2004, Zeitler received a phone call from a cousin, one of her aunt's sons. He was crying, and she knew immediately: Her aunt had committed suicide.

"I just thought, 'This is not happening to my family again,'" Zeitler says, "and yet it did."

Outing the suicide at the funeral was risky yet admirable, says [Tanya Tabon](#), a longtime friend. "It takes incredible courage to call it what it is."

Anderson says it was something of a shock but ultimately beneficial for Zeitler and her family. "I think it was freeing for her," Anderson says. "Dealing with it - not making it some shameful family secret that had to be locked in the closet."

Awareness, prevention

Zeitler's essay, currently on exhibit, chronicles the moment she exposed the suicide and the aftermath of her surprising announcement. She uses humor and sarcasm to tell the story and argue for more awareness and prevention.

According to the World Health Organization, nearly 1 million people die by suicide annually, with a 60 percent increase worldwide in the last 45 years. Studies show that

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Asian Americans are much less likely to seek mental health treatment or counseling.

"The expectation is that you're not going to rock the boat," Zeitler says. "You don't admit to anyone outside your family that you have a problem."

Zeitler's writing is by no means solely dedicated to the deceased. As a survivor, she, too, is a victim. Her plight is bigger than just her and her family, reaching beyond the Asian American community to all of humanity. Zeitler wants to end suicide globally. She has advocated by writing and speaking.

Maybe someday, she will be able to sing, too.

UnderCurrents & the Quest for Space: Through May 25. SOMArts Cultural Center, 934 Brannan St., S.F. aawaa.net.

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