

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

◆ Eddy Zheng ◆

Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award



The amazing story of youth counselor and activist Eddy Zheng is a testament to life's second chances in spite of one's past, the transformative power of education, and the immigrant communities' positive contributions to American society.

Arriving in the United States from China at the age of twelve, and as the youngest of a family of five in a one-bedroom apartment in Oakland, California, Eddy's existence seemed bleak indeed. Speaking no English in a world often not accepting of so-called "outsiders", frustrations turned him to the only thing that provided a sense of belonging... street life with other alienated Asian youth.

Eddy's involvement in a violent home invasion resulted in his conviction on several felony counts, and sentence of seven years to life in San Quentin State Prison at the age of 16; at the time the youngest inmate of the notorious facility. For many, the story would end there. For Eddy, it was just the beginning.

Determined to change his course and take ownership of his future, Eddy turned into a model prisoner, improving his English skills, becoming a voracious reader, and earning a GED and associate's degree. Most importantly, he adopted a mentoring role, advising other prisoners, setting up an Asian American Ethnic Studies program in the prison college curriculum, and holding crime prevention workshops for at-risk immigrant youth on how to break the cycle of incarceration.

A fifth parole hearing led to his release from prison after twenty years, at which point Eddy dedicated his life to youth advocacy work. He became a project manager at San Francisco's Community Youth Center, published an anthology of poetry and essays from himself and other Asian/Pacific Islander inmates entitled *Other*, and has served as a member of the Asian American Law Journal, and as co-chair of the Asian Prisoners' Support Committee (APSC) as part of the Asian American & Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) Beyond Bars Coalition.

Eddy has dedicated his life to mentoring youth on the importance of an education, honoring your roots and community, and raising awareness on the impact of criminalization and deportation within the AAPI community- an issue often overlooked due to the "model minority" myth. Through his work, Eddy connects and stands in solidarity with other communities of color to shed light on and address the issue of mass incarceration in America.

It is his hands-on work directly impacting youth in his native Bay Area that's meant the most to Eddy. In 2015 he was named an Open Society Foundation Soros Justice Fellow, enabling him to address reforms in deportation practices amongst the Asian/Pacific Islander community. And his inspirational tale of redemption made him the subject of an award-winning 2011 documentary "Breathin': The Eddy Zheng Story", showing others that they too can turn their lives around.

Eddy Zheng... a living, "breathin'" example of education being the key to an emancipated future.