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NEA honors activist Eddy Zheng with human and civil rights award

Zheng is among a dozen recipients of the prestigious NEA Human and Civil Rights Award

HOUSTON—Eddy Zheng, a formerly incarcerated man, is an empowering activist dedicated to the redemptive and transformative powers of education. He was honored this year with the NEA’s Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award.

“Eddy Zheng is a true inspiration and is incredibly deserving of the 2019 NEA Human and Civil Rights Award,” said NEA President Lily Eskelsen García. “His journey to this moment could have not have been possible without perseverance and true passion to make the world a better, fairer place. His efforts are extremely motivating and energize us to never abandon the pursuit of making a difference.”

Zheng’s path to becoming an activist did not begin in a typical classroom. Born in China and arriving in the United States at age 12, Zheng spent 20 years in prison beginning at age 16. However, this did not deter him from pursuing education, he earned both a GED and associate’s degree while incarcerated. Not only did he work to educate himself, but Zheng also realized the importance of mentoring others. In prison, he advised other prisoners, created an Asian American Ethnic Studies program in the prison college curriculum, and held crime prevention workshops for at-risk immigrant youth.

Once released from prison, Zheng’s dedication to youth advocacy work only increased. He became a project manager at San Francisco’s Community Youth Center, where he mentored youth on the importance of education, as well as honoring one’s own roots and community. Zheng’s wisdom helped to manifest an anthology of poetry and essays from himself and other Asian American & Pacific Islander inmates, titled Other.

Another passion of Zheng’s, directly related to his life story, is addressing mass incarceration. His activism helps to raise awareness on the impact of criminalization and deportation within the Asian American & Pacific Islander community. Zheng served as co-chair of the Asian Prisoners Support Committee and as part of the Asian American & Pacific Islander Beyond Bars Coalition.

Zheng’s inspirational story of education, redemption, and empowerment is so extraordinary, that he became the subject of a 2011 award-winning documentary “Breathin’: The Eddy Zheng Story.” Zheng continues to inspire others and change lives through his tireless advocacy, and NEA was proud to celebrate his efforts.

Eddy Zheng was one out of 12 outstanding social justice heroes honored at NEA’s 2019 NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards, which took place on July 3, in Houston, Texas. Click on link to view video tribute of Eddy Zheng.

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