

Asian-American says Latinos not only ones hit by Ariz. immigration law

Daniel Gonzalez, The Arizona RepublicShare

7:25AM EST November 26. 2012 - PHOENIX -- Jim Shee says he never experienced discrimination, let alone racial profiling, until his 70th birthday.

Shee, a Paradise Valley, Ariz., real-estate investor of Chinese and Spanish descent, was driving to meet friends for lunch on April 6, 2010, his birthday, when he stopped on a side street in west Phoenix to check a text message.

A Phoenix police officer approached and tapped on his car window.

"Let me see your papers," Shee says the officer told him.

"That is the very first thing he said," recalled Shee, now 72.

Shee, whose civil-rights battle against Arizona's strict immigration law is credited with highlighting the law's impact beyond the Latino community, was taken aback.

Born in Tucson, Shee has been a U.S. citizen all his life. No police officer had ever asked him for his "papers."

When he asked why he'd been stopped, Shee says the officer told him, "You looked suspicious."

Less than two weeks later, Shee said, he was profiled again by police.

This time, he was with his Japanese-American wife, Marian, driving back to the area after taking her across the border in San Luis, Sonora, to have some dental work done.

On the highway near Yuma, an Arizona Department of Public Safety officer traveling in the opposite direction saw Shee's car, made a U-turn across the divided highway and pulled him over. Shee was sure he hadn't been speeding because his cruise control was set below the speed limit.

The officer told Shee the tint on his 2002 BMW was too dark and gave him a repair order.

Shee did not receive a citation in either case. But he believes both stops were motivated by Senate Bill 1070.

"I've never really experienced any type of discrimination and then ... wham, bam. Twice," Shee said, referring to the police stops. "It made me feel like I should carry my passport around all the time."

At the time, Arizona's immigration enforcement law was moving through the state Legislature on its way to being signed by Gov. Jan Brewer on April 23, 2010. The most controversial provision of the law requires police to check the immigration status of a person stopped, detained or arrested if there's reasonable suspicion the person is in the country illegally.

Shee believes the law fostered a climate of discrimination that led police officers to think he might be an illegal immigrant based on his appearance.

Shee joined a civil-rights lawsuit filed in May 2010 against the law by a coalition of civil-rights and immigrant-advocacy groups. He is one of 10 individuals and the only Asian-American to be publicly named in the lawsuit. The other plaintiffs are Latinos.

The suit is pending in U.S. District Court in Phoenix.

By joining the suit, Shee demonstrated how the law has affected not just Latinos but also other minority groups, said Jessica Chia, an immigration and immigrant-rights staff attorney at the Asian American Justice Center. In October, the center awarded Shee its national American Courage Award at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Although Asians are the fastest-growing minority group in Arizona, they make up just 3 percent of the state's 6.4 million population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Latinos make up more than 30 percent of the population.

The federal lawsuit's main claim is that the law violates the 14th Amendment's right to equal protection by subjecting minorities to police stops, detention, questioning and arrests based on their race or national origin.

The civil-rights lawsuit is separate from a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Justice Department. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the most controversial provision of the law requiring police to question suspected illegal immigrants about their status, could be enforced.

Shee traveled to Washington, D.C., in April to speak out against Arizona's law on the steps of the Supreme Court on the day justices heard arguments in the Justice Department's lawsuit.

Madeline Ong-Sakata, executive director of the Asian Chamber of Commerce, said many Asian Americans in Arizona supported the immigration law. Shee has helped change perceptions of how the law could apply to them, she said.

His involvement also reminded Asian Americans that many of their ancestors came to the U.S. illegally as "paper sons," she added.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 essentially barred the entry of all Chinese immigrants to the U.S. except for the children of U.S. citizens. To get around the discriminatory law, Chinese men often falsely claimed to be U.S. citizens after the giant 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed government records, then returned to China to bring back "sons" who were not really their children. These children were sons on paper only, thus the name "paper sons."

"A lot of Asians forget that," Ong-Sakata said. "They have this false idea that (SB 1070) doesn't include them and every so often Jim and I have to remind them that a lot of their parents came here illegally through the fake papers."

What's more, many Asian Americans ignore the fact that a large number of Asian immigrants are living in the U.S. illegally, she said. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that about one in 10 illegal immigrants in the U.S. is Asian.

Chia said Shee has also drawn attention to the connection between the law and the U.S. internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

"This is really important to us, not only because of the historical link to Chinese exclusion and the Japanese internment, but also because presently, it encourages Arizona law enforcement to stop and question anybody they think looks or sounds foreign and obviously this will have direct impact on Asian citizens and immigrants" she said.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2012/11/26/arizona-immigration-asian-americans/1726535/>