Introduction to Eddy Zheng

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In 1986, when Eddy Zheng was sixteen years old, he and two of his friends broke into the home of a Chinese immigrant family in San Francisco, hoping to find a safe filled with money and other valuable items. When there was no safe to be found, their ill-advised armed home invasion quickly developed into a six-hour debacle involving hostage-taking, kidnapping, and extortion. The criminal escapade finally ended when the police pulled over Zheng and one of his cohorts for driving without their headlights on. Zheng, who was tried as an adult, eventually pleaded guilty to robbery, kidnapping, and possession of a firearm. He was sentenced to seven years to life with the possibility of parole for his involvement.

Zheng was released in 2007 after serving nineteen years of his life sentence in state prison and nearly two years in the custody of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He now works as a project coordinator for the Community Response Network for Asian Pacific Islanders (CRN-API) at the Community Youth Center of San Francisco. In his day-to-day work, Zheng strives to prevent youth from making the same mistakes he did as a teenager. He believes this goal requires a coordinated effort among community-based organizations, parents, schools, and local law enforcement to combat the underlying struggles that immigrant youth often face—living simultaneously in two cultures, navigating the public school system, and struggling to find a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

Zheng’s story can best be described as one of redemption and transformation. It is often said that prison changes a person, and Zheng is a testament to that fact—but not in the way one might think. Although prison is, more often than not, a place where despair overwhelms hope, Zheng has

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2. Id.
3. Id.
4. CRN-API is “a collaborative framework that addresses youth gang violence issues by incorporating existing neighborhood services, funded programs and coordinating these efforts across programs and agencies.” San Francisco Department of Children, Youth & Their Families, http://www.dcyf.org/Content.aspx?id=1350&note=1492.
achieved more within the confines of his prison cell than most of us whose freedoms have not been taken away. While serving time at San Quentin State Prison, Zheng not only earned his GED but also an Associate’s Degree through the prison college program. He developed a lifelong passion for poetry and organized San Quentin’s first ever poetry slam. In addition to all this, Zheng even developed a seventy-page curriculum for at-risk youth.  

Zheng was imprisoned as retribution for his crime—a punishment he believes was justified. Although he could have chosen to serve out his sentence in quiet submission, thereby improving his chances for early parole, he believed his debt to society would be better repaid by advocating for change from within the prison system, even if doing so resulted in additional punishment. And it did. When Zheng and two Asian American prisoners fought and petitioned for an Asian American studies class, he was placed in solitary confinement for eleven months. Yet even through this bleak experience Zheng found a way to make the best of his situation. He took this opportunity to meditate and reflect on his life, and even wrote poetry.  

Zheng’s confinement for having the gall to demand an Asian American studies class for prisoners had another amazing, yet unintended, effect—it mobilized the Asian community in the San Francisco Bay Area to champion his cause. Zheng became somewhat of an overnight celebrity, and soon lawyers, community activists, and politicians alike began telling his story and advocating for his release. His freedom today is due in large part to the efforts of these many individuals who believed in Zheng’s cause.  

Zheng approaches all facets of his life with a deep sense of urgency. Perhaps this is the logical result of having been imprisoned for twenty-one years, or perhaps it stems from the fact that he could be deported back to China at any time.  

Zheng’s commitment toward working for the betterment of the Asian American community is evident to anyone who knows him. Many of us began our legal journey with a strong desire to “do our part” in helping the indigent members of our community or in advocating for social justice. Yet the inherent pressures of law school often waylay such noble desires. Zheng’s story compels us to pause and take stock of our own lives, and reminds us that we have little excuse not to try harder.
