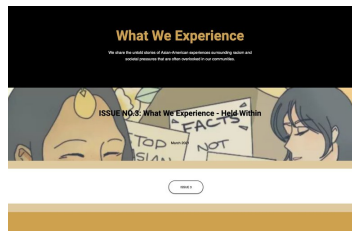


...Seattle-area teens start online magazine, What We Experience, to share Asian American stories

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Jeenah Gwak and a team of 10 volunteers are working on the fourth issue of their free, online magazine What We Experience.

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

When Jeenah Gwak visited New York City last year, the teen expected to have new experiences. But she wasn't prepared for one of them to be the overt racism of a random stranger. Amid the noise and bustle of Times Square, she and her mom walked right past a show promoter without even hearing his pitch. But she did hear what he shouted after her, "Don't speak English, huh?"

"Growing up in my 'Bellevue Bubble,' I've never had anyone assume that about me," she said. After that experience, she began noticing microaggressions in her own community. In the early days of the pandemic, Gwak read about anti-Asian hate crimes on the Asian American website [NextShark](#). But she did not see those stories in mainstream news. She realized Asian Americans needed their own media spaces to make their voices heard.

A year later, Gwak and a team of 10 volunteers are working on the fourth issue of their free, online magazine [What We Experience](#). Dedicated to sharing uniquely Asian American stories and illustrating the breadth of the Asian American experience, the themed, quarterly issues are supplemented by monthly "What We Ponder" blog posts. The first issue, published last September, was titled "What We Experience — NOW" and covered timely issues Asian Americans faced in 2020. Subsequent themes were immigration stories and women's issues.





Jeenah Gwak (Courtesy of Jeenah Gwak)

“When I thought of the title, ‘What We Experience,’ I wanted to highlight what we experience; the ‘we’ is emphasized,” said Gwak. “The platform is a space for people to find solace with their own experiences in learning that they are not alone.”

But Gwak stresses that the “we” is also inclusive. “It emphasizes that there isn’t just one Asian American narrative,” she said. Gwak and her team are not interested in restrictive definitions of who counts as Asian. They strive to reflect the full diversity of Asian ethnicities, including biracial, adopted, immigrant and U.S.-born.

Gwak said they receive positive feedback from readers from a variety of backgrounds and generations.

“We’ve had a lot of people contact us and thank us for creating the magazine. That’s what keeps us going,” she said.

When she got the idea for the magazine, she knew exactly how to begin.

“It was actually really simple. I texted Hope with my idea,” she said.





Hope Yu (Courtesy of Hope Yu)

Hope Yu, then a sophomore at Garfield High School in Seattle, had volunteered with Gwak for three years at YouthKAN, a mental health organization that serves Asian American youth.

The two set up a webpage and social media accounts for What We Experience and reached out on their own social media channels for collaborators. Their all-volunteer staff of high school students (and one college student) has grown with each issue. They have accepted some outside submissions, but the volunteers generate most of the magazine's content while fulfilling their administrative roles.

The team meets weekly on Zoom where they decide each issue's theme together and generate story ideas. Each member chooses their own article topics. So far, the magazine's only expense is web hosting, which the team has covered with their own pocket money. But there is a donate button on the website, and Gwak hopes to put out print issues in the future.

Gwak is currently a junior at Newport High School in Bellevue. She and Yu plan to stay involved in What We Experience in college while transferring some responsibilities to younger students. For now, her focus is on expanding the reach of the magazine. The upcoming June issue will focus on gender and sexuality in the Asian American community.

Gemma Alexander is a Seattle-based freelance writer; gemmadeealexander.com.