OAKLAND ASIAN CULTURAL CENTER | ARTogether | ASIAN HEALTH SERVICES — HEALTH CARE FOR ALL. ADVOCACY FOR THE UNDERSERVED.

in collaboration with **NAMI San Francisco**, **Justice Murals** & **Lincoln Summer Nights**

For Immediate Release —

Oakland Asian Cultural Center Exhibits Award-Winning Comic
During October's Mental Illness Awareness Week and World Mental Health Day

Month-long Event Aims to Spark Meaningful Mental Health Conversations and Combat Stigmas in Bay Area's Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) & Immigrant/Refugee Communities



[Oakland, CA — Aug 29th, 2022] Unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have negatively affected our mental health, triggering "a major increase in the number of U.S. adults who report symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia."

Disproportionately affected are communities of color. Asian Pacific Islander Americans (APIA) and immigrants/refugees, reporting a dramatic increase of anti-APIA hate and violence as well as rampant anti-immigrant sentiments, faced additional challenges in these past two years—especially immigrants and refugees with lower English proficiency who often have trouble accessing mental health care due to structural, cultural, and linguistic barriers *[Additional context is compiled towards the end of this document]*.

To spark mental health conversations and combat stigmas in these communities, **Oakland Asian Cultural Center (OACC)** is premiering an in-person exhibition of ***Press Play,*** an award-winning mental health comic, in October 2022 to coincide with **Mental Illness Awareness Week (Oct 3-9) and World Mental Health Day (Oct 10)**.

Written by **Edward Gunawan** and illustrated by **Elbert Lim**, the comic follows an individual's mental health journey in overcoming anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation through a first-person narrative and evocative hand-drawn black-and-white illustrations.

"So many are struggling with their mental health during this time. The vacuum of community gatherings in the past two years has only made it worse. With this project," Executive Director of OACC Saly Lee says, "We have the opportunity to bring people together again while fostering meaningful and much-needed conversations to counter misunderstandings and stigmas around mental health, which will reinvigorate interpersonal connections and re-strengthen our communities."

Dr. Yuhuan Xie, Asian Health Services Specialty Mental Health's Medical Director, adds, "Life and struggles of people with mental illness were often underrepresented and misunderstood. Telling their stories through art is a powerful and direct way of sharing. Through sharing, we develop understanding and compassion; through discussion, we find ways to accept and appreciate each other."

Co-presented by **ARTogether** and **Asian Health Services (AHS)**, in collaboration with community partners **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) San Francisco**, **Justice Murals,** and **Lincoln Summer Nights**, the month-long event will feature a family-friendly collaborative painting activity and panel discussions with mental health professionals and local Bay Area writers who engage in mental health topics in their work. Local organizations offering mental health services are also tabling during key event dates to share resources and information.



A creative collaboration by two brothers who often tackled important social issues through their respective work, the project started as a webcomic five years ago. Writer-filmmaker Gunawan, an immigrant from Indonesia, based the narrative on his own lived experience after opening up about his own mental health struggles publicly for the first time through a live storytelling show. Encouraged by an audience member who connected him to a mental health organization, Gunawan became involved in mental health advocacy by sharing his mental health journey in classrooms and offices.

Sensing the need to expand reach and increase accessibility, he then approached Lim, a visual designer, to adapt his story into a format that makes the serious topic more approachable. Volunteering their time to work on the project over a period of 8 months, the brothers then solicited feedback from mental health professionals and organizations to finalize the comic before making it available online during Mental Health Awareness Month in May 2019.

They also compiled resources on the website for readers who are seeking additional information and to provide a space to meaningfully connect with one another — the same way Gunawan engaged with audience members after each speaking event, exchanging valuable mental health resources along with self-care tools and practice.

Since then, the comic has received a "Speaking Out" Mind HK Media Award for challenging negative narratives around mental health, and was nominated for a Shorty Social Good Award and two Webby Awards. Translated into 6 languages including Chinese and Spanish, and published as a chapbook by Sweet Lit, the comic has been viewed by over 10,000 readers across 100 countries.



"This powerful and sensitively-rendered project is the recipient of our first mini-grant," Executive Director of ARTogether Leva Zand says. "It exemplifies how a creative project can affect a real positive impact, in the way that only the arts can do — bypassing prejudice and preconceived biases that our communities have towards mental health issues while shedding light on the important issue of culturally-competent mental health support."

As OACC exhibits the comic for the first-time in an in-person setting this October, Gunawan hopes that the comic can remind at-risk individuals that someone else has been there before, "We initiated this project to reclaim a small corner of the Internet for ourselves, in an effort to normalize mental health conversations. This exhibition is an extension of that work — IRL (in real life) this time."

Gunawan remains committed to mental health advocacy by hosting workshops and giving talks through local organizations and communities, such as NAMI and AHS. "*Press Play* is an intimately personal project, and that's the point," Gunawan adds, "By sharing such an intimately vulnerable story, I hope it can empower others to do the same — to talk more openly and honestly about their own circumstances, their own feelings, with people they love and trust. And ultimately, seek professional help if they need to."

Exhibition is available to the public from Oct 1st to 31st during OACC's regular opening hours: Wednesday through Saturday from 12pm to 5pm, or by appointment — **FREE ADMISSION.** Visit projectpressplay.com/exhibition for more information and to RSVP for these special events:

- **Oct 1, Sat @ 4:00 pm at Oakland Asian Cultural Center**
  Opening Reception (in-person / hybrid)
  with a special reading by Bay Area writers Dawn Angelicca Barcelona and Hannah Wastyk

- **Oct 8, Sat @ 2:00 pm at Oakland Asian Cultural Center**
  Mental Health Professionals Discussion Panel (in-person / hybrid)
  Featuring representatives from Asian Health Services and NAMI San Francisco

- **Oct 13, Thu @ 5:00 pm at Lincoln Square Park**
  Collaborative Painting with Justice Murals at Lincoln Summer Nights (in-person)
  A fun family-friendly collaborative painting activity — supplies and materials provided, no experience necessary

- **Oct 29, Sat @ 2:00 pm** at **Oakland Asian Cultural Center**
  Writers Discussion Panel (in-person / hybrid)
  Featuring Bay Area poets Michelle Lin and Christine No

CONTACT Edward Gunawan at hello@projectpressplay.com or 415.610.0052 for more details and/or to arrange interviews.

Available for interview:

- **Saly Lee,** Executive Director of Oakland Asian Cultural Center
- **Leva Zand,** Executive Director of ARTogether
- **Dr. Yuhuan Xie**, Medical Director of Asian Health Services - Specialty Mental Health
- **Andrew Tuttle,** Director of Education Programming of NAMI San Francisco
- **Edward Gunawan,** Lead Organizer and Writer of *Press Play*
- **Elbert Lim,** Illustrator of *Press Play*

Additional Context on Mental Health Struggles in APIA and Immigrant/Refugee Communities

A study by stopaapihate.org reveals:

- Almost half of Asian Americans (46%) nation-wide struggled with anxiety during the pandemic, with 15% having depressive symptoms.

- One in three Asian and Asian American young adults reported clinically elevated symptoms of depression and general anxiety, and one in four reported a PTSD diagnosis. These rates are higher than pre-COVID-19 mental health estimates.

- One in five Asian Americans who have experienced racism display racial trauma, the psychological and emotional harm caused by racism.

- Experience of racism during COVID-19 is found to be more strongly associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Asian Americans reporting COVID-related discrimination were three times more likely to also report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to those who did not report discrimination, even after accounting for pre-existing mental health diagnoses and lifetime report of discrimination.

- Asian Americans who have experienced racism have heightened symptoms of depression (a 155% increase), anxiety (93%), stress (94%), and physical symptoms (78%) than those who didn't.

- This affects immigrants and refugees, especially those with lower English proficiency who often have trouble accessing mental health care due to structural, cultural, and linguistic barriers.

- Additionally, a report from Mental Health America states that "Asian youths were also least likely to receive mental health care."

ABOUT

Founded in 1984, **Oakland Asian Cultural Center — *Co-Presenter and Venue Sponsor*** is located in the heart of the city's Chinatown district. Through presentations of high-quality cultural and artistic programs such as performances, exhibitions, festivals, school tours, workshops and classes for the community, the organization fosters inter-generational and cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, collaboration, and social justice — oacc.cc.

ARTogether — *Co-Presenter and Fiscal Sponsor* is a Bay Area 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that seeks to strengthen refugee and immigrant communities through the creative arts. Our mission is to provide art programs that foster compassionate communities where refugees and immigrants can flourish. ARTogether works with artists to produce programming, professional development workshops and exhibitions that highlight topics relevant to the refugee and immigrant communities — artogether.org.

Asian Health Services — *Lead Sponsor* is a national model for multilingual and multicultural health care services for low-income children, families and elders in and around Alameda County, California. AHS offers primary, dental, and behavioral and mental health services to more than 50,000 patients in 15 languages from 9 clinic sites, regardless of immigration and insurance status, income, language, or culture. Languages include: English, Korean, ASL, Lao, Burmese, Mandarin, Cantonese, French, Mien, Karen, Mongolian, Karenni, Tagalog, Khmer, and Vietnamese. Rooted in advocacy since inception, AHS promotes national and local campaigns and policies that make our communities a safer and healthier place to live and thrive — asianhealthservices.org.

Project: Press Play — *Co-Presenter* is a volunteer-led community with a mission in increasing and normalizing mental health conversations to combat stigmas and promote overall well-being. Its signature mental health comic *Press Play* received the "Speaking Out" Mind HK Media Award for a "Speaking Out" Mind HK Media Award for challenging negative narratives around mental health, and was nominated for a Shorty Social Good Award and two Webby Awards. Translated into 6 languages including Chinese and Spanish, and published as a chapbook by Sweet Lit, the comic has been viewed by over 10,000 readers across 100 countries — projectpressplay.com.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) San Francisco — *Community Partner* is the nation's largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals living with a mental health condition(s) and their families/loved ones. NAMI effectively provides advocacy, support, and education for millions of Americans via grassroots, local affiliates throughout the United States. NAMI San Francisco's mission is to provide community education, spaces for peer and family connection, and programs designed to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. To this end, NAMI SF offers a Helpline, support groups, educational classes, and a range of educational presentations for community-specific groups — namisf.org.

Justice Murals — *Community Partner* is a collaborative national art non-profit fostering civic dialogue & engagement. The organization has done over 25+ museum, gallery & pop-up installations w/ artists, students, refugees, & volunteers to spark important equity conversations. In addition to local community work, Justice Murals has partnered with international organizations like Afghan artists ArtLords, recreating their murals painted over by the Taliban alongside Afghan refugees, and is also aligned with the Ukrainian Institute in Kyiv to promote Ukrainian art and messages of peace. Justice Murals uses a range of art mediums to amplify community voices, including light projections that are seen on recognizable buildings across the Bay Area — justicemurals.org.

Lincoln Summer Nights — *Community Partner* is a volunteer-led community event that takes place at Lincoln Square Park in Oakland Chinatown on every 2nd Thursday of the month from 5-8pm. On its 6th season now, it draws together a multi-generational and multi-cultural crowd of families, youth, and seniors for an evening of free games, art, resource fair, sports, and performances — friendsoflincolnsquarepark.org.

Edward Gunawan — *Writer and Lead Organizer* is an interdisciplinary writer and filmmaker. The author of two chapbooks: *The Way Back* (Foglifter Press, winner of Start a Riot! Prize) and *Press Play* (Sweet Lit), he has also completed over 25 feature and short film projects as writer, producer, actor, and/or director. His two most recent producing projects — *How to Win at Checkers (Every Time)* and *By the Time It Gets Dark* were both honored as Thailand's Best Foreign Language Film entries for the Academy Awards. His non-fiction essay "Crows Like Us," in which he examines mental health-related suicides in the LGBTI community, was published in the *Intimate Strangers* anthology (Signal 8 Press). A queer immigrant from Indonesia and of Chinese heritage, he now resides on Ohlone land in Oakland, CA where he organizes storytelling and wellness gatherings that foster individual well-being and community health through creative play — addword.com.

Elbert Lim — *Illustrator* is a visual storyteller from Indonesia. In 2019, he founded Khayalan Arts — a creative studio that creates socially-impactful art projects, installations, exhibitions, and workshops. He is also the creator and lead designer of Samudra (released in 2021 on Steam), an award-winning video game that addresses the global threat of ocean pollution — khayalanarts.com.

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