NEW BREED OF PROTESTER ASKS: WHY NOT US?

Andrew Lawler

BOSTON—On a rare hot night this past June in Cambridge, Massachusetts, computer science grad student Roger Hu tossed and turned in his stuffy apartment. For nearly a year he had been following with increasing anxiety the case of Wen Ho Lee, the Los Alamos National Laboratory physicist who had been arrested and jailed in New Mexico under suspicion of mishandling classified data. Unable to sleep, Hu fired off a 3:00 a.m. e-mail to a West Coast venture capitalist, an Asian American and longtime mentor to Hu.

"I asked him right off—I don't know if protesting is the way to go. That seems to be something reserved for other people." The response was immediate and unambiguous: "Let your voice be heard," his mentor responded. "Protesting is an important aspect of the political process." Hu took the advice, and the 22-year-old has become a key organizer among Asian-American scientists and engineers in the Boston area.

Now Hu struggles to keep up with his Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) classes in computer science and electrical engineering in his new life as an activist. In one 5-day period in September, he packed an MIT lecture room with students and professors for a teach-in on the Lee case, helped raise $14,000 for Lee's defense from a Boston Chinese-American group, and led a protest rally at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, the night of the first debate between presidential contenders George Bush and Al Gore. Two weeks later he was invited to a private audience with MIT President Charles Vest to discuss the Lee issue.

Such political activism, he insists, is not in his blood. With a father who is an electrical engineer, a mother who's a chemist, and two computer scientist siblings, "we sometimes call ourselves a bunch of nerds." Nor did Hu—who was raised in Palo Alto, California, describes himself as a "diehard Bay Area kid," and speaks in the typical lingo of California youth—learn much while he was growing up about the culture and language of his parents' native Taiwan and China. "We're entirely Westernized," he says. And he doesn't see himself as a victim of racial bias: "I can't quite relate to discrimination, though I know it exists."

Lee has been released from prison, but the handling of the case was an eye-opener, Hu says. During final exams last December, he was astonished to read that the federal case against the physicist was going forward. But even more disturbing, he says, was the bored reaction of his classmates when he showed them news clips. Last spring, he helped organize some small events, and "everything snowballed from there."

Hu has energized many Asian Americans, but remains critical of the lackluster response of MIT students and faculty, who "have not really spoken out." He did meet privately with Vest last month, at the president's request. As a result, MIT is considering hosting a forum next year on the impact of the case...
on Asian Americans and the scientific community. But Hu has warned: "This is a wake-up call—if you think this is over, you're wrong. We have to protest."

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