

The Medicine We Need
By
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When CAAM invited me to attend the Rural Women's Summit, I found myself quite unfamiliar with this congregation or its mission. The "*Rural Women's Summit*" created a quizzical confusion of what this convening would encompass. Created by the Rural Assembly (<https://ruralassembly.org/>), an alliance of "individuals and organizations at the local, regional, and national level based in all 50 states and the District of Columbia," with a shared mission of advocating for rural communities. Together they brought women from across the nation to discuss civics, conservation, faith, education, incarceration, indigenous rights, and diversity to name a few. Women who were mothers, spouses, artists, professors, lawyers, journalists...each bringing their lens and experiences to the table.

Having attended the "*Beyond Borders: Diverse Voices of the American South*" conference a couple of years earlier, I was once again hopeful, interested and yet cautious about any expectations in regards to rural immersion or any substantial outcome, especially pertaining to my demographic as an Asian-American in the rural south. While I understood why this was happening, I could not help but wonder if "we," would be included within the wider conversation. Would this speak to me as an Asian woman residing in the deep culturally entrenched south? Would such issues as veiled prejudices and binary exclusion even be addressed?

Yet unlike the "*Beyond Borders*" conference, the "*Rural Women's Summit*" was not singularly focused upon the issues impacting Asian Americans within a select area of the country, but rather the issues affecting the vast spectrum of women across America who resided in rural communities. What would be our shared challenges? Could we discern the disconnects that often leave us out of the conversation? Much like CAAM's encouraging outreach with "*Beyond Borders*," the first ever "*Rural Women's Summit*" would seek to expand the conversation across the regional lines to explore, empower and embrace all the challenges and opportunities that relate to women in this vast arena.

My desire was to have the affirmation that we too had a seat at that table.

As I arose at 3 am for my 6 o'clock flight to South Carolina...I was again reminded of the rural nature of my circumstances. Having just a few years earlier departed the comfort and lifestyle of southern California for rural Louisiana to care for my aging parents, the reality of limited 3 flights daily gives one little room to enjoy the pleasure of travel choices or schedules. Long gone were the creature comforts that a major cityscape provides.

Landing in the countryside airport of Greenville, South Carolina lies a picturesque alcove away from the hustle and bustle, a far cry from Atlanta's harried commuter metropolis. The small but functional airport was even smaller than the one my flight originated from, which brought a slight smile to my exhausted face. With a heaping 7-hour wait until the evening's reception, I

grabbed a Lyft from an incredibly kind driver named, Trent who for the next 30 minutes engaged me in the local points of interest in this charming town before unloading me at my hotel.

Arriving for the evening's reception, the room was filled with an extraordinary array of more than 200 women and a few men from more than 30 states. Each had descended upon Greenville to share experiences and learn from each other. It was a delight and relief to see colleagues of all ages clearly represented. A moment of encouragement for this well over-40 participant.

Catching bits and pieces of conversation as I made my way around the room, it occurred to me that at that moment I was not alone in my "challenges" of the isolation within the rural space. Everywhere you turned I heard either by choice or circumstance, the positives and negatives of residing rural. Here in front of me stood a palette of faces and talent, each present for the specific reason of engaging with one another to find and offer support, hope and outreach. This moment promised a light of opportunity, which I yearned would not fade.

As we nestled in for the evening's presentation of food, music and engagement, it was quite obvious from the first announcement from Whitney Kimball Coe, Director of National Programs at the Center for Rural Strategies, that the convening of this summit was to empower each other as women and as colleagues in creating a stronger presence across America. From Vermont to Washington, we were each to bring our voices, our concerns, and our talents in order to "form a more perfect union." Generating a 4-step initiative, Coe proposed getting to the heart of what this summit sought and hoped to achieve.

1. *If women are the "backbone" of communities, how do we support them as organizers and leaders?*
2. *How is women's leadership different? What are the values, strategies, and tactics that women are bringing to community building?*
3. *What are some concrete examples and models of tools and resources that are empowering rural women?*
4. *How do we build power for the values of inclusion, justice, and equity?*

Sitting at my table with our appetizers was a beautiful array of accomplished women...artists, entrepreneurs, and advocates, each of whom shared their individual and communal issues regarding their respective areas. With an opening remark from North Carolina Poet Laureate, Jaki Shelton Green powerfully proclaiming, "We Are Here," the event got underway. In the sharing of food and conversation, the walls of unfamiliarity lessened... sustenance is a great communicator and equalizer....it allows us to engage at an almost spiritual level of candor....peppering our passionate conversations over crab cakes and tartelettes gives one a freedom of thought in exchanging ideas, frustrations and opposing viewpoints. It is hard not to remain open in sharing thought when you are also sharing the enjoyment of southern shrimp and grits.

From Jacqueline's artistic beauty of Playhouse Arts, within her small town of Arcata, CA to Emily's passion for healthcare with The Pew Charitable Trusts in Washington, DC., our table ran the gamut from millennial enthusiasm to seasoned professionals... each bringing their rural lens to this endeavor in landscape of South Carolina. The table was hopeful and I found this a purposeful and strategic move by The Rural Assembly to generate a foundation and a force of change from women who may have felt isolated, marginalized and invisible because of their rural circumstances. I felt encouraged about what these next 2 days would bring.

As we assembled into the official "Welcome," while listening to the *Opening Session with Rural Women Journalists*, I had a chance to peruse the crowd...looking for either a familiar face or a face like mine. Cultural psychologists would say I was doing what comes naturally...that innate desire of seeking out shared norms and experiences...our cultural sameness that gives us a sense of belonging and acceptance. However, in this room, at that moment, I found none. Admittedly, it was a bit disappointing, but not completely unexpected. While Asians comprised only about 1% of the population in rural communities according to the 2010 census, although there has been an upsurge in the numbers, we still fall low on the scale by comparison; yet this statistic should not detract from our respected visibility and voice.

Our "invisibility" was noticed during the Q&A session when there was a subliminal balance of taking questions from the binary spectrum. While I do not believe this was intentionally disrespectful, it was a silent reminder that there was still much work to be done to get to that table. How do we get past the invitation to attend to an invitation to participate? How do we move from cocktails to a seat for dinner?

Admittedly, I too take responsibility for my disappointment.... had I become too jaded from the racial exclusion of the deep south? Had the unacceptance into the insular southern communities darkened any hope of inclusion? Despite my internal dilemma, the reality is that our truth is still truth and deserves to be validated, and here was an opportunity to reframe that conversation for us as Asian Americans. No matter what...WE are here!

With the stacked agenda of workshops and presentations, which ranged from music to social justice, we were offered a vast array of topics to explore, learn and participate.... the most difficult decision was choosing which workshop to attend. I began with one entitled, *"Creating Our Human Museums,"* a provocative program by Jaki Shelton Green that explored our inner selves. What did we carry? What did we share? What was in our museum? It seemed like a perfect way to start.

I was personally moved by the serendipitous union of my tablemates, Autumn a trauma counselor with the Veterans Affairs in Knoxville, Sara, the young mother and spouse of a combat veteran and Diana, a former combat medic, and myself.... the daughter of a combat veteran and a staunch advocate for mental health. Together we cried, we shared, we all spoke our truths and despite the pain, the trauma and the fear, there was great healing and support...the medicine we needed at that time, at that moment, in that place. It was there that I understood the power and the potential force that this convening could bring. These women,

although bonded by love and pain, gave to one another the courage and validation that their journey mattered and more importantly, that they could make a difference.

While many of the other workshops were not as personally revealing, each did reveal something about ourselves, both individually and collectively. Each was designed to delve into the root causes of historical mantras that continued systemic breakdowns within leadership, legislation and attitude. The difference within the synergy of rural women was their approach to addressing and dissecting the problems in order to find optimal solutions, as was showcased in the *“Empowering Rural Women’s Leadership.”*

With SEAL Team like precision.... these resilient, adaptable women identify the problems, assess the challenges and locate the opportunities for success. Perhaps unlike their city-dwelling counterparts, they are accustomed to doing “without.” Without support, without services, without funding, but these women through vigilance, perseverance and aptitude generate a firestorm of strength and ability at the same time identifying overlooked support and services that could strengthened our cause and mission. It was an electrifying a-ha moment for all of us in the room as we collaborated and generated new pathways that would benefit each of us.

In our evening’s reception hosted by *“Vote Run Lead,”* the conversation turned to the importance of presence in politics. The slogan of *“Do Nothing About Us Without Us”* rang clearly in the room...bringing a surge of enthusiasm and resounding support for the importance of, not only the female voice, but the power of the rural female voice. With engaging speakers as Erin Vilardi of VRL, Monica Ramirez of JAMW (Justice for Migrant Women), along with actor and activist, Piper Perabo, it was obvious that there was a greater need for “us” to become more involved in our own outcomes. If we wanted change, we could not expect someone else to do it for us, we had to be part of that change.

Rural women deal with their community issues every day. They see the highs and lows of their “backyard” through its economics, politics and their neighbors. They also realize that not all things are visible...there are those that remain marginalized, isolated and invisible, but these women are creating a coalition of hope and change, and that is what will make a difference.

There were so many unforgettable moments that moved me during my time in Greenville, some more than others, but all equally important and valuable. With another day of workshops and presentations, I wanted to make the most of this incredible opportunity afforded to me by CAAM, and their continued desire to support our presence as Asians Americans despite our rural geography. There is great value in the investment of people, seeing them where they are and acknowledging their worth as a contributing member of society. All too often we ignore the contribution of those in rural areas.... the farmers, the educators, the advocates.... those who despite limitations, do make an impact and a difference in the lives of so many.

In listening to the closing presentation of *“The Women’s Rural Summit,”* the plight of the indigenous communities and our migrant workers struck a deep chord with me. Each detailed the challenges, the hardship, the lack of services and support.... the isolation. The feelings of being ignored and minimized...yet despite the visible pain each woman carried, they also spoke

of the enormous sacrifices made by their families and the trauma that remained..... families like mine.

As the daughter of an immigrant, my mother was one who witnessed the cost of war, like my combat veteran father...they faced the obstacles of survival, the overt racism, prejudices and fought to carve a life for themselves. Generational trauma is real...passed along from the experiences witnessed and lived.... we live with it, we taste it, it becomes a part of who we are. It is something we cannot aptly share and articulate with those who have never experienced the devastating effects that linger. But in listening to these women who chose to share their stories and that of their families, brought a deeper connection for me to this summit and its mission. This collective of women whose objective was to educate, learn and share with each other through their pain, candor and experiences, also released a greater awareness of symmetry in our existence. Despite location, race, or age, we all came together for one purpose....to unknowingly heal and grow from whence we came.

During our closing session two points really struck me, surmising what these days have meant. One was that, "*we are the caretakers of our community.*"

We are not always given choices in where we land, such was the case for me, however we do have a choice on how we invest in ourselves and our neighbors. We have great power to make a difference wherever we are, we do not need permission, we just need to act upon our advocacies. It is taking that fire within and igniting it into action.

The second point was, "*We are each other's medicine,*" which had me reflect back to my first workshop...the kismet twining of souls coming together for a brief moment to heal and support each other. Maybe that was the overall message of this summit. Through our shared experiences, challenges and crossroads, we come to the aid of each other knowing that sisterly support is available and that someone is listening.

When CAAM asked me to write of my experiences, I had to weigh from what vantage point.... that of a southern-based Asian American? From that of a woman? From that of a metropolis transplant trying to carve a new-normal in a foreign landscape of rural living? The truth is, it is all of those.... what happens in rural communities affects us all. Rural communities are growing exponentially as over-crowding, economics and changes in one's own situation carves out the new landscape of what it means to live in rural America. And for us as Asian Americans in this vast space, it is a reminder that despite our cultural differences there is symmetry in our journeys. We are not alone, despite often feeling as such. We can look to others who have faced a similar pathway, especially those of us outside of the binary. Whether entrenched in the deep south or the Alaskan wilderness, we have sisters out there in the netherworld, those who have faced prejudice, racism, segregation, isolation and invisibility. Our power is in our voice and our experiences, it is in our accomplishments and in our downfalls. Each step creates a tapestry of our presence, pieced together through obstacles of pain and love.

Do I feel that my presence helped to move that chair closer to the table? Yes, in some small way it has. Not because of me, but because of who I represented...my Asian American rural sisters and brothers. We are invisible no more.

This extraordinary assembly of women came together for varying reasons and objectives, but left as a unified coalition of an indestructible force. Together we coalesced in meeting each other at where we were, whether culturally, geographically or socially, we found common ground to take the next step forward. I look forward to the next trailhead.