

Good morning everyone and happy AAPI month! I'm Emily Weber, the State Representative for Missouri's 24th District, the Midtown and Downtown area of KC. I'm so pleased to be here with you during your Mental Health Summit. To Min Liu, thank you for all that you do for your community, for reaching out to me, and also helping organize students to come testify for the AAPI Heritage Month legislation that I filed this session. For those of you who don't know I filed a bill this year that the state of MO recognizes AAPI Heritage Month in May. We have a federal law but we do not have a state law. During this session it received a hearing and had some amazing people from the community from all over the state come to testify. Your stories on why this is important for our state to recognize and celebrate were the reasons why I filed this legislation. I'm happy to say that I added this bill to another bill on the floor and it was truly agreed to and finally passed. Now it's up to the Governor, he can sign it, do nothing at all or he can veto it, if he vetoes it we will have to start all over again next session.

Today, I want to tell you my story, because I believe I can speak personally to the heart of what this meeting of the minds is all about: how to confront the mental and emotional strain of advocacy and activism while also finding the strength and joy in work worth doing.

When I first ran for office, I didn't know this but Missouri made a little bit of AAPI history. I became the very first — and so far the only — Asian woman to be elected to the Missouri General Assembly.

This is a road that I never thought I would travel, and it hasn't always been an easy one. When you become the first to do something, it puts a lot of weight on your shoulders. You're representing the hopes and dreams of your ancestors, the

expectations of your peers, and the construction of your own legacy as it will be interpreted by future generations.

And that road has been especially foreign to me because politics wasn't something that I dreamed about or necessarily wanted to do. I didn't set out wanting to be a legislator or working my way up the political ladder.

My story begins the same way many American stories do, though I wasn't named Emily Weber from minute one. My birth name is Ahn Ok Hyun and I was born in South Korea. After my parents adopted me, I was raised in a small, conservative town in rural Kansas, which — surprise, surprise — was predominantly white. But despite that, I never felt like an outsider. Our town had a lot of kids that were my age or my siblings' age so we all hung out together. It was a community where in the summer you played outside until your porch light came on, then you knew it was time to come home for dinner.

But I did have a lot of questions. My parents are conservatives and deeply religious, everything they are for, I'm against. You can imagine a lot of those questions would get me into trouble. That curiosity about the world around me made me critical of the world around me.

And it made me want to do what I could,  
to change what part of the world I could,  
to make it better,

which is at the heart of activism and community, which is a big life lesson I did take away from my upbringing.

Our communities make us stronger.

Eventually, I left my town, and while I still felt passionately and strongly about issues, I also got down to the work of making a living for myself in Kansas City.

I got an associate's degree in Marketing from Butler Community College in El Dorado, Kansas. Then, I moved to KC to attend Kansas City Art Institute. Eventually, I made a career out of graphic design and marketing.

The day after the 2016 Election, I woke up from living the American Dream. I was in the parking lot of the grocery store and a man in a huge truck rolled down his window and yelled "Go back, to where you came from, china doll"

This wasn't the first time or the last time that I've experienced racism, but I knew exactly why this instance of racism occurred. Why this person had felt emboldened to be the worst version of himself and show his true colors of what he thought about me and the Asian-American community. Going back to my hometown after that election when I would visit my family and friends, I was treated like an outsider and saw the racism that came out. I started to see my hometown, my memories, through a different lens.

I would bet that every person in this room has been able to sense the shift and change in the treatment of Asian-Americans since 2016.

I would bet I'm not the only person in this room who remembers the moment they realized that voting wasn't going to be enough. When they realized to do something more to shape the reality of our country and our communities. My realization came to me while I had a shopping cart in my hands.

When was yours?

I started to dig deeper into topics that used to make me uncomfortable. I found candidates on the Kansas and Missouri side that I supported through volunteering and knocking doors, not just giving them my money, but giving them my time. I worked with different organizations that supported women candidates and helped them get elected. I registered voters and helped get petitions signed.

I got involved because I knew and saw what can happen if we don't and we have a voice that needs to be heard.

I did what I always do when something pushes me...

I pushed back.

But I still never thought about running for office.

As we live in a state with term-limits, I wanted to see when exactly former state Rep. Judy Morgan's term would end, and hopefully get an idea of who was running to replace her. It turned out no one was set to run after she termed out in 2020.

So, my community urged me to take her place. I went through the imposter syndrome of not thinking that I was qualified to represent thousands of Kansas City residents in the state Capitol. But as more people asked me to run, the more I thought about it: I've worked paycheck to paycheck, been without health care, have student loans, been paid less than a man for the same job, and I'm a minority woman in the state of Missouri.

I'm more than qualified.

So about four years ago, I announced my candidacy, then I won a primary election, and then I defeated a third-party candidate in the general election. On Jan. 6, 2021, I was sworn in to the Missouri House of Representatives.

The growing pains that first year were difficult, especially since we were still in the midst of the pandemic. I decided to make it even more difficult on myself when I filed an HR complaint against another representative who continued to say “China virus” when talking about COVID. I didn’t ask for much. I just wanted him to stop using a bigoted and xenophobic term that had increased anti-Asian sentiment across America that had caused direct harm to members in our community. I wanted to create an environment in the people's house — your house — that welcomes everyone.

I got pushback from some. I got threats from others. I don’t believe anyone fully understood why this needed to stop so badly or why I felt so strongly about it.

But a week after I made the complaint, the Atlanta spa shootings happened. Other elected officials, like my congressman, Emanuel Cleaver and my mayor, Quinton Lucas, took a stand with our community. They had public events about AAPI hate, and how everyone needs to stand with the AAPI community. I’m so thankful for that and how my own caucus — my friends and colleagues — stood with me too, and even some of the Republicans did as well. They understood what hate can do and realized that this is an issue and we should listen.

I’m here before you to talk about advocacy and mental health in our communities. And I believe my own stories here offer a couple of important lessons.

While I might stand before you and seem like I have taken the stress in stride, I can tell you all that I have struggled to stay composed. That on many Sundays, I really question whether it's worth my sanity to drive two hours to Jefferson City and suffer for a week, especially when there's a good chance I'm going to be insulted and offended.

Every year that I've been in the House, we've had debates on the floor about bills that would limit teaching the truth about America's racism. While our Black caucus members usually take the lead in denouncing the horrors of those bills, I have also spoken about events like the Chinese Exclusion Act or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II or other parts of American history that show how difficult, demeaning, and dehumanizing it has been to be Asian in this country.

When these bills come up, I always have to ask how am I not supposed to take that erasure of our community personally?

And I do, and it hurts every time.

The mental toll of activism and advocacy, especially when you're not in power, is exhausting. Trust me, as a member of a superminority party in a state legislature, I speak with plenty of experience on that front.

But as Asian-Americans in advocacy, I believe we also face a different kind of struggle. We know how difficult it is to wear your heart on your sleeve and stick to your values and work hard and all-too-often come up short for the causes and candidates you believe in. And that hurts.

But so often, we feel we don't necessarily belong in the space of American civic and political life because the racism we encounter is designed to "other" us, to set us apart from the rest of America. It's always flavored with the xenophobia that has long plagued immigrant communities and their descendants. So when we lose on our issues, it also feels like a part of our identity loses too. That somehow all of the slurs and hate speech and microaggressions telling us we don't belong are right. That as an Asian American, I don't actually belong in American civil society.

But we belong.

What keeps me going, what helps me get past that roadblock on this journey, is twofold:

First, I've learned to take great pride in being places where other people think I don't belong. That's about as American as it gets. I serve as the ranking member on the House Agriculture Committee, which always seems to surprise people, given I represent one of the most urban districts in the state. But as I said earlier, I grew up in rural Kansas and I was part of my community 4-H club and my dad owned Weber Surge Dairy Equipment. So I have the experience to understand what matters to the farming community in our state. Also, a lot of immigrants that come here, are farmers. In the same way, while I am Asian American and that is part of my advocacy, it's only one of my experiences. This is a room filled with people who speak passionately and intelligently about their lived experiences on a wide range of issues.

You know what you know and  
you have a right to tell people about it.

You belong in every conversation where your knowledge would be of value.

Second, know that being Asian and American aren't exclusive. America is Asian. It's also European and African and indigenous. But Asians have been significantly shaping American culture and society almost since it was founded. With the rising numbers of Americans who belong to the AAPI community, it's important to recognize just how much we give back to **our** state and to **our** country.

So, get involved, get active in your community, in your city, your county, your state, because it's yours just as much as it is any other Americans'.

So now you're probably asking, that's all well and good, but *how* do I get involved? You can easily start by making sure you are registered to vote, get your friends to register, family members, anyone you come across.

Then get to know your elected officials; we are public servants, we work for you. Find out who is serving on your school board, or who is your city council members, state reps, or senators. If there is an election, look up who is running, you can do a quick Google search or visit [vote411.org](http://vote411.org).

What are your issues that you are worried about, is it taxes, potholes, healthcare, common sense gun laws, education? Ask them questions, and get out of your comfort zone. Then if you find a candidate that you support, go knock doors. It's great exercise, you get to meet new people and you're doing something for democracy. And of course, vote, in every single election.

We also need to watch our mental health. It's easy to get too involved and to suffer burnout. This session seemed to almost break me. I've realized when I



would come home I was tired and depressed. I've always been a believer in therapy, so I would remind everyone here that asking for help is okay. Saying you're not okay is okay. Taking a break, having a breather, is also necessary. Remember that this work is a marathon, not a sprint. Change doesn't happen immediately, it can take a while. So make sure you're in it for the long haul.

It sounds odd, but in a way, I'm thankful for that slap in the face election and for that racist remark. Because it inspired me to do work that I never thought I could do. And I found a community of people that support each other as we strive for progress in this country.

The more our government starts to look like what America actually looks like, full of diverse people of all backgrounds, the more decisions will be made that will truly promote equality for everyone.

We need more people at the table. We need you to get involved in every angle. Go find organizations that align with your beliefs and get involved. Go outside of your comfort zone, bring some friends along the way, and meet new people.

I'm going to end with this. If you are thinking about running for something someday, we know women, especially women of color have to be asked multiple times before they decide to run, I was asked repeatedly before I decided. Consider this your first ask. I want you to run for something, we need your voice. If you have any questions please reach out.

Thank you so much for inviting me to your Summit.