

MY TURN

I DON'T COUNT AS 'DIVERSITY'

Successful? Sure. But sometimes Asian-Americans need affirmative action, too.

BY ANGELO RAGAZA

WHEN I LEFT school for my first job nine years ago, I had no reason to believe I faced professional obstacles bigger than anyone else's. I was the child of middle-class professionals, grew up in a comfortable New Jersey suburb and held a degree from an Ivy League school. As an Asian-American, I was relieved that I belonged to a racial group that many equate with academic and professional success. But once in the workplace, I found myself slapped in the face for straddling the racial divide. In some situations, I was considered virtually white and not "minority" enough. In others, it was the other way round. I was temping at a national civil-rights organization when, a few months into the assignment, I was told that management was thinking about making my place there permanent. Interviewed by three different managers, I grew increasingly optimistic. At the last interview, the deputy director commended my performance and told me that I all but had the job. But the next day my hopes were dashed. Through the office grapevine, I found out that management was under pressure from the community to diversify, and my replacement, an African-American woman, billed the bill better than I

The decision hit me, not in the hallowed realm of my ideals of inclusiveness, but in the hollow realm of my wallet. As an Asian, I thought I already was bringing diversity to the organization. But before I had a chance to morph from idealist to cynic, I left the nonprofit world for the world of publishing. When I compare the complexions of my colleagues with the staff of nonprofit organizations, I wonder whether I am indeed in America.

Some of my publishing friends say they've felt isolated and frustrated at being the only minorities on staff. Because of the homogeneity of editorial personnel, blatant stereotypes of Asian-Americans sometimes pass under the radar of otherwise exacting editors. And while some publications make a conscious effort to report on and hire minorities, I can't tell you the number of times I've pitched an Asian-American story to an editor, only to be told it wouldn't appeal to a "general" audience. Or the times an editor



DAVID N. BERWITZ FOR NEWSWEEK

'Once in the workplace, I found myself slapped in the face for straddling the racial divide'

over Asian-American math whizzes for "less qualified" minority applicants. But what about Asian-Americans in the work force? Here we cease to be useful to the foes of affirmative action. The few statistics that exist indicate that, despite having education and training to rival their white colleagues, Asian-Americans have not achieved parity in status and salary. An Asian-American is 60 percent more likely to hold a bachelor's degree than a white American but makes a lower median salary (\$37,040 versus \$42,050). And although Asian-Americans constitute 4 percent of the population, they occupy less than two tenths of 1 percent of the corporate directorships. In sports, the media, politics and entertainment, it would take a blindfold not to see our absence. Affirmative action's critics are wrong to forge an alliance with Asian-American Success. In fact, an Asian-American family is 20 percent more likely to be living in poverty than a white family. And in 1996, exit polls found that 73 percent of Asian-American Republicans and 79 percent of Asian-American Democrats voted against Proposition 209, the referendum that eliminated affirmative action in California.

Mainstream media ignored this finding. But it speaks volumes about Asian-American critics of affirmative action like "Illiberal Education" author Dinesh D'Souza, to whom the media have paid inordinate attention. These folks don't speak for all Asian-Americans. And they certainly don't speak for me, my mom or my dad.

RAGAZA is the founder of Angel Island Media in New York.

went through the motions of interviewing me, only to hire a friend. I don't want to insinuate that the people weren't qualified, but they did happen to share the editors' race, class and connections. The rank and file of magazine offices is filled with people who got their jobs because their parents put a call in to the higher-ups. Neither my mom nor my dad is in a position to do that, though in every way they—a biotechnologist and a computer engineer, respectively—should fit into the great American immigrant success story like a hand in a glove.

But don't look to my parents to jump on the backlash bandwagon. Over the course of her career, my mother has seen managers tailor job descriptions and manipulate the promotion process to install people with whom they felt "comfortable"—even if their

choices' qualifications didn't hold a candle to hers. And my dad has struggled for years to be his own boss, partially because his accent, immigrant status and lack of connections were like dead weights on the corporate ladder.

It's easy to see why Asian-Americans make ideal poster faces for the affirmative-action backlash. Just yesterday we got "off the boat"; apparently overnight, we're driving Lexuses and sending our kids to Yale. We're proof that prejudice doesn't exist—and that affirmative action is unnecessary. Take the debate over college admissions, which routinely depicts schools like Harvard passing