



**A Family Educates to Prevent Hate Crimes:
The Case of Joseph Ito**

A Family Educates to Prevent Hate Crimes: The Case of Joseph Iletto

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I found myself at the funeral of Joseph Iletto, a Filipino American postal worker who had been gunned down in a racially motivated shooting in the greater Los Angeles area. Little did I know at the time that Joseph's brother, Ismael, and the rest of his family would become dynamic spokespersons against all forms of hate crimes, crisscrossing the U.S., speaking out and extending their hands to gays and lesbians, Jews and Muslims, and African Americans and Latinos who also were victimized.

1. Why Was Joseph Iletto a Hate Crime Victim?

On August 10, 1999, Joseph Santos Iletto, a Filipino American postal worker was gunned down along his Chatsworth route by a self-professed white supremacist named Buford O. Furrow. Just hours after Furrow fired shots into a playground full of children at the North Valley Jewish Community Center (NVJCC) in Granada Hills, the killer encountered Joseph, who happened to be covering another mail carrier's route that day.

“Why can’t they see us?”

– The Iletto Family

Furrow approached Joseph and asked him to mail a letter for him. As Joseph agreed to mail the letter, Furrow pulled out his gun and shot Joseph nine times. Furrow later confessed that he killed Joseph because he looked Latino or Asian and because he was a federal employee. Furrow also stated that Joseph’s racial background and employment with the government made him a good “target of opportunity.” As Joseph tried to run away, the killer shot him

a few more times before finally escaping himself. Joseph died from gunshot wounds to the chest and one to the back of the head and was the only fatal victim during Furrow’s rampage. The day immediately after the shootings, Furrow turned himself in to the authorities and confessed his guilt.

Kuya — Who Was Joseph Santos Iletto?

To his family, Joseph was fondly known as Jojo or *Kuya*, a Filipino term of respect for an eldest brother. With the death of their father at an early age, Joseph played a central role in the household. A filial son, a devoted brother and brother-in-law, *Kuya* was an honest and modest man who never hesitated to help others. Ismael Iletto, Joseph’s younger brother, recounted an incident where Joseph helped the local sanitation workers when they came around on their shift. “That’s their job,” Ismael recalls saying, but that did not stop Joseph from helping those men.

At 39, things were going well in Joseph’s life. While attending California Polytechnic at Pomona for an Engineering degree, Joseph went to work at the United States Postal Service. An avid chess player, Joseph had been featured occasionally in magazines and newspapers for his accomplishments. Joseph had also just become an uncle as his brother Ismael and his sister-in-law Deena celebrated the arrival of their son, Kyle. Close to his younger twin sisters Carmina and Raquel, and his loving mother Lilian, Joseph was the family’s big brother, their *Kuya*, in every sense of the word.

Around the time of Joseph’s death, the national media had prominently focused on the brutal hate crimes perpetrated against an African American man in Texas named James Byrd, and a gay man in Wyoming named Matthew Shepard. In the wake of these murders, the Ilettos were aware that hate crimes

What is a hate crime?

The California Attorney General’s Civil Rights Commission on Hate Crimes Final Report, March 2001, defines a hate crime as: “Any act of intimidation, harassment, physical force or threat of physical force directed against any person, or family, or their property or their advocate, motivated either in whole or in part by hostility to their real or perceived race, ethnic background, national origin, religious belief, sex, age, disability, or sexual orientation, with the intention of causing fear or intimidation, or to deter the free exercise or enjoyment of any rights or privileges secured by the Constitution or the laws of the United States or the State of California whether or not performed under color of law.” Joseph’s death falls within the scope of this definition because he was singled out and killed based on the color of his skin.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN LEGAL CENTER OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Photo: the Iieto family, seated, from left: nephew Kyle, sisters Carmina and Raquel, sister-in-law Deena and mom Lilian. Standing behind the family are, from left, Chris Komai of the Japanese American National Museum, the Hon. Judy Chu, L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Ismael Iieto at the APALC Commemoration Event for Joseph Iieto in August 2005.

“Before, we would watch TV thinking that hate crimes would never happen to us or, good thing, we don’t live in that area.”

– Deena Iieto, sister-in-law

were happening but it never occurred to them that someone in their own family could become a victim.

“We never even got the chance to say goodbye. I want to tell him that we miss his company and I hope he can see that we’re doing our best to honor his name,” Ismael said, fighting back tears, “I want people to remember my brother Joseph not just as a hate crime victim, but for what his name stands for: J.O.S.E.P.H.I.L.E.T.O. Join Our Struggle; Educate and Prevent Hate; Instill Love, Equality and Tolerance for Others.”

2. U.S. Media Fails to Cover Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans

As the Iieto family received the shocking news of Joseph’s death that summer afternoon, coverage of a crazed lone gunman emptying bullets into a playground full of children was the lo-

cal and national media’s greatest concern. Five people in the NVJCC shooting were seriously hurt and footage of young children being led out by the police were the recurring images sensationalized on television throughout the day. The brutal murder of Joseph and the shooting at NVJCC, both disturbingly violent, were reported as almost unrelated events. The murder of the Filipino American postal worker received minimal news coverage.

The media’s consistent failure to adequately cover anti-Asian Pacific American (APA) incidents can explain the public’s general lack of awareness of anti-APA violence. In 1999, although four racially motivated murders against Asian Americans occurred, only those that involved other religious and racial minorities such as the shooting of five at the Jewish Center along with the Joseph Iieto killing received public attention.

Civil Rights Violation Penalties

On February 6, 2003, more than three and a half years after the tragic death of Joseph, the California Fair Employment and Housing Commission ruled that Furrow violated Joseph's civil rights and caused extreme emotional distress to his family. The Commission ordered Furrow to pay \$150,000 in compensatory damages and \$25,000 in civil penalties to the estate of Joseph. This was the first time that the maximum penalty was awarded for a hate violence case under California's Ralph Civil Rights Act. The Commission's decision to order the maximum penalty was based on the coroner's determination that Joseph experienced tremendous emotional and physical trauma in the minutes before he died and because of the severe nature of the hate violence expressed in this case.

It is unlikely Joseph's family will receive any money from Furrow. However, the ruling is important because it sets a precedent for families of hate crime victims to get financial redress. Joseph Duff, the housing agency's senior staff counsel who presented the case, said "the ruling affirms the power of this department to bring action on behalf of victims' families. It sets a legal and social precedent that will benefit future hate crime victims in California."

Asian Pacific American victims often receive less coverage than the victims from other racial groups. To a large extent, Asian cultures deem family matters to be private and many hate crimes against those of Asian descent have gone unreported. Because it holds the power to influence public perception, the media's failure to report anti-Asian violence results in incomplete and inaccurate understandings of the nature and true extent of the problem.

Enraged to find Joseph's death being ignored, the Iletos decided to break their silence. Thus, this began the family's transition into the spotlight of anti-hate crime activism.

3. *An Ordinary Family Speaks Out to Educate the Public*

Ismael Iletto, Joseph's brother, became the family spokesperson in the wake of the tragedy, and continues to be a speaker against hate crimes today. However, taking on this role did not come naturally to him.

As a student at California State University, Los Angeles, Ismael Iletto was neither a political or social activist nor an outspoken speaker. Ismael had once joined a protest of the brutal Detroit hate killing of Vincent Chin, but that was the only form of activism he had participated in while in college. Furthermore, politics was not a large concern to the Iletos. Hate crimes, especially, seemed to be a distant issue for them. Ismael admitted, "For some reason, we always feel that somebody else is already doing the job. There is no need for us [to be politically and socially active]."

That all changed on August 10, 1999.

Ismael realized that he would have to be his brother's silenced voice. "We've come to realize that we have to do it for ourselves, for Joseph," Ismael said. "No one else is going to do it [hate crime awareness]." The loss of Joseph sparked a determination in the family to find the strength to speak out to others.

"Before, we would watch TV thinking that hate crimes would never happen to us or, good thing, we don't live in that area," Deena Iletto, Joseph's sister-in-law, explained. "And then it happened to us. It was shocking. You come to the realization that there is no type of area and no one is safe when hate is all around us. After Joseph's death, we realized that we needed to do something. We owed it to (Joseph)."

Experienced in dealing with tragedy in the public arena, Jewish activists promptly activated a well es-

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you should be *enraged*.”

– Ismael Iletto



Photo: Ismael Iletto, above, fourth from left.

tablished network to rally together after the shooting spree. The Iletos, who deeply sympathized with the Jewish victims of the shooting spree, were afraid that Joseph’s tragedy would be ignored. This was not just an anti-Semitic attack, it was also an anti-Asian one.

The Iletto family quickly came face to face with the invisibility that Asian Pacific American hate crime victims and their loved ones routinely experience. The family soon became frustrated, and began asking the question, “Why can’t they see us?” Despite the fact that the family was invited to events and memorials where politicians and the media would express their condolences, when it came time to making public comments about the August 10th tragedy, no one mentioned Joseph or the fact that he was an APA.

4. Making Hate Crime Victims Visible

Seventeen days after the shootings, a gun control legislation bill was signed by the governor in Los Angeles. The Iletto family was invited to sit in the front row and quickly realized that there were only a handful of Asian Pacific Americans in the entire audience. Governor Gray Davis was there to sign three bills. In his speech, he addressed representatives of the Jewish community and mentioned the Jewish Center shooting numerous times, but failed to mention Joseph even once.

“As people were walking out,” recalled Ismael, “Governor Davis announced, ‘By the way, the Iletto family is here.’” Lilian Iletto turned to her family and

exclaimed that she was terribly embarrassed, and in a way, hoped there were no other Filipinos there to witness that her son Joseph was not acknowledged.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed, you should be enraged,” Ismael recalled telling his mother. Deena remembers asking: “Why are they oblivious to us when we are sitting right in front of them?” It was as if people would only recognize the Iletos or Asian American hate victims if they stood up and made noise.

That incident at the bill signing only served to galvanize the Iletto family’s quest to include Joseph and other Asian American hate victims in the national dialogue on hate crimes. Today, the Iletos spend all of their free time, vacation time, and days off dedicated to educating people about hate crimes and how to prevent them.

In the days following Joseph’s murder, various civil rights and community-based organizations, together with members of the Asian Pacific American and Jewish communities, organized vigils and rallies denouncing hate-motivated violence in Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Chicago, Dallas, and Seattle. Within the Filipino American community, Jon Melegrito, executive director of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), said many Filipino Americans “think of themselves as model minorities who are not vulnerable to discrimination, let alone hate crimes.” Prosy dela Cruz, a Filipino American organizer, fur-

PHOTO COURTESY OF APALC

ther acknowledged that as a Filipino American, Joseph's death was something "you don't expect when you come to the United States to pursue the American dream." These were the exact sentiments shared by the Iletos.

In the wake of Joseph's death, Joseph's mother Lilian was terrified to speak up. She feared retaliation from White supremacists. Her fear was not unfounded. The Iletos have since received vicious hate mail and explicit, threatening phone calls. To protect themselves from danger, Ismael and Deena have moved. Because both brothers work for the mail industry, Ismael, a UPS driver, is especially traumatized by the hate mail. Yet, in spite of the obstacles they have faced, the Iletos remain committed to their cause.

Joseph's mother (Lilian), brother and sister-in-law (Ismael and Deena), and sisters (Carmina and Raquel) tirelessly marched in the streets, attended city council meetings, and rallied for stronger federal hate crime and gun control laws. In the name of Joseph, the family turned their sorrow and frustration into powerful tools of social activism making it their mission to support all victims of hate crimes, regardless of race, creed, national origin, or sexual orientation. In doing so, they have successfully built a multi-cultural coalition to promote hate crime awareness and hate crime prevention.

5. *Obtaining Justice for Hate Crime Victims*

“In Catholic school, we are taught to forgive and forget,” Ismael said, “but it’s hard when your brother’s killer is smiling as he apologizes in the stand.” The Iletos’ only desire was for justice to be properly served on Furrow.

At a time when overt racial discrimination is rarely condoned, such hate killing is “a bitter reminder that bigotry is (still) alive,” U.S. district Judge Nora Manella told the killer. Prosecutors sought the death penalty against white supremacist Furrow. With U.S.

Attorney General Janet Reno’s approval, U.S. Attorney Alejandro Mayorkas filed the death penalty notice. Furrow was indicted on hate crimes in the wounding of three boys, a teenage girl, a receptionist at the North Valley Jewish Community Center and the killing of Joseph (*Asianweek.com* Jan. 5-11, 2001).

Judge Manella imposed on Furrow two life sentences without possibility of parole, 110 years in prison, and payment of \$690,292 in restitution. The judge reprimanded the killer, “If you’ve sent a message, it is that even the most violent crimes can strengthen a community.” The family expressed a sense of relief knowing that the killer would be forever kept behind bars. “Although it can’t take away the sorrow and pain, or return our brother back to us, at least he is kept away from harming another person. I wouldn’t want any family to go through what we went through because of him,” Ismael said. Joseph’s mother Lilian says her only peace of mind is that Furrow cannot harm another family again.

The brutal deaths of Joseph and other hate crime victims have helped raise the nation’s consciousness regarding hate violence. The Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1999 (HCPA) was introduced to provide more federal resources to address the problems of hate crimes.

Progress halted, however, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks of the World Trade Center in New York City. This was particularly distressing for Asian Americans because of the rise in hate crimes towards South Asians immediately after September 11. Over 250 bias-motivated incidents targeting APA’s have been documented and 96% of those incidents involved South Asians. Individuals in universities, workplaces, and public places have been subject to racial slurs and threats as well as physical attacks. Almost immediately after September 11, two Asian Americans, a Sikh American and a Pakistani American, were brutally murdered. While previous racially motivated assaults involved only male victims, the

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN LEGAL CENTER OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Photo: the Ileo family at the APALC Commemoration Event for Joseph Ileo held in August 2005.

current trend post September 11 include women and children as victims.

According to Intergroup Clearinghouse, a San Francisco organization, more than 1,700 cases of discrimination against Arab Americans, South Asian Americans, Muslim Americans, and Sikh Americans have been reported as of January 2002. Sikh Americans have been disproportionately targeted for the backlash post September 11 because their appearance resembles that of Arab and Muslim Americans. In California alone, hate crime offenses based on a person’s race, ethnicity, or national origin, increased 21 percent in 2001 due to backlash from the September 11 attacks. (Hate Crime in California 2005, California Attorney General’s office).

The inability of the federal government to address hate crimes is pressing and needs to improve quickly. The Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act (LLEEA) of 2001 seeks to address the government’s capacity to address hate crimes. Public officials and community leaders including the U.S. Attorney General must step forward to address the growing con-

cerns of such hate motivated crimes and take action against hate crimes by taking measures such as supporting funding for anti-bias educational programming. Various APA communities have been reaching out to the victims of the terrorist attacks and the victims of the backlash since September 11.

6. Tragedy to Activism: Celebrating the Bayanihan Spirit

In memory of Joseph, the Ileo family invoked the Filipino spirit of *bayanihan*, across different groups and has built a multi-racial coalition in their fight against hate crimes. Bayanihan is a traditional Filipino custom to help one another as one larger community. In their quest to speak out against hate crimes, the Ileo family has reached out to various groups that they had no prior affiliation with in a desire to build a larger community against hate crimes. They have built a coalition with a pan-ethnic identity that includes diverse groups from other Asian American communities to gay and lesbian organizations.

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– Iletto Family

“We are pushing for a bill that will put criminals away for all motivations for hate crimes. For discrimination against race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation,” Ismael said. One of the problems that the Iletos are facing is that many politicians are reluctant to include sexual orientation on that list. The Iletto family met with the parents of Matthew Shepard and shared their grief.

“We want a bill that covers everyone,” says Ismael. “Hate that stems from intolerance or ignorance is unacceptable no matter what form it takes.”

The Iletos are public supporters of the Local Law Enforcement Act (formerly the Specter-Kennedy Hate Crimes Bill). As of March 2009, this bill still has not been passed because of opposition to its inclusion of sexual orientation and/or gender related hate crimes.

Robin Toma, a civil rights attorney and the executive director of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission said, “I know that because of the tireless activism of the Iletos, people everywhere have been touched by their story of the devastating impact of hate crimes.” Toma is like many others who strongly agree that the way the Iletto family has turned their grief into activism is astounding. “Even if they do nothing more in their lives, their willingness to speak out in favor of understanding and prevention of hate crimes has impacted millions and serves as a shining example of what human beings can be. They are personal heroes to me.”

The Iletos are not solely concerned with hate crimes against Asian Pacific Americans. They have traveled near and far, accepting all invitations to speak at rallies and conventions for many different causes. Ismael explains “... the family has been going out to different campuses and colleges to bring their awareness to the students in colleges and high school students... just to make them aware that it could happen to them... we are there to tell them that, hey, we are targets. And we need to stick together... We are [also] asking the different parishes and churches and faiths to address the issue of hate crimes in their congregation... we are building bridges with other communities because that’s what we need, to unite together. Because we can’t just fight this alone.”

The family marched with Jesse Jackson in October 1999 in support of the National Rainbow Coalition’s effort to unite communities of different faiths to prevent hate crimes. Among the various local events the Iletos have participated in, the family also spoke

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– Ismael Iletto



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ILETO FAMILY

Photo: the last picture taken of Joseph at his nephew Kyle's birth at St. Jude in Fullerton, CA.

at the National AFL-CIO Union Convention, at the Museum of Campaign as part of the Million Mom March against gun violence.

Since Joseph's death, the Iletos have become actively involved with organizations that strive to prevent hate. The Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC) in Los Angeles has created the Joseph Iletto Hate Crimes Prevention Fellowship that serves as a memorial for Joseph by advancing education and advocacy around the issue of hate crimes and strengthening intercommunity networks

as a means of preventing hate crimes. The family has also been actively involved with the Filipino Civil Rights Advocates (FILCRA), a group that worked with APALC to provide support for hate crime prevention. Recognizing that brutal crimes like the hate murder of Joseph, continue to happen in our society even today, Deena feels the collaboration of various groups is especially important.

“We need to be more outspoken. How many more have to die before we're important enough... for people to listen to our issues?” Ismael asserted.

If you think you have been the victim of a hate incident or hate crime you should report it immediately to your law enforcement agency. Reporting a hate incident or hate crime to law enforcement may keep others from being victimized. It is also important for law enforcement to be aware of what is happening in their jurisdictions so they can take necessary steps and provide resources to make the community safer. Let the officer know that you think you were a victim of a hate crime or hate incident. If words were used during the incident, write down the exact words that the perpetrator used in connection with the incident and anything else that would link the perpetrator to the incident. (safestate.org- project of the California Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center).