

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, Tim has a discussion with Northern Light Health employees of Asian heritage.

Tim Gentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Gentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. Here at Northern Light, we embrace diversity and focus on issues of racial, social, and medical justice. We want to listen and learn by tapping into the many voices of diversity that we have across our healthcare system and our state. This podcast provides a forum for our listeners to share an experience of growth toward a culture that cares for one another. Those of you that have listened to these podcasts, I believe this is our 22nd one. And I know that you've heard me say that time and time again, growth toward a culture that cares for one another. And I can just tell you that, the more I say that, the more I see it, the more I hear it, and the more I feel it being expressed by my colleagues.

Tim Gentry:

So it's a wonderful thing for sure. We're fortunate to have today, two guests, two colleagues on our podcasts to share with us their perspectives as providers who are of Asian heritage. We have Omm Stilwell, a psychiatric clinician at Northern Light Acadia Hospital and a member of the integrated behavioral health team. Omm Was born in Thailand and adopted by her parents at the age of two and grew up in Southern Maine. Welcome, Omm.

Omm Stilwell:

It's nice to be here.

Tim Gentry:

Thank you. We also have John [inaudible 00:01:38] , or Mack as he goes by. Mack is a registered nurse in the critical care unit at Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center. He was recruited through our international nurses program in 2018 and comes from the city of Manila in the Philippines. Welcome, Mack.

Mack:

Hi, good afternoon guys.

Tim Gentry:

And thank you so much. Thank both of you, Mack and Omm, for joining us today. So let me start with a brief perspective. This is my perspective I'll share with the listeners and both of you, Mack and Omm, but you've heard me say this. And that is, our two guests today, colleagues, yes are of Asian heritage, but Asian is a broad geographic term with many cultures, languages, and countries. Omm and Mack are two people with unique experiences. They cannot be painted as a certain lifestyle any more than you can paint me as a Caucasian American for that would be stereotyping, which is not only wrong, but it inhibits you from getting to know the genuine nature of those around you. With that being stated, I'd like to ask both of our guests to share with our listeners a little bit about your own experience here living in Maine. Omm, you grew up here so you might have a different perspective. And since you have longevity, why don't you start?

Omm Stilwell:

Certainly. I'd be happy to do that. As you mentioned in the introduction, I was adopted at the age of two. I was born in Thailand, and at age two, I was adopted by Caucasian parents. I grew up in Southern Maine, lived in Maine for most of my life. And as they put it, I assimilated a little bit too well. Essentially, despite their best efforts, I really wound up assimilating Maine culture more than anything else. And so in a lot of ways, my experience, while impacted by the way I look, which is very clearly Asian, is much more akin to another person you may speak with that has been from Southern Maine. Although if you ask people from Northern Maine, they would say that that's also a different culture.

Tim Gentry:

Very good. That's terrific. What would be one example of that?

Omm Stilwell:

It's rarely uncommon for people to make direct comments, I'd say have obviously racist attitudes, but I would say that there's been a number of people that would frequently ask me, where are you from? And if I told them from Southern Maine, or when I was living in Bangor, Bangor, they would say, "But yes, where are you from really?" with the implication that someone who looks the way I do is not actually local, and in many ways, I truly am.

Tim Gentry:

Yeah. That's great. Thank you so much for sharing that. And you know what, why don't you tell our listeners also a bit about your work experience here, your clinical experience as well so people get a sense of what you do when you're working at Northern Light?

Omm Stilwell:

Certainly. So as a member of the integrated behavioral health team, I work with a number of other social workers, and we are part of the community based at activities that Northern Light Health has. And so we are embedded in primary care practices all around the state, ranging down to Southern Maine, up through the far reaches of the county. And we are very widely spread out, but as part of these primary care practices, we can provide embedded behavioral health services without patients needing to come into Acadia Hospital or behavioral health specific locations, which improves overall behavioral health access.

Tim Gentry:

Very good. Thank you so much for that. Mack, you're fairly new here, as we have just stated. Tell us about your experience here in Maine. And I'm just, once again, just so thankful that both of you are here, both of you are on the Northern Light team. As you know, Mack is a critical care nurse. That takes a special kind of devotion just as the behavioral health side that Omm was just describing. So I'm so thankful to both of you. Tell us about your experience in Maine and including your work life.

Mack:

Yeah. My experience here in Maine has been good so far. Started in 2018. I'm met some nice people when I was new here. I met some very kind coworkers who have toured me around Maine, gave me an idea of what Maine is. They brought me to some hiking. I've been hiking a lot, saw the beautiful mountains, especially sunsets, sunrise. I like nature, so when I see those stuff, it gets me going. With regards to Asian hate, I've never experienced anything like that here in Maine. I can give you an example

of one close to it, but it's not normal. It's because the patient has post-traumatic stress disorder from a Vietnam war. So he has dementia as well, so every time he sees people with on our heritage or Asian looking people, he gets mad and all, but you would expect someone who had PTSD and dementia to have some fear from people Asian. But otherwise, my experience has been good. Maine people, as they say, are very kind, and I appreciate that a lot.

Tim Gentry:

Great. Thanks for that perspective. I really appreciate it. Both of you, Omm and Mack. So Omm, I'm going to turn back to you, Omm. And you shared a view when we were talking previously that when people inquire about your background, you touched on in your opening thoughts as well, it often feels like they are asking you to educate them as the way you and I were talking about this, but you believe it is important for people to educate themselves. Very interesting thought. Some of us are inquisitive about other people and backgrounds and heritage, but sometimes a well-meaning person may ask questions of someone of a different background and it comes across insensitively. So how would you advise others, advise our listeners here on this podcast, to engage with different people without making those people feel obliged to give an expansive education?

Omm Stilwell:

Certainly. Before I say this, I do want to kind of elaborate that I don't have an issue with people having curiosity or wanting to learn more, but there's kind of a two-sided issue. And the simplest one is that, as we established earlier, not every Asian person is going to be able to speak to every Asian American experience. Mack and I have very, very different life experiences, and we're just two people. So looking at the Asian American community as a monolith is problematic to begin with. But the secondary piece is that when you expect to approach a person of a marginalized community and they have to set everything aside to simply explain to you what it means, at least for them, in this case, what it means to be part of that community, it almost marginalized is their actual experience, because they have to make that secondary to some one's curiosity.

Omm Stilwell:

That said, the best place to start would be asking someone, "What can I read? Or, I'd like a video to watch. I want to understand better." And most people, not all, but most people will have at least a sense of, "Have you thought about watching this or reading these authors?" I've suggested everything from comedy troops to some very thoughtful authors that have written about either the Asian American experience or the Asian diaspora. And so there can be a number of resources, but that doesn't require me to sit down, take time out of connecting with another person as a person, just to have to wear the hat of a teacher, so to speak.

Tim Gentry:

Very good. You're reminding me when nine years or so before I joined Northern Light, I was traveling internationally quite a bit. And when I would go into countries like Chile or Lebanon or Ethiopia or United Arab Emirates, I would always ask those from that country, those native to that country, if you will, "Who are the authors that you think of from your country?" I guess I just got lucky with that question, because wow, did I get a great education from Neruda in Chile, the great poet, and so many other amazing authors that I read around the world. So that's really, really good advice and guidance because it gives people a deeper sense, I think, of the culture, and I found it gives you a deeper of our

universal truths that we all share, that we all have. The connective tissue runs a lot deeper than differences, I believe. So, thank you. Thank you for that.

Tim Gentry:

Mack, you shared with us a really good sense. I love what you were saying about your passion for nature and the like, and how you connected with people through your passion for nature and that your transition has been pretty smooth and pretty good. I'm so happy to hear that. As a critical care nurse, so here's a question. As a nurse, you've experienced some cultural differences in caring for patients. For example, at end of life, you've shared that story with me. So can you share that experience with our listeners?

Mack:

Yeah, absolutely. So before I moved to critical care nursing, I was in grand six for like two years. And grand six is a oncology respiratory unit. We cater most of the comfort patients in the hospital. Having comfort care is like taking care of patient through their end of life. You help them pass away. So one time I had this... I was new, maybe two months new. I had a comfort patient. That was my first patient. And it was very tough for me to handle the patient. It's very uncomfortable to give the medications for the patient, because as a Filipino nurse, our goal was to heal people, to get them better, to make sure they go back to their families. They say, "We never say die. We keep fighting until the end." That was very tough for me.

Mack:

But then as I handle more comfort care patients, I was talking to my coworkers, I realized that I was healing them too. I was healing those comfort patients as well, but just in a different way. I was healing them towards comfort, towards passing away, but this time just getting more comfortable. Right now, whenever I get comfort patients, I feel comfortable handling them, and I give them everything they can have and just to help them pass away peacefully.

Tim Gentry:

Said beautifully. Thank you. Thank you so much for that, Mack.

Mack:

You're welcome.

Tim Gentry:

Omm, also as a caregiver, provider of integrated behavioral health services, what are your thoughts and observations, and what would you like to share in the role that culture plays in the treatment as you see?

Omm Stilwell:

Certainly. What's been unique for me is that I would actually say that I've found that a number of patients are so pleased to be able to access those services that my race very rarely comes up. I think only a few patients have mentioned it. And for the most part, they are more focused on the behavioral health service that I can provide, which can be surprising on some cases. I work in a very rural area with

several of my locations, but overall, I would say that the response culturally has definitely been, across the board, fairly positive, for me at least.

Tim Gentry:

Excellent. That's that's really great. I appreciate that. So before we wrap up, I just want to give each of you the opportunity. Are there other things that you'd like to share, other things that you'd like to make sure our listeners think about, that I think about? Because this is such a great opportunity to do just that. If you have anything else you'd like to state, please take your time and go right ahead. Start with you, Omm.

Omm Stilwell:

I would say, and I know I've already kind of touched on this, but really having some partly sensitivity to the current political climate of the people you interact with right now is important, but the key is always going to be to connect with the other people as people, rather than identifying somebody as an Asian American person that you want to learn from. I identify myself as a social worker before anything else, and I would say that's a larger part of my identity than anything else. And so it's going to be about that shared humanity that we talk so much about as part of Northern Light Health, finding those commonalities, rather than those differences.

Tim Gentry:

Thank you so much for putting it in that light. I really, really appreciate that. Sometimes I will hear people drawing a correlation that are taking a stand on racial, social, and medical justice, and talking... Even though the intent is to move all of us, therefore, closer to a culture of caring that starts with caring for one another, I'll hear "He's getting out on that thin ice of being political." So you raise that term political. And so what you just said really struck a chord with me, because I don't see caring for one another being political. I don't see seeking racial, social, and medical justice and equity and fairness to be political. And so I really value what you just said and putting it in the context of delivery of care and behavioral health. So thank you for that. Really appreciate that, Omm. That's a deep thought. No pressure Mack, but how about you? Open mic for you.

Mack:

First of all, I agree with what Omm said. I think first of all, I'm very appreciative of... Maine was my first state here in the US. I feel like if I had been to a different state, my experience would've been different, and I don't know what racism or hate will I get or experience. As a nurse, I feel like we don't look at the person's race whenever we take care of our patients. It's, "You're our patient. You're human. We take care of you." That's our goal. And I wish every other people would think like that, everybody would see that we're all humans and we're not classified by race or anything. And I think if people would be thinking like that, we have a better world.

Tim Gentry:

Here, here. My wife's a nurse, and as we talk about all these things, that's what she says too. She's like, "Well, we're all caregivers. We were trained, and our values, everything about us is about treating everyone equally and not to have any difference of treatment that way." And maybe that's how healthcare is unique, and maybe part of what's going in society is all of society doesn't answer that same question the same way. So maybe that's why us as caregivers, and all of us in healthcare, and all of us at Northern Light, I think through the pandemic, we have proven that the communities can count on us.

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They can rely on us. When they were in fear or the unknown stages of COVID, we stepped up. And so we became leaders. So hopefully, we'll also be that kind of values leaders as well. And what you just said, and Omm, what you just said, will begin to permeate beyond just when people come for healthcare.

Tim Gentry:

So Omm and Mack, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, your stories, your time with us today, and thank you all of our podcast listeners. Until next time, I'm Tim Gentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity, and inclusion. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast, please join us again, May 13th, for our next episode. And a reminder that you can find additional episodes of Tim Talk at northernlighthealth.org/podcast.