

## AT THE MOVIES

# IN "LOVE IS BLIND,"

## RACE IS JUST ONE FACTOR IN CHOOSING A PARTNER



By Kai Curry  
NORTHWEST ASIAN  
WEEKLY

"Love is Blind" is a Netflix series that asks the question, "Do you have to see a person to fall in love with them?" The answer is "no"—but that doesn't mean it will be smooth sailing. Yes, you can fall in love with someone through a door while sitting in a "pod" talking. But will you stay in love once you see each other and spend time together? The series, which just completed its second season, walks viewers through the entire process, from hopeful beginnings to the altar.

On March 8, Clubhouse, a social audio app, hosted two of the Season 2 hopefuls: Natalie Mina Lee and Deepti Vempati. Now that the season has ended, vows said or not said, and the cast has had a reunion, on March 4, Clubhouse host Naima Cochrane wanted to know, what was it like?

Vempati and Lee were stand-outs on the show due to their decision to say "no" at the altar. On International Women's Day,

the Clubhouse virtual event centered solely on the two women and their experience. Relationship expert Helen Fisher of Match.com also chimed in on the chemistry of love and what it takes to make a relationship work.


Vempati and Lee were praised for their strength and for ultimately choosing what was healthiest for them. They talked about previous dating experiences compared to their "Love Is Blind" relationships with Abhishek Chatterjee "Shake" and Shayne Jansen, respectively. Race came up. The show is relatively diverse—not in terms of sexual preference (it's hetero cis male/female)—but the "rules" of "Love Is Blind" imply that participants should not ask what the other person looks like, be it skin color, or, because it came up a lot, weight. However, participants got around the framework by posing questions such as Chatterjee did to Vempati: "Would I be able to lift you on my shoulders?" And, it was inevitable that couples would talk about their backgrounds, so it became obvious that Vempati

is of Indian heritage and Lee of Korean.


Did that matter? It absolutely did. Both Vempati and Chatterjee admitted having never dated within their race or ethnicity prior to the show. Both also acknowledged that it felt good to do so. "I've literally only dated two men and they just happened to be white," Vempati said. "Going into the experience with an Indian man, it was really pleasant because we have our language and our culture as our foundation, so it's nice to listen to music that's in Hindi...we could connect on a deeper level. I never once was like, 'I'm never going to date an Indian man,' but it just never...happened for me...I was pleasantly surprised to have all those commonalities. In the future, I'm not negating any race...I don't want to put myself in a box in any way."

While the race thing didn't come up as much for Lee and Jansen, Lee told Clubhouse that it had definitely been an issue for her in the past.

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**MENTORS from 5**

skills were brand-new, and school for the then-12 year old was a challenge.

In high school, Thang found a program offered by the Burmese American Community Institute to help him with his homework and questions about his future.

The first in his family to attend college, Thang went off to Indiana University. He returned to programming at BACI shortly after he left it.

The mentee is now the mentor, and he's not the only one. More than half of BACI's current mentors are former mentees in the

program.

Thang now sits with students in a Southport High School classroom on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, where he and mentees go over homework, talk about goals and learn college readiness skills.

"It's just a really good community to work with because we're all so close with each other," Thang said.

Like Thang, Burmese Hoosiers who have spent half or more of their lives in the United States face a number of hurdles while adjusting, said Elaisa Vahnle, the institute's executive director.

For the last decade, they have sought to narrow achievement gaps, especially for Burmese refugees. Although the program focuses on this community, it's open to students of all backgrounds.

The resettlement of Burmese refugees throughout Perry Township, where BACI is based, has contributed to a significant rise in the area's Asian community. With that growth, BACI looked for a way to connect with young people who would be among the first in their families to attend higher education and some K-12 schools.

December Tling, a mentee in the program, is considering her options:

college, becoming a flight attendant or enlisting in the Armed Forces. If she chooses college, she would be the first in her family to do so.

While COVID-19 changed her high school experience, Tling said her biggest challenge came in dealing with all of the moving parts in her life, like her family on the run in her native Myanmar since the military coup.

Shared knowledge and experiences from mentors make mentees more comfortable with still unfamiliar territory, Tling said.

"You're truly not alone. You're not the only person going through this." ■

**MOVIES from 9**

"With dating apps, where I really struggled...was I feel like men would see an Asian woman and they would make judgment off of that. I know that there's a stereotype that comes with Asian women, and I hated that I would fall into that box... 'She must be docile or home-bodied, or more quiet because she's Asian.' Those are the stereotypes. Being able to [date] without them seeing what I look like was so refreshing for me because...they weren't making any judgment based on my ethnicity or how I dressed."

Did race matter to the success or failure of the relationship? Not so much. The couples simply found that they were incompatible. Is love blind? It can be. But it's not everything. There were many occasions during Season 2 when participants admitted that love was there, yet it was "not



enough." Fisher, who has studied "the brain circuitry of romantic love," explained that "it can be triggered instantly, and you don't have to see the person... Relationships move along and they will either escalate or they will decline... you give a lot of time to... figure out who the other person is, and the farther you get into a relationship, the less important looks become—but it is quite a moment... the moment that they actually saw those boys. Looks do count."

In spite of an emotional connection,

Chatterjee struggled with his physical attraction to Vempati after the first flush of meeting in person. Throughout the process, he rationalized that, in his culture, arranged marriages were common and perhaps he and Vempati could cultivate the physical part of their relationship. While both Vempati and Chatterjee's parents came from traditional backgrounds, they did not expect this of their children. All of the parents in the show—even Lee's, who did not learn about the "experiment" until the day their daughter introduced them to Jansen—were supportive and wanted their kids to be happy.

"My dad and mom... would always say, 'You don't have to get married. You don't need a man. As long as you're this independent woman and you're happy, you don't need marriage,'" Lee shared.

"For me, there is a little bit of pressure to get married," Vempati admitted. "I'm 31 now. Ever since I graduated college, it's been

a topic in my family. 'When are you going to get married?' 'Do we need to look for a boy for you?' But as Natalie said, I don't need a man to be independent... One of my favorite quotes is, 'Spoil me with loyalty. I can finance myself.'"

Vempati and Lee chose happiness for themselves, even though society doesn't always encourage that for women. It might not be happiness in romance just yet—but it will come.

"People pine for love. They live for love. They kill for love, and they die for love. [It's] one of the most powerful brain systems that you guys are all playing with," said Fisher. She added, "This program is very unusual in that it's capturing real people in real time doing the one single most important thing we do with our lives." ■

**Kai can be reached at info@nwasianweekly.com.**

**SEATTLE PRESCHOOL PROGRAM from 6**

tuition is free for most Seattle families, with rates for higher income families calculated based on household income and family size.

Susan Yang, director at Denise Louie Education Center, said, "Our longstanding partnership with the DEEL has been invaluable for our program. Many of our families

are essential workers who are directly feeling the impact of rising costs and lasting effects of the pandemic. Providing their children with high-quality early learning opportunities at this time is a job we do not take lightly."

To better support student learning during the pandemic, DEEL has provided more than 8,700 home learning kits for SPP families to encourage parent engagement and support sensory exploration and important foundations for

learning and development. ■

*A full list of programs and application materials is available at [seattle.gov/applySPP](http://seattle.gov/applySPP).*

*Families who need language assistance to complete the application process can contact DEEL at 206-386-1050 or email [preschool@seattle.gov](mailto:preschool@seattle.gov).*

**ADMISSIONS from 5**

aspects he found unconstitutional.

He said there is a risk of "irreparable harm to the students who have been found to have been discriminated against" if the school system were allowed to use those same procedures for a second straight year.

The case has been closely watched as courts continue to evaluate the role that racial considerations can play when deciding who should be admitted to a particular school. Similar debates have popped up at elite public schools in New York, California and elsewhere. Earlier this year the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear a similar case alleging that Harvard University discriminates against Asian Americans in its admissions process.

Hilton ruled last month that impermissible "racial balancing" was at the core of what motivated the county school board to overhaul admissions at "TJ," a highly sought-after school near the nation's capital that is often ranked as the best public high schools in the country.

For decades, Black and Hispanic students have been woefully underrepresented in the student body. In the wake of criticism over a lack of diversity, the school board scrapped a standardized test that had been at the heart of the admissions process. It opted instead for a process that sets aside slots at each of the county's middle schools. It also includes "experience factors" like socioeconomic background.

A parents' group sued in federal court, arguing that Asian

Americans, who constituted more than 70% of the student body at TJ, were unfairly targeted in the new policy.

The school's current freshman class, which was admitted under the new policy, saw a significantly different racial makeup. Black students increased from 1% to 7%; Hispanic representation increased from 3% to 11%. Asian American representation, meanwhile, decreased from 73% to 54%.

It's unclear what Fairfax County Public Schools must do to bring its admissions policies into compliance with Hilton's order. In a statement issued after the March 11 hearing, the school system said it's considering an appeal of Hilton's ruling.

"This ruling is so inconsistent with current law on diversity efforts that we cannot stand by and allow it to go unchallenged," said School Board Chair Stella Pekarsky. "We cannot walk away now after making so much progress toward a fair and equitable system."

The school system has insisted that its new policies are race neutral, and the panel evaluating applicants is not even aware of applicants' race as it conducts its reviews.

Hilton, though, said in his ruling that the changes, implemented against a backdrop of heated debate over the student body's racial makeup, were "infected with talk of racial balancing from its inception."

School officials say they cannot reinstate the standardized test used in years past because one of its components has been discontinued by the vendor.

Asra Nomani, a former TJ parent and cofounder of the

parents' group Coalition for TJ, which filed the lawsuit, said another standardized test could easily and quickly be lined up as a replacement if the school system were willing. She called it "unconscionable" that the school system is still defending its policies after a judge found them to be discriminatory.

"That's nothing but systemic racism" against Asian Americans, she said.

Erin Wilcox, a lawyer for Pacific Legal Foundation, which represented the Coalition for TJ, said after the hearing that it's up to the school board to craft an alternative admissions policy but "whatever they do, they can't discriminate against a group of students based on race." ■

**ATTACKS from 1**

attacks I have ever seen—to beat a helpless woman is despicable and targeting her because of her race makes it more so," Yonkers Police Commissioner John J. Mueller said in a statement.

The woman, who was not publicly identified, is in stable

condition and recovering in a hospital, police said. She suffered facial bone fractures and bleeding on the brain.

Esco was charged with attempted murder as a hate crime and one count of assault as a hate crime. He was arraigned on March 12 and remained in custody at the Westchester County Jail as of March 14, according to inmate records.

Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano called hate crimes

"intolerable."

"I expect the suspect to be charged to the fullest extent of the law for his heinous actions." Spano added, "I continue to keep the victim and her family in our thoughts and prayers." ■



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