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# Niskayuna NEIGHBORS



*Jennifer  
Zhao*

Always Trying  
New Things



## RESIDENT FEATURE

BY JENNA CAPUTO

PHOTOS BY  
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& CONTRIBUTED BY  
JENNIFER ZHAO

# Jennifer Zhao

## Always Trying New Things

*Jennifer Zhao believes in the importance of trying new things because reinventing one's self should not be looked at with fear, but with excitement and anticipation.*

*Life is full of opportunities to try new things, and Jennifer has taken those chances starting from a very early age.*



Born in Tianjin, China, Jennifer's family immigrated to the US when she was nine years old. Her father was a visiting scholar at the University of Arizona for three years before Jennifer and her mother followed him. It was a time of political upheaval in China, and with the changes in the US immigration policy, her family decided that a new life in America would be best. But with one change, comes many others, and settling into a new country meant learning a new culture as well. "When I first arrived, it was a big culture shock," says Jennifer. "I had never ridden in a car before, and the trip to the airport plus the transcontinental flight was a whirlwind. There was a lot of uncertainty—we didn't know how long we were leaving for, and when we would go back, whether we would see our family again, and what to expect in the US. Back then, we didn't have FaceTime or anything like that. My dad sending pictures and letters by mail would take three weeks each way. Phone calls were super expensive as well. When I first stepped off the plane, it was February, and the Arizona heat already hit me. I was surprised because in Tianjin where I grew up, February was wintertime, much like Albany. But in Arizona it was 80°F."





Jennifer was in third grade and didn't speak a word of English. She had never ridden a school bus before, either. Despite starting in a disadvantaged school, she was lucky to have wonderful and caring teachers who helped her to assimilate. She especially connected with her English as a second language (ESL) teacher and still keeps in touch to this day. Bullying was an issue, but the diversity of the school helped her to feel not as alone. "I think I was lucky because the student body was very diverse, including kids from various backgrounds and ethnicities and many children who were also English language beginners like myself. There were kids from many places like Vietnam, China, Mexico, South America. It helped so that I didn't feel like I stood out too much, but I was still bullied, especially during the first year."

It took her about two years to catch up with English, and she began to find her place in fifth and sixth grade. But change happened again in seventh grade when her parents moved their family to Cleveland, OH. "The population was much more homogenous, mostly white with very few immigrants and people of color," she says. "It was another culture shock for me. Slowly,

I made friends and learned a new way to behave and integrate myself. Eventually, I finished high school having developed a bit more confidence in myself."

The library was her favorite place, and Jennifer grew up constantly reading. She loved listening to all kinds of music and played piano herself. She enjoyed dancing, being in nature, planting things, spending time with friends, and writing poetry—even winning some teen poetry contests. Her scientist father often took her to science museums, and the subject became a passion. She went to college at Cornell University, receiving her BS with a major in Material Science Engineering and a biomedical engineering minor. She went on to receive a Master of Engineering in Microsystems Engineering from the University of Michigan Ann Arbor and a Master of Business Administration from Quantic School of Business and Technology. She joined GE as an Edison Engineer right out of college, participating in the leadership rotation program that allowed new employees to try out different roles and technology areas. During the program, she worked on microelectronic-mechanical systems (MEMS), fiber optic sensors, and photovoltaics. After the three-year program, she joined the Thin Films lab to work on Cadmium-Telluride thin film solar panels, a new technology. She then spent time in Denver, CO to work with a collaborating company and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, and her team managed to break the efficiency world record several times over!

Jennifer met her husband, Paul Chen, whose family was from Taiwan, during college. "We went to a college hockey game as a date, and he caught a hockey puck that was about to hit me," she says. "And the rest is history! We still have that hockey puck as a memento." They now have three children: Micah (11), Jonah (8), and Hailey (5). Six fish and four chickens round out their family. Paul is an electrical engineer with Lam Research. Micah and Jonah both play the violin and are in the Boy and Cub Scouts.

—continued







## Micah

Hailey is learning to play the cello. Jennifer still plays the piano and is now also learning the violin. Music is important to their family, and they have collected a variety of instruments. Besides violins of every size, Jennifer also has a guitar, ukulele, cello, and even an otamatone.

When Micah was in kindergarten, Jennifer decided to run for the school board. At the time, she didn't know much about the school system, but she did know she wanted to help make it better and make a difference somehow. She also knew that the relatively large Niskayuna Asian population needed a voice. Many of the Niskayuna residents didn't know much about her, but she put herself out there and became the first Asian American to sit on the board. "My goal was to listen to the community and help reflect the needs of the families and students to the rest of the board and to the administration. I didn't have any specific personal agenda," she says.

One of her first projects was improving the nutrition program. Working together with the administration and the community members on the wellness committee, they streamlined the operations and set standards, passing the district wellness policy. As part of the policy committee, she worked with the team to pass the district equity in education policy, which became a landmark accomplishment with many other Capital Region districts following suit. She's been involved in the years-long Capital Project, which is the basis for improvements to all the schools. "I'm proud to have been part of the process from planning stages to seeing the improvements to our buildings and grounds, which will ultimately benefit students for years to come," she says.

In the summer of 2021, Jennifer joined the International Center of the Capital Region (ICCR) as Director of Communications. She has since transitioned to Executive Director. Founded in 1956, ICCR's mission is to connect the Capital Region to the world. A 5013C non-profit, ICCR brings professional exchange groups from various nations to the area for short term trips, sponsored



## Johah

by the US State Department and congressional offices. There are 84 sister organizations around the country.

"At the ICCR, we believe in the power of personal experiences," she explains. "For people who are living in a different country, it's difficult for them to form an accurate opinion of the US without traveling here. Their views are typically skewed and filtered by the media, news, and the movies. During the time they are here, they meet with professional counterparts and have meals with ordinary citizens, and some even stay in people's homes for a few days to a week. They get a real taste of what America is all about. They also get to learn about Albany and the Capital Region, an area of the US that most international visitors know nothing about. Every time, they are so appreciative of their experience, and lifelong friendships are made. They go back to their home countries with a new appreciation for the US and great memories of NY's Capital Region."

ICCR has recently hosted emergency room doctors from Ukraine, female police officers from Kazakhstan, teachers from Poland, filmmakers from Senegal, and climate scientists from Egypt. ICCR has many volunteer opportunities for those who want to help out. In addition to dinner or home hosting, volunteers can also help with the website, graphic design, or podcasting, as well as any other ideas residents might have. Interest forms are available on ICCR's website. They have several exciting opportunities coming up for residents this year, including the new Capital Region cultural food passport. Members will receive a passport with promotional discounts from 15 area family-owned restaurants that offer unique cultural cuisine. "It's a great way to experience a new culture through food!" says Jennifer. They'll also be organizing some prix fixe menu nights and cooking classes as well. Information will be posted on their social media and through their newsletter.

Later this year, ICCR will host more groups from Poland, Ukraine, and Armenia, as well as



## Hailey

taking nominations for their second annual Achievement Awards, honoring first generation immigrants who have made significant contributions to the Capital Region and beyond. Nomination information will be available on the website in March.

In addition to her other responsibilities, Jennifer sits on the board of directors at the Chinese Community Center of the Capital Region and the Asian Pacific America Public Affairs, a non-partisan organization that promotes Asian Americans to be more active in civics and politics. She also does college admissions consulting, helping students with the college transition for more than ten years now.

Jennifer's favorite time is family time. Their family is a member of the Chinese Fellowship Bible Church and Jennifer helps out at the church's Chinese School as well. She enjoys watching movies and shows and has been into Korean and Chinese soap operas lately. In addition to her music, Jennifer enjoys art such as pencil drawing, painting, watercolor, gauche, and Chinese brush painting. She still loves to read when she has the time, but her new hobby is interviewing other people. "During the pandemic, I started interviewing people who are interesting, or just my friends. After I lost a friend to illness, I thought interviewing people is a great way to document amazing people in our lives, and I hope to leave something for my kids that they can look back on and be inspired by these people many years from now. These interviews are on YouTube for all to enjoy. Another added benefit is that I like asking people about their careers and why they chose their career. I hope this will help young people as they choose their career directions, since many times, young people struggle to understand what career paths are available or what some careers are really like."

She was also asked to speak to our local FBI field office about her experience as an Asian American. "I was very proud to be able to represent a sliver of the Asian American voice



and speak to law enforcement officers about my experience,” she says. Jennifer is hoping the future will bring more civic discourse for our nation. She wants “more people to reach out and understand other points of view, to find solutions to common problems by working together.”

Jennifer and her family enjoy travelling—especially to someplace warm in the cold months. She’s looking forward to seeing more of the world with her family and is hoping to take the kids to China and Taiwan after the pandemic is more under control so they can experience the culture and language. When at home, the Zhao/Chen family loves to try all the different ethnic restaurants in the area. Exploring new family places is a favorite with all of them and they always enjoy the NY State Museum, SPAC, hiking at Lishakill or Thatcher Park, skiing at Maple Ridge, and ice skating at the Empire State Plaza.

Jennifer’s favorite quote reflects her life so far—

*“The person who says something is impossible is often interrupted by someone doing it.”*

“It’s never too late to learn something new and to reinvent yourself,” she says. “It’s important to have the courage to fail so we can truly achieve something great and memorable.” ☺



To learn more about ICCR and their events, visit: [www.iccralbany.org](http://www.iccralbany.org)

To see Jennifer’s interviews, visit her channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/@chattingwithjenn3264>



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