

My Struggles with Self and Society

By Charito Viloría

My name is Charito Viloría, and I am a 20-year-old first generation Pilipino-American, whose mother is a Registered Nurse and father is retired Navy. Born and raised in San Diego, California, I've had a good life thus far in that I never struggled financially and I grew up in a good community. I never really encountered hate or felt unsafe. I have always been surrounded with love. My story is similar to many other children of immigrants, the one that tells of parents coming to America for a better life, struggling so that I wouldn't have to.

I consider myself very fortunate to be where I am now — at a place of higher education. I have my parents to thank for that, since day one they've stressed the importance of education, not only verbally, but also through their example of hardships in this country that I wouldn't have to face if only I would attain higher learning. My education is also important to me now, more than ever, because I've come to understand that education is a means for social change. I'd like to think that I go to school for learning's sake rather than for the grades or ultimate goals of becoming rich and powerful.

There are some things I do struggle with, however, like my identity and my future. I am constantly soul searching and trying to figure out my place in society, both in this country and as a world citizen. I struggle with my future in that I am not too sure which paths to take. What it comes down to is the battle between the “practical” and safe route, for example becoming a

nurse because there is a lack of nurses and there is guaranteed financial security, versus the rockier road of doing what I like although it doesn't make a lot of money.

I am a living paradox in that I reap the benefits of something that, ironically, I disagree with. My dad is in the military, or was I should say, and because of that we get benefits — health care, tax-free shopping at the Navy Exchange, and free tuition in the state of California until I'm

25. And yet, I struggle against the concept of the military. There are a number of reasons: For one, the amount spent on the military has taken away from money spent for education, which, like I said before, is really important to me. It has taken away from my fellow students and me; we are constantly paying higher fees and getting less resources. Secondly, it recruits people of color, like myself, to serve their country in exchange for benefits, like those I mentioned. Those same benefits that are advantageous to me also lure in my peers who often don't see the adverse effects of being in the military, like being deployed, leaving behind loved ones, and going to war. My best friend is in the Army reserves, and she just found out she is leaving for Germany in a week. She also just turned 21, and I think it is unfair that she has to spend her prime in a foreign country away from her friends and family, serving a nation that lured her into that situation in the first place.

When I first learned about why so many people of color are in the military in my Pilipino Experience class, while almost simultaneously learning about the effects of militarization in another class, I took on this new opinion of the military. And in that sense, finding out my life's connections to history was indeed “many ways a terrible lesson.” Becoming more conscious

about the world around me has made me come to grips with this reality, that I benefit from my dad being in the military. So how could I ever speak out against it?

Going to college at UCLA and leaving home has allowed me to grow in ways that I never would have grown if I had stayed home in San Diego. The type of learning atmosphere is different here in that people are more liberal and more conscious about bigger issues that affect them. I first learned about myself as an Asian American when I took Asian Am 99 during my first year. For the most part, it was a “magnificent lesson” because I learned about my culture and rich history and I felt like I was truly beginning to find myself. However, I believe it was then that I realized I was a person of color, a “terrible lesson” in the sense that I learned about the struggles that my people have faced, and even more “terrible” that the struggle continues today. Becoming more aware is tough because I feel such a huge debt of gratitude to those who have come before me, especially my parents, so of course I would feel the need to work for the people. Working for the people, working for change is a struggle in itself.

This new consciousness changed my life drastically. At this point, a new path appeared before me, one that was foggy, more dimly lit, yet somehow I knew more rewarding in the end.

I’ve been doing high school outreach while attending UCLA, and it’s helped me see the difference between high school students across counties. San Diego, being a conservative military-town, can be a bubble, confining its inhabitants to a narrow-minded mentality and not conscious about the world around them. The area I went to school is a relatively new community, middle to upper-middle class, and the problem there is not that it is a low socioeconomic area or there is a lack of resources like many of the high schools we outreach to

here in Los Angeles and Long Beach, but that they lack role models and mentors to encourage higher education and awareness of bigger issues. I would like to change that, perhaps by establishing a mentorship program between the high schools and colleges in the area or maybe becoming a high school counselor. Whatever I do, I know that I'd like to help bring about social change.