

## A Truly American Experience

By Jacqueline Pon

I would not be where I am today without the courage and hard work of my maternal and paternal grandparents. I was raised in an upper-middle class neighborhood in San Francisco and never felt like I was deprived of anything. I was educated in some of the best public schools that San Francisco had to offer at the time, and was taught that the sky was the limit with what I could do with my life and my future.

My maternal grandparents immigrated separately to the United States. My grandfather came first in the 1930s as a paper son to a man who was from the same village in rural China. It was possible for my grandfather to pose as this man's son because of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco. The earthquake led to other disasters such as fires that burned most of the City's records of Chinese immigrants and their kin. After several years of odd jobs working as a farm hand, my grandfather found steady work at a chrysanthemum nursery in Santa Clara County. By the late 1940s, my grandfather had saved enough money to finance my grandmother's trip to Sunnyvale, California from China. My grandmother was already in her mid-thirties and was determined to have children. After a difficult first pregnancy with my aunt, my grandmother was advised by her doctor to not have anymore children, but my grandmother was determined to try again for a son. Because of her stubbornness to try again, she gave birth to my mother in 1952. By this time, she was nearing 40 and stopped trying to have anymore children. My mother was raised in a farm-like setting in Sunnyvale surrounded by animals,

gardens, and fields of citrus fruits and corn. My grandfather and grandmother wanted to ensure that the lives of their children and grandchildren would not be stricken with hardship as theirs had, so they lived frugal lives, saved, and purchased property in the San Jose area as an investment. And that investment is still working for my family today.

My paternal grandparents also immigrated to the United States separately. My grandfather came with his father from Canton in 1937 at the age of 13. He had a rough childhood growing up in a foreign country and was taught how to be a butcher by trade. My grandfather's livelihood came from his work in various butcher shops in the Bay Area before settling in Oakland. When he was 18, my grandfather was drafted for World War II, and was stationed in China driving supplies from camp to camp. Meanwhile, my grandmother was living in Hong Kong with what was left of her family after the Japanese occupation of mainland China. After WW II, my grandfather returned to Hong Kong to visit his mother and other family, and during this visit he was introduced to my grandmother. Their relationship resulted in marriage and my grandmother's arrival in the U.S. due to the War Brides Act of 1945. They first settled in Oakland with friends and eventually moved to San Francisco. First they lived in Chinatown and then later raised their family in the Richmond district.

My father's childhood was worlds apart from my mother's childhood. He grew up with after school activities and hung out in Chinatown. My father was also able to grow in an environment that accepted his identity as a Chinese American. My mother had a more difficult time accepting her ethnicity because she was raised in a predominantly

Caucasian environment. My mother's experiences affected the way that I was raised in that I do not really know or understand many Chinese customs and traditions. It then becomes the job of my paternal grandmother to teach me the customs and traditions, but she believes in doing her best to assimilate to mainstream culture. Like my father, I grew up in San Francisco surrounded by people who look like me, but I was different because I was usually the only third generation Chinese American in class. I have tried to fit in with my friends, but I have come to realize that the most that I can retain about the Chinese aspect of me is the food. I know what I like to eat; I know what it is called and what it should look like.

My childhood was unfortunately really, really easy. Because the lives of my grandparents and parents were difficult, they did their best (and succeed) to ensure that my siblings and I would have comfortable lives. While I attended one of the best elementary schools in the City, my father was trying to overcome institutional racism in the workplace. His Caucasian counterparts were promoted, given the best clients and received raises while my father's position at work remained stagnant. My father eventually quit his corporate job and became his own boss with his own investment advisory business. My mother also works for herself; she has her own pharmacy staffing agency after being laid off as a pharmacist at a hospital. Like many other Asian Americans, my parents have found happiness in working for themselves. Their salaries and benefits are directly correlated to the amount of work that they do.

It is because of my simple, sheltered childhood that I chose to major in Asian American studies. I want to use my life to change the world by empowering others with information. I strongly believe that an education is the answer to a better life. With more educated people, our world will be a better place. I also feel that a quality education is not always a formal education. Racism is a huge stumbling block for our society, and advancements in race relations are always set back with events such as the Assi Market strike. A full understanding of America's past laws and social history, such as immigration law regarding minorities from non-Western European countries, will result in a fully informed population that will understand that the damaging effects of discrimination, and realize that working together and treating each other as equal human beings can only benefit society as a whole.