

My History Is Not Just My History

By Christopher San Nicolas

I was born on February 11, 1982 in Daly City, California. I am the second of three boys. My older brother Edwin is only one year and two days older than I am, and my younger brother Kenneth is two years and five months younger than I am. My mother and father then had three kids by the time they had reached twenty-five-years old. We lived in a small three bedroom house in Pacifica, California along with my maternal grandmother, her sister, my mothers sister and her son (who is only a year and two weeks older than my younger brother), and occasionally one of my Aunts, who was one of my grandmother's sister's daughters would stay with us. The house was only 3 blocks away from my paternal grandparents' house and we had several extended relatives that lived in the surrounding areas, all basically within a short car ride away. I attended Catholic school until we all moved to Benicia, California, a small suburb thirty-five miles north east of San Francisco, half way through my first grade year. I enjoyed growing up in Benicia. It is the type of town where you do everything with the same few kids. There is only one middle school and one high school so you sort of grow up together in a tightly knit community. I was able to participate in sports teams and excel in school and make good friends in the process. Yet, at the same time I have always felt like I didn't quite belong. I have always had to explain myself and my family situation and perhaps was never really understood. There are only a handful of Asians in Benicia and even smaller handful of Pacific Islanders. Everyone else was pretty much white. So for someone who was taught to have pride in my heritage and with a strong family commitment my personal circumstances seemed to differ from my classmates. Still, when I reflect on my near 23 years of existence, I have come to realize that is has been a good life. Though I have experienced adversity, with the help of my family, I have been able overcome any obstacle that has thus far come in my way.

History often seems to be about major adversity. The perception of history is that it involves conquest or domination of an epic proportion. I don't feel that I have personally accomplished anything that would warrant being written down and retold in a history book. I have only done what has been expected of me in life. Whether it be my parents or family expectations or fulfilling the norms of the rest of the people my age whom I grew up with, my life has thus far been about seeing certain goals and following the path that would lead me there. But perhaps my history is unique in the sense that it is not just my history. My history is connected to my parents and my grandparents; histories. I am part of the first generation born in the continental United States on either side. I am part of the first generation of children to attend college on my mother's side. Though I have enjoyed the amenities of the suburbs, my entire life this was not the case for my mother or father. My mother immigrated from the Philippines when she was seven where she had no indoor plumbing. Though my father was born a US citizen being from Guam, the quality of life simply wasn't the same as can be expected in California. Also having parents who were teenage parents is another unique part of my history. Little has ever been expected from teenage parents historically. But my parents have survived bad odds, and I am proof that the models that history seems to provide can be broken.

Realizing that in my circumstance I have at least been given the opportunity to succeed is a very empowering feeling. It feels as if I have already made it, and regardless of what I may do with the rest of my life I can be proud of my family and myself. We have seen hard times and persevered. Yet when I look at the bigger picture, I can get discouraged. The fact that I have no friends from Benicia that look like me, have dark skin like me, or have a big family like me is a sign. Though we may have succeeded, it is clear that many others have not been able to achieve the same socio-economic status that my parents have achieved. I mentioned that I am thankful for, at the very least, the opportunity to succeed and I realize that because of issues of stratification and a lack of resources there are more people who look like me, have dark skin like me, and have always lived with more than their nuclear family and don't get the opportunities to succeed even though they have the desire to do so. My parents told me that they never taught their children to speak their native languages because they didn't want them to have accents when speaking English. They didn't want to hinder their children's ability to excel in school because of a language barrier. It makes me wonder why it is that my family must sacrifice who we are in order to "get ahead in life." I become disheartened when I realize what we have had to sacrifice so much throughout my family's history. Did any of the families of the children I grew up with have to change who they are? It makes we wonder if the price of "success" is really worth it.

I still am thankful for everything I have in life. I am in a position where I can make a change for the better in the world, even if it's just a small contribution. This change should start in being proud of who I am. And when I have children, I need to help them to carry that same pride with them. I want to teach them to cherish diversity and not be a afraid of difference. Hopefully this feeling will be spread through the people I come in contact with. If I am not afraid to explain why it is I may act a little different, live a little different or eat a little different, they can gain an appreciation of who I am and be more understanding of the people who are like me. It is also very apparent that there needs to be a literal reconstruction of the education system so people with a lack of opportunities and resources can gain equal ground with those people that do. Because of my socio-economic and educational status, I have the opportunity to be politically active and be influential. Immediate change can come from advocating and voting for laws that would help accomplish this. Big or small the ability to improve the status of Asian Americans is within me to achieve.