

## Asian American Studies Legitimizes My Existence

By Huong Nguyen

History serves as a tool in revealing stories and lessons about a country and its people. History allows us to link our own lives to those around. We make connections to the past according to the history that we are told. A large part of history is the act of story telling. We listen and record our ancestors' as well as ourselves. My history as a Vietnamese American is interwoven with the history of my family and their stories. Let me begin a story about growing up Vietnamese American.

I was born in August of 1982 to refugee parents in Aurora, Colorado. Two years after I was born we left for San Jose, California in order to be closer to my mom's family. Growing up I was one of two children in the family for a couple years. The other child was my older sister born two years prior to my arrival. My mom decided early that she would stay home with us until we were both in grade school. I grew up in a low income housing apartment complex, Las Casitas, with aunts, uncles, and grandparents within walking distance. Because it was a low income neighborhood I was raised with other Asian families and Latina/o families. It was a pretty safe neighborhood except for some small problems once in a while. I remember becoming old enough to walk over to my great-grandma's apartment and knowing the people I saw as I walked through the apartment complex. For the next 15 years, I continued to be raised in Las Casitas. Traditional holidays and those adopted through the American culture were always

celebrated with my entire family. It was a total blessing for me to grow up with so many of my family. Not only did we have our immediate family but also my mom's cousins, uncles and aunts. Family had played a big role in my life. When asked, I always tell people that my entire family raised me. Family has taught me traditions that they brought with them from Viet Nam, the Vietnamese language and culture, English, and many other things.

My education started with pre-school at Head Start, which was located right inside the complex. I don't remember a whole lot about going there except for the meals, reading time, and naptime. I do remember one particular Christmas when the school brought snow in for us. I also made my first friend there. As I got older, I did come back and volunteer with the school. As for middle school and elementary, other than little tidbits, I don't remember a whole lot of details. There were several things I remembered doing such as building mission in fourth grade, celebrating Presidents' Day in the second and getting taken out of G.A.T.E at the end of the sixth. I think my high school years had more of an influence on my life that I was conscious of it. I'm sure that middle school and elementary trained me in a particular way to be part of the larger social structure but at the time it wasn't something I was aware of at the time. It really wasn't until the end of my first year in college that I knew what I wanted to at least do in undergraduate studies. My original goal was to go into ethnic studies but I decided later that I wanted to specialize in Asian American Studies. At the time I really believed that there was something within Asian American Studies that I can fully relate to. Coming into UCLA

and finally finishing my major in Asian American Studies, I leave with more questions than I have answers about where my history begins.

In a lot of way, Asian American Studies legitimizes my existence even though my history does not stretch as far back as the Chinese and the railroads. The history of my people in the United States began when Viet Nam became a topic worth airtime in the evening news. My people's history came about because of warfare and this nation's obligation to right things. I sometimes wonder how much of my Asian American History is relevant to my life as a Vietnamese American. It becomes problematic because there's a part of me that feels stuck when it comes to history and finding some relevancy within the academia. Sometimes I wonder where I developed my ethnic identity from and how much of what I'm recording, as history is tangible.

I'm currently at a point in life where more decisions has to made especially because I'll be graduating in two months. Ideally, I would want to become a teacher but the path in which I want to obtain that, I'm unsure. Actually, it's interesting because in trying to answer the last question, it reminds me a lot about the other paper on how people learn and teach. As active participants in society, everything we do will be remembered as history. I think these stories of struggle and successes are worth recording and remembering. History is complicated and I wish there was a way to guarantee history is remembered the way it happened. But maybe that's not for us to make happen and that history is useful only to those who are able to look at it critically.

We have control only to a certain extent in which history will be remembered. Our choices now will reflect the history that is remembered later. I can only do what I can now as a conscious person and maybe later on my choices, along with other events, will shape how future Asian Americans will interact with history.