

I Have an Identity of Intersecting Layers

By Karin Miyazaki

As an individual, I have been shaped by several different factors that span far before I was even born. My family has a huge part in raising me, however we have all been influenced in our lives by history. My very identity is largely dependent upon my background in the Los Angeles area, and the values instilled in me by my family. The decision of my ancestors to immigrate and participate in certain historical events has shaped not only the location of my upbringing, but also the ideals and morals within my life. Asian American Studies realized early that one's personal and family background is a crucial history lesson in itself.

Oftentimes in the Japanese American community, people will identify themselves with a certain generation. However, it is difficult for me to do so because I am fourth generation Okinawan American on my mother's side and second generation Japanese American on my father's side. It was sometimes difficult to grow up with the culture clash of having one parent that was Japanese and one parent Japanese American. My parents were actually from two very different backgrounds, which can be seen in several areas of our family life such as traditions, gender roles, religion, social etiquette, language barrier, and food. After my father immigrated to America, he found it very difficult to understand much of the "American way of life" and often inadvertently took it out on our family.

The affect of having parents of different upbringings on me was the result of my ancestors on my mother's side immigrating to America. Both of my grandparents on my mother's side were born

in Hawaii after their parents emigrated from Okinawa. Okinawa is a southern island now in Japan, that has its own culture and language, and had independent rule until the late 19th century. However, shortly after Japan claimed Okinawa as a prefecture, there was economic downturn and several Okinawans immigrated to Hawaii, California, South American countries, like Brazil, and several places around the world. My great-grandparents found better economic opportunities in Hawaii and were able to immigrate because of the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement between Japan and America. This act allowed Japanese laborers to immigrate to Hawaii, but restricted the immigrants to the continental US.

After my grandparents on my mother's side were married, they settled in downtown Los Angeles and had my mother. When my mother was about five years old, they decided to move into the suburbs of San Dimas about 30 miles east of Los Angeles because the area they were in was too congested. Like many other Japanese Americans in California before them, my grandparents were farmers for several years yielding lemons, strawberries, and oranges. Later, they started a gardening route and joined a Gardener's Association with mainly Japanese Americans.

One huge historical event that affected both sides of my family, myself included, was World War II. My grandfather on my father's side fought in China for the army of Japan and my great-uncle on my mother's side fought in Europe in the famous 442nd for America. However, this historical event still had a negative effect on both sides of my family, as fighting and war are definitely not in their nature. I have attended the Peace Park as a memorial for the atomic bomb victims in Nagasaki, Japan where my father's side of my family lives, as well as the Manzanar internment camp in California, which forcibly held thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Being on both ends definitely made me think about the impact of war, violence, and injustice on people's lives. Luckily, neither of my grandparents on my mother's side had to endure these relocation camps. My grandmother was still in Hawaii and my grandfather was attending college in Kentucky, where there were no internment camps and many people thought he was Chinese. He was even able to travel to the Manzanar relocation camp and visit his friends who were there freely.

This family background is largely impacted by economic trends and history, and led to my upbringing in San Dimas and my father taking over the gardening route of my grandparents. San Dimas is still a small city and slowly increasing diversity. My grandparents on my mother's side funded a private high school education for my two brothers and me. My grandparents were able to save and invest, including the late 1980s, during a relatively good time in American economic history. It was a very different experience for me attending a Catholic all-girls high school, especially since I am Protestant and had attended public school up to the eighth grade. Most of my high school friends are Filipino American, and even that can be related to the increased immigration due to the history of colonization of the Philippines by the US.

Both of my parents taught my brothers and me several morals and values pertinent to a Japanese background. However, my father was definitely the more traditional of my parents. He grew up in Nagasaki, Japan and lived there until he met my mother and then immigrated to America. My father found it very frustrating learning more English and taking over my grandparent's gardening route with no prior experience in that field. However, my parents taught me many values, as seen in the Japanese cultural history, such as a respect for others and especially elders,

an emphasis on education, and a “ganbatte” persevering attitude. Also, there was the continuation within my family of Japanese and Japanese American cultural activities, such as New Year’s traditions, as well as attending Japanese school and other events at a local Japanese community center.

My family’s emphasis on education and working towards personal economic stability pushed me to work hard in high school and at UCLA, and to pursue a career in the health field as an optometrist. Even the long history at UCLA has molded me into the person I am today, as well as my experiences from education in Biology and Asian American Studies or my work in student organizations. My time at UCLA has taught me about the intersectionality of my identity and my personal interaction with history. This can be a both positive and negative concept as explained by C. Wright Mills’ quote, “in many ways is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one.” This can be seen in several different lights, for example in a theoretical standpoint. Conceptually, we must understand that we are not independent beings and much of our life is uncontrollably affected by our family’s background and history. We cannot choose our parents or our ancestors, and we cannot ignore that some are born with several more resources than others.

In terms of being a “terrible lesson”, several events that have the most impact on the world are negative or violent, such as war, famine, or disease. Personally being a part of history means that we are also involved in some of the heinous proceedings of the past. For example in my family, the participation in the violence of World War II is disheartening to me. However on the opposite end of the spectrum, or the “magnificent” lesson, is that we may all learn from the past

because we are all related to history. World War II is something that no one should have to go through again, and we can join together with others to prevent similar occurrences. For example, several Japanese Americans are working with those from the Middle East that are targets for hate crimes after 9/11. Whether we like it or not, we are not distanced from historical events, but this means that we can all be involved in using this awareness to make a better future for everyone.

Having an identity of intersecting layers is crucial in one's understanding of their personal and professional goals in life. For me, I am constantly re-evaluating myself in order to establish my own identity in several terms, such as gender, race, sexuality, religion, because this will help determine what I support and my ambitions. My experiences have been affected by several communities, which I would like to give back to in the future. This relates to my goals of becoming an optometrist and working in the public health community, as well as the Asian American community. Being conscious of our own affect on the community and history is very important in shaping our children's lives and the next generations of the future. I hope to pass on many of the Japanese and Japanese American values I have learned from my past to my children, as well as teach them that they can have a large impact in the future.