

Their History Is My History

By Alma Riego

I'm known as the "black sheep" of the family; otherwise known as the middle child. I, Alma Jean Riego, was born on March 5, 1986 in the upper half of the Central Valley's very uneventful: Stockton, California. Although some authority deemed us as the "All-American City" twice, as a resident of Stockton for the past 19 years, I have yet to see the reasons for receiving such an honorary award. Anyway, that becomes beside the point; as, I write this very piece, my life is definitely reaching a point of knowing; knowing what I want to do with my life, who I am as a person, and who I am as it pertains to society (but this is something which will be fully explained later in the essay). Coming from a Pilipino background, one may immediately label me, as Catholic, housed by strict parents, likes to dance, with ambitions of becoming a nurse, doctor, or any other profession that generates a heap load of money. And in fact, those were all true at some point in my life, but as of right now, I think only two actually pertain to me.

Growing up in Stockton, my parents were slightly quick to involve me into activities other than those given to me by them. Although I had my share of household obligations, I was rewarded with a chance to venture outside the world of my small, two-bedroom home in the lower middle class portion of the city, and, for lack of a better word, explore. Well, I guess exploration may be appropriate in this case, because with the freedom to experience what my schools and my smaller community had to offer, it was an adventure in itself. As years passed by, I found this same attitude towards exploration as the

driving force in my life. I was curious and always strove to satisfy this great craving, and involvement did just the thing for me. Fortunately, my parents were wonderful in accepting that school wasn't my only priority and always supported my involvement with club organizations in high school.

During the end of my junior year at Edison High, my Youth Minister, Dillon, asked if I wanted to be a part of the Little Manila Foundation (the Little Manila Foundation is an organization founded by members of the community, that fights to remember, reclaim, preserve, and educate the community about Stockton's Pilipino American historical roots). Of course, I thought of this as a great opportunity to better my college applications and in some way help the community, so, I quickly responded with a "Yes," still not knowing why an organization like this was important at all. So, as I began attending meetings as the youngest Little Manila Board member, I felt intimidated, intimidated that things I was learning were only new to me and not to everyone else. But, what I failed to take into consideration was the fact that I was learning and I was never alone. After a few meetings and my own want to do more research on the area of Little Manila in my hometown, I quickly began to understand why I was in this organization and this, in turn, became the reason why I still am apart of this organization today.

Upon reading various articles written by fellow board members, as well as the many discussions we've had during our lengthy weekly meetings, I finally understood.

Back in the early 1920's, a large wave of Pilipinos immigrated to the United States to find a better life for themselves. Many of these Pilipinos were young men, seeking to find better education through the American system, or just to escape the harsh realities

that unfortunately plagued the Philippines. On arriving to America, many of these Pinoys (Pilipino men) began to realize that there was no immediate advancements for any of them. Because of the color of their brown skin, they were being threatened by the Whites in town with the concern that they will be taking away job opportunities. So, a large majority of Pilipinos looked towards the fields to begin living their misconstrued idea of the “American dream,” but of course, this was a new beginning for them in an entirely different world. But, nonetheless, these men were able to send money overseas “back home” to their wives, relatives, and children for them to emigrate from the Philippines and join them here in America. Soon, the Pilipino in Stockton was progressing. Shops, pool halls, barber shops, small markets, dance halls, and numerous restaurants filled eight blocks of downtown Stockton, and very soon, this area was known across America as Little Manila. But all of this was to change in an instant.

During the early sixties, the city was under an urban renewal craze and built a freeway right over these eight blocks of Little Manila. Everything was gone, shops, restaurants, homes, lives. And till this very day, only three buildings remain of what was once an area bustling and progressing and unfortunately, those were being threatened for demolition as well.

Then, comes in the Little Manila Foundation. As we continued with our work and educating ourselves about our hometown, it became apparent that this was more than just a local issue, but a national one. I understood that American history was at stake because a few people want to create an Asian-themed strip mall and completely demolish the last standing historical buildings of Little Manila. I began to become angry to find that all of

this happened to my people and wanted to know why I wasn't aware of such things before. So, as I went back to my Pilipino club in school with news of this cultural situation, I realized that they didn't understand. In order for them to support their own culture, they needed to be rid of the mentality of which the Western educational system has embedded in their minds of devaluing their own culture and accepting the more apparent one in which they're residing in. Being in this Foundation and being able to find this connection with what went on in my hometown, to my people, and how it affected and still affects my life was something I found to be very significant.

Everything was so much more than just telling a story, a history; it was about educating and advocating in order for them to find a connection. The connection that I found was that this fight for saving history was also mine. That those who immigrated to Stockton before me were the ones that set the base for what I was able to do in the future and the opportunities that were available to me. And I truly thank them for that. That to save these buildings and to educate those about the issues going on with Little Manila was to let known to others that this is who I am and not have this same mentality which I had beforehand, of ignorance about my own culture, about my history, and about myself.

With that, I aspire to be a high school teacher. It used to be that I wanted to become a professor at a prestigious university and teach students who were already privileged (because, yes, they are able to attend college), but I realized something else. I learned during my stay as a board member with Little Manila, that there's so much more to teaching and learning history than what everyone thinks. To be able to find that

connection between a Manong and Manang (Pilipino elder man or woman) to myself is something similar in what I'd like to instill into students when I become that teacher. To learn their own histories, rather than those lived by others with no connection to them, I think, will help to further their minds and create a sense of privilege when going on to higher education and with life. To have people see that the dream that they've once had of being successful, getting an education, and living the "American dream" didn't end with their deaths, but continued on into the minds and hearts of young people like myself.

History is what drives me now. I once thought my hometown was just one big hole filled with nothingness and that this was not the place for me. But to see where I am now, with my knowledge and newfound sense of attitude towards my hometown, I am proud to say that yes, I am from Stockton. To return from college, go back home, and give back to the community through relevant education and advocacy is what I plan to do. And to proudly say that Stockton is not just a two-time "All-American City" winner, but more importantly, this is the center of Pilipino American history and to know deep down inside that this is also my history, and the reason and inspiration for my future ahead.