

## Leaving My Comfort Zone

By Eugene Lew

Last summer, I spent part of my vacation teaching English in China to grade-three students, the equivalent of American high school seniors. For one of our lessons, my teaching partner and I asked our sixty students to write down their hopes and dreams, and most of them expressed that they wanted to do well in school in order to attend a good university. After this exercise, one of my students approached me and asked me about my hopes. My mind started racing. “What *were* my goals in life?” I thought to myself. I mumbled something that satisfied my student, but this question stayed with me even after I left China, “Was I doing what I wanted with my life?”

On June 30, 1985, I was born at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital in Los Angeles and grew up fourteen miles away in “Little Taipei,” as some people call Monterey Park. Growing up as a Chinese American in San Gabriel Valley during the late twentieth century, I never felt displaced because so many Asian Americans lived in the vicinity. Not much, including the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest and September 11<sup>th</sup>, could penetrate my comfortable and somewhat atypical life in Monterey Park, which became the first city in the United States to have an Asian majority when I was only five. That is, most of these events never forced me to change my way of life. I never left Monterey Park until I began attending UCLA.

Without any prior knowledge or experience, I entered UCLA as a Computer Science major because I figured that I could get a good, stable engineering job after college. Hearing about the high drop-out rate of UCLA Engineering students, I was determined to succeed. I was somewhat dismayed when other engineers I had met at orientation switched to other majors only after their first or second quarters at college. “They’re not trying hard enough,” I told myself. Soon, however, I found myself dreading most of my core Engineering courses. My lowest point came when I utterly failed two of my classes at the end of freshmen year. I was put on subject to dismissal during my sophomore year for not one but two quarters. While most people would have immediately switched majors, I refused to entertain that thought. I thought that if I just sucked it up, I would eventually learn to enjoy my computer science classes. I told myself that I was not interested in any other majors and it was too late to change. The main reason, however, was fear. I equated stability after college with a degree in Computer Science and was afraid of letting go and venturing into the unknown.

After I came home from China, I could not forget the question that my student had asked me, “What were my hopes? Was I doing what I wanted with my life?” Returning to UCLA for my third year, I began my upper-division Computer Science courses and realized that I could not imagine doing this for two more years. I enrolled in a Chinese language class because I wanted to speak some Mandarin the next time I went to China. I then tried to sign up for Asian American Studies 10W, but to my dismay, the class was completely full. Although my chances of getting in were slim, I talked to the professor after almost every lecture and went to every class. When a spot opened up near the end of

second week, I enrolled although I could not attend the necessary discussion section because of time conflicts with my computer science course. After much thought, I decided to drop all my Computer Science courses, as a personal sign that I was going to pursue something better suited for me. The fear of an uncertain future was still there, but I felt released from a self-imposed bondage. When my friends found out that I was switching out of my engineering major, many asked if I had told my parents. I cautiously approached my parents but learned that any fears I had were unfounded. They simply told me to work hard at whatever I decided to do.

As C. Wright Mills says, when each person gains insight into their life's intersection with history, this discovery is "in many ways is a terrible lesson, in many ways a magnificent one." My life's intersection with history is no different. The Asian American Studies 10W class showed me a world that I did not know existed. History became alive as I heard the untold stories of different Asian Americans. Asian Americans in the Yellow Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s fought to be seen as equals in United States. They fought to better understand themselves and to be better understood. Because of their efforts, my parents were able to create a comfortable life for me in Monterey Park. Because of their efforts, I can choose any career path I want even as a Chinese American. It would be irresponsible, however, to only reap the fruits of their labor. How can I remain safe and comfortable with the knowledge that many other Asian Americans still face discrimination? I am now considering majoring in Asian American Studies and taking art courses outside of UCLA to pursue my love of digital photography. Through a

combination of these two disciplines, I someday hope to educate my community about the past and current state of Asian Americans.