

Embracing History

By Joey Furutani

From the day I set foot on the campus of UCLA for the first time, I have been mistaken for every ethnicity besides Japanese. As I walk up Bruinwalk on my way to class, I mistakenly get fliers for Samahang Pilipino and Southeast Asian Studies majors. A dark complexion and large eyes must be the misleading features that I possess. Having been involved in an Asian-American fraternity for the past two years, I have had numerous encounters where the mystery of my actual ethnicity is the topic of discussion. When I tell them that I am a fifth-generation Japanese-American, most people are left in disbelief. My implied ethnicity, as I reflect back on my life, was possibly confirmed by my brother's insistence that I was adopted and how my father took me on a pilgrimage to Agbayani Village. Although quite Americanized and frequently misinterpreted as being of Southeast Asian descent, my life is deeply rooted in Japanese tradition and is a model product of Japanese-American history.

My family history stems five generations before me, starting with my great-great grandparents settling in Hawaii. My grandparents on both sides of my family were incarcerated in the Japanese-American concentration camps during World War II. My father's parents met and were married during their incarceration in Jerome, Arkansas. My mother's mother met my grandfather after camp and lived on a military base in Kyoto, Japan, the birthplace of my mother. At the start of the 70's, both my parents became involved in the civil rights movement that encompassed gaining minority rights

and a respected identity as a whole. My father met my mother's mother, Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, at a civil rights rally in New York City in 1969. Attending a gathering at a friend's home, my father was introduced to my mother by Yuri Kochiyama.

After getting married in 1980, my parents had their first son in 1982. In 1985, their second son, Joey Tadashi Furutani, was born in the current bedroom of his grandmother's house. I have lived in Gardena my whole life, moving multiple times within the city for my father's political residence requirements. I am the product of the Los Angeles Unified School District public school system, attending Denker Avenue Elementary, Peary Middle School, and the California Academy of Mathematics and Science. I decided to forgo the high school that both my father and brother went to and attended CAMS, a math and science magnet school on the campus of California State University, Dominguez Hills. I am currently in my third year as an Economics major at UCLA, but I will soon be changing to an Asian American Studies major.

As I was applying to colleges in my senior year of high school, I began to contemplate the idea of attending culinary school. My passion for cooking began at the age of five when my mother sat me in the kitchen as she prepared dinner. Since then, I have been cooking and creating new dishes of all kinds. I specialize in Japanese and Italian cuisine. This leads me into my future goals and aspirations. After graduating from UCLA, I hope to go to graduate school and get my MBA. This is all involved in my pursuit to own Japanese and Italian restaurants. I originally wanted to be a chef, but after hearing that they get paid very little and work the longest hours, entrepreneurship in the form of

restaurant ownership was the next best option to have a career that related to my passion in life.

My life intersects with both past history, as well as history in the making. Besides my family history and the fact that I am a product of it, people that have been a part of my life have been involved in historic events. My grandparents, Jack and Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, were leading researchers/archivists on the *coram nobis* team that gained redress for the internees of the internment camps of WWII. My father, Warren Furutani, was the first Asian-American to be elected to the LAUSD, as well as the first person to be elected to both the LAUSD and LA Community College Board. My parents' involvement in the civil rights movement during the 70's has influenced our family in many ways. In my lifetime, history has intersected my life in the form of the terrorist attacks on September 11th. This date will remain infamous in U.S. history as a dreadful event that threatened the safety of the all-powerful "America." September 11th and the War on Terrorism will be highlights in my generation's time.

In reference to C. Wright Mills, events in history may have been a terrible lesson, but they can also turn out to be magnificent ones. Basically, something might be bad in one aspect, but good can also be a product as well. The internment camps of WWII were life-changing incidents that denied the rights of American citizens that were of Japanese decent. Light is shed upon these dark times in Japanese-American history when I think of the fact that my grandparents would not have met without their relocation. The denial of minority rights and representation was the basic motivation of the civil rights

movement of the 70's. This struggle for rights was a hard fight that took the efforts of millions. If there was no struggle or movement for civil rights in the 70's, my parents would not have been introduced to each other. The magnificent lesson was not only the fact that dire times bring people together. It also means that some good in the form of children can come from a time of hardship, struggle, and injustice.

This assignment has made me become even more aware of how my life intersects with history, allowing me to understand its importance to learn from it. Many historic events have been occurring during my generation's time. I believe that my peers, especially those attending universities, feel unaffected by politics and current issues outside of their personal circles. Being a student at a university myself, I am fully aware of how a student who has the main responsibility of studying, attending class, and living in a dorm can become displaced from the real world. I believe that future generations should remain involved, or at least aware, of current issues or things will just pass by without warning, such as a draft. At a more personal level, I believe that the younger generations, including my own, of Japanese-Americans lack the knowledge of their own cultural history in the U.S. I have tried to help my generation embrace their cultural history by organizing a high school conference on JA internment camps (2001), as well as a chartered trip to Manzanar for high school students (2002). I received state funding from the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program for both projects, which provided ample financial support to plan the successful events.