

The Best Decision I Ever Made

By Kristine Gonzales

You know if I really think about it, attending UCLA was probably one of the smartest choices that I had made in my whole entire life. I am not just saying this because this institution is one of the more prestigious public universities in the state, but rather because my experience here really allowed me to open my eyes and ears to things and ideas that I had never seen or heard of before as well as discover both myself and the history and issues surrounding Pilipino and Pilipino Americans.

When it came to Pilipino culture and tradition, I really had no clue as to what it was. Happily strolling through my childhood ignorance, I grew up believing that every other kid I knew of grew up the same way I did. In my mind; every kid called their grandparents “lolo” and “lola,” removed their shoes before entering a house, and ate dishes every night with funky names such as “Sinigang” (a sour tamarind soup usually with beef and vegetables) and “Dinaguan” (AKA Chocolate meat). Other than the fact that my parents came from some island called the Philippines and that I was Pilipino, I really didn’t know that I was different from my classmates and, in some sense, secretly disliked being Pilipino because I thought that it was one of the more boring or unknown ethnicities. In school, I never learned about the Pilipino culture or the rich Pilipino history Pilipinos had in America. I did not receive any type of educational information that told me that Pilipinos were one of the very first Asian immigrants in the U.S. as several of them jumped the boats that they were in and swam to Louisiana as it passed by America in order to escape slavery or that the first initial waves of Pilipinos produced farm workers and scholars and that it was not really until post 1965 that America saw an increase of Pilipino professionals coming over. Instead, I learned about white American historical figures, the Chinese railroad workers, the Japanese and WWII, the Vietnam War, and the African Americans who worked as slaves. I even remember this one instance when I was in third grade looking through my history book and wishing that I had some sort of Japanese or Chinese heritage in me because they seemed to have a more interesting and richer history in America as opposed to Pilipinos... after all, who and what were they? And where exactly was the Philippines? I really did not know any of this as my own parents never really educated my brothers or me on the matter. As a matter of

fact, the only recollection I have of learning about Pilipinos while in school was in high school, but even then, it was only through one sentence in my American history textbook that referred to the Philippine American War.... One sentence and that was all.

I started to really get interested in what it meant to be Pilipino around junior high when I had my first encounters with other Pilipinos that actually sported out “pinoy/pinay pride” (Pilipino pride). At the time, I didn’t even know what “pinay” or “pinoy” meant and had to ask my parents upon hearing those words. Growing up as a little girl, I did watch several Tagalog movies and TV shows and I did try to attempt to learn Tagalog several times, but because my parents were scared that by teaching me and my brothers the language we would have difficulties in school, their “lesson plans” only lasted a day or two and my attempts then were not as strong as they were later. It was not until I bumped into those peers of mine that I started feeling embarrassed that I knew so little of who I was. As my education continued, my curiosity on the subject began to grow. Despite the fact that the high school I attended was predominantly white and that there was really only three other Pilipinos on the campus besides myself, a heightened interest in being Pilipino occurred during those years, most especially when I decided to join the ethnic advisory council (EAC). EAC was a kind of associated student body (ASB) counterpart that focused more on making the campus more culturally aware. We through cultural fairs and assemblies constantly tried to promote cultural diversity throughout the entire school year. As I had stated earlier, it was through this club that my curiosity and actually my pride as well shot up as our advisor constantly made us focus on our own identities and ethnicities and what it meant to be students of color. I remember that it was also through my involvement with EAC that I began to realize even more so how racist the world could be when my advisor’s car was vandalized by students on campus after we had just finished throwing our very first cultural assembly.

Two years after our first cultural assembly, 9/11 came and opened my eyes up even more so to the hatred and cultural ignorance that remained on my high school campus as other students began harassing one of our members due to his Muslim faith. Two-thousand two was also the year that I too received my very first racial remark. It was actually during my senior year when everyone began to find out which colleges accepted or even rejected them. This white girl in my calculus class had asked me if I had gotten into UCLA and after I had told her I did, she quickly

came to the conclusion that I only got in because I was non-white. She did not care to realize that I had had a higher grade point average than her, that I had taken up more challenging classes than she did during our high school career, that I was highly involved in more than one student club, or that I was (not to brag but rather to make a point) amongst the top two percent of our graduating class where she was not. I was not aware of affirmative action at the time as I, although involved on campus, lived in a bubble. Thus, when I heard her comment, I was deeply crushed and began to really question the validity of my acceptance to UCLA.

Despite the incident that had happened with my peer that day, I decided to attend UCLA regardless because I was really into the distance it could offer me from my (at the time) condescending and emotionally challenging family, and it was, as I had said in the very beginning of this paper, probably one of the most smartest choices that I had made in my life. Not only did it allow me to better my relationship with my parents via the distance, but it had also allowed me to understand them better through the several different Asian American classes I had taken. With every class that I had taken here to learn more about what it meant to be Pilipino and the more involved I got with Samahang Pilipino (the Pilipino mother organization on campus), the more I began to understand and learn about myself, my parents and their decisions, and the history and current issues surrounding the Pilipino community.

Through classes such as Asian American Studies 10, I was able to learn and hear my parents' own immigration stories and even understand how and why they had acted as they had. For my mother's part, I had come to understand why she had constantly pushed me to find a job in the medical field and opposed my desires to become anything that did not promise a wealthy and/or secure future. Like me, my mother was heavily persuaded to give up her own occupational desires in order to pursue a career that my *lola* felt would secure her future. As a student, my mother had wanted to become a secretary but seeing as it was that nurses were in high demand, promised a stable income, and even provided for a better chance for my mother to immigrate to the United States where she could earn even more money, but my *lola* flooded my mom's head with talk of nursing and the value of the dollar (as opposed to the peso) to the point where my mother eventually gave in. After all, the Philippines at that time (and even today) had an overabundance of well-educated middle-class citizens but with very little jobs to offer them, thus

leaving the country for better employment opportunities began to make sense to her just as much as it did for a majority of others. As time later proved, my mother became part of what is now known as the “brain drain” as she immigrated to the United States in order to do just that, find a job and make more money.

My father, on the other hand, graduated college in the Philippines with a degree in mechanical engineering. He was the youngest of his family, spoiled, and unlike my mom, came to the United States mainly because his whole family (with the exception of one brother) was already residing in America. Because he had immigrated to America without any prior engineering experience, finding a job in that particular field proved to be a great challenge for him. In order to aid his chances at obtaining an engineering job, my father attempted to apply to a place that would offer him experience in his field. However, because he was not a U.S. citizen, he was denied the position. My dad then tried going to the Air Force, but because he was not a citizen he would only be qualified to attain private status regardless of his college diploma and therefore decided that the military was not his cup of tea. Eventually my father found a job... a handful to be exact. He tried such jobs as maintenance, technician, mailman, and eventually ended up in sales. As a result, and due to his inability to acquire an occupation related to his degree, my father came to the conclusion that college degrees were pretty much useless and that anyone did not necessarily have attend a prestigious four year college in order to meet ends needs. Rather, it would be more beneficial for an individual to attend a community college and attain an associate’s degree first before attempting to obtain any other type of degree for safety and practical purposes.

After having interviewed my parents for that particular Asian American Studies class, I came to really understand why my parents initially resisted my wanting to attend UCLA. To them, my attending UCLA was initially a choice that would soon result as a waste of time and money (especially since they knew I no longer wanted to be a doctor). However, as time shows, I still went to UCLA regardless of my parents’ initial disapproval. In order to appease my parents, I funded my own way through college (and still am) through student loans, grants, and jobs on campus. I also kept my major in Biology (up until last summer when I finally switched to Asian American Studies) in order to ensure them that after I graduated, I could attain some kind of job in the medical field regardless of whether or not it was a doctoral occupation or what not. After

all, with the type of mentality that they both developed as a result of the different types of pressures and influences they received as children from their own parents about finding practical jobs, I knew I had no chance of staying at UCLA unless I provided them with some sort of stable future.

Going back to the experiences I had with the Asian American Studies classes I took and my involvement with Samahang Pilipino, it was through those avenues that I truly began to embrace and learn about what it meant to be Pilipino and Pilipino American both in the past and in the present. I learned about historical events such as the many types of discrimination acts that the early *manongs* (or elderly Pilipino men) went through in America, the results of the Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines, the effects of the post 1965 immigration both in the United States and in the Philippines, and the history of the Philippines prior to American colonization. I also received information pertaining to the current injustices against Pilipinos such as the case with the WWII veterans, the lack of resources for many Pilipino high school students to attend higher education institutions, and the tragedies that many Pilipinos around the globe undergo on a day to day basis due to the sexuality and/or occupation that they chose to pursue, most especially overseas contract workers and prostitutes.

With new and constant knowledge came an even greater desire to learn even more about my own history and how it did or did not tie into the topics and events that I had been learning about through my UCLA career experiences. Through questions upon questions to various members of my family, I began to further uncover how my own family history tied into the history I was learning about in school. My mother's uncle, for instance, was one of the WWII Pilipino veterans that fought for America in the Philippines but was not able to receive his benefits that the American government had promised him (... sadly enough, he passed away this past summer). Through further inquiries, I learned how the same war forced my grandmother (on my mother's side) and her sisters to cover their faces with dirt while they were young in the Philippines in order to avoid being raped or abducted by the Japanese during their occupation of the Philippines. In addition, I was able to understand why my family had such a strong tie to the Catholic religion (of course, through Spanish colonization) and why they believed that white skin

and a more defined, non-flat nose was seen as beautiful (again another result of colonization but this time an influence of all the countries that colonized the Philippines, not just Spain).

In a sense, the discovery of the intersection of history and autobiography is in many ways a magnificent lesson as well as a terrible one. I say that the intersection between the two is a terrible realization because by learning about those certain historic events and then applying it to your own family and seeing and obtaining knowledge as to how it negatively deals with you and your family is almost like reality slapping you in the face with all the family secrets that were meant to be kept silent. It's those pieces of information that truly open your eyes to the injustices that your family had and still may be facing now as well as the different kinds of struggles that your friends or community members have dealt or are still dealing with. It's also the wake up call for you to come to terms with yourself that your life is not as peachy, unaffected, and boring as you were led to believe and that your voice and actions need to be both heard and seen in order to help you and your community take that one step closer to justice in the world. With this realization, the intersection then becomes a magnificent one as you are able to make your education relevant to yourself and really learn about the things that matter to you most. It's also magnificent in that you are then exposed to other opportunities in your future besides the standard medical, engineering, lawyer, and accountant options that your parents misled you to believe were the only occupations that could provide you with some success. Lastly, it's a magnificent one in that it also allows you to really look at and reflect not only on yourself but your family as well and how certain events have come to shape how you and your family act, think, breathe, and manage in the ways that they do today.

As for me, with my own realization of how the intersection of both autobiography and history has affected me and my family, I have taken it beyond myself to really reflect on who I am and what it is I want to do with my life. Unlike the few Pilipino friends that I grew up with back in the suburban setting of Corona, California (which is in Riverside county), I have become involved with the Pilipino community on campus in a political and conscious way (or in other words for reasons beyond parties and social networks) and have become even more conscious of how the color of my skin affects my everyday actions in the bigger scheme of things. Currently, I am working with Samahang Pilipino Education and Retention (SPEAR), a student retention

project on the UCLA campus that caters to the holistic development, retention, and graduation of all students (regardless of skin color or background), most especially the Pilipino students on campus. I have also come to terms with myself that the science field is not for me, that I have been lying to myself my first three years of college, and that my heart actually lies in work that allows me to aid in the further development of the community whether that be in the form of teaching, student advising, or working with a community-based organization (I'm still in the process of trying to sort out my options). Lastly, I have acquired a love and appreciation for my Pilipino heritage and am currently trying to find and venture avenues that will allow me to open others to the same place I am today.