

## What Do I Have to Offer?

By Lesley Miyagawa

After reading past student's autobiographies in the class reader, I had a tough time trying to figure out how my life intersects with history. These students and their families had gone through such experiences as the Vietnam war, immigration to the United States, and many hardships that were endured while living in countries abroad, among other things. But me on the other hand? I am a fourth generation Japanese American which means that my great grandparents were the first ones in my family to immigrate to the United States from Japan. My family has been in the United States for over a hundred years. My father grew up in Long Beach, my mother in West Los Angeles. I grew up in a middle class family in San Francisco and never went through some of the difficulties that others have. So I had to ask myself: what do I have to offer about my family history that will help me to understand how my life intersects with history?

And then it dawned on me. I am an Asian American Studies major because I have always been interested in Japanese American history. What is the most important historical event that has happened to hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans in the United States? Of course I am talking about the internment of World War II. And here is where I have come to see how my own life history begins to intersect itself with some of the history of the United States.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, whose purpose was to evacuate every person of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast and relocate them into internment camps. My father's family, who was living on Terminal Island (near San Pedro) at that time, was relocated to Manzanar. My great grandparents came from a small fishing village in Wakayama-ken in Japan called Taiji. My father's side of the family decided to settle on Terminal Island because they felt that they fit in with the other fishermen families that were also living there at that time. My grandfather and his brothers went out on their boats every day to bring home the fish that they would catch, which would eventually turn into money to feed their families. Because of World War II, my father's side of the family had been forced to relocate to Manzanar.

My father was born at Manzanar in 1944 and spent his first few years growing up in an internment camp. After the war ended my grandparents took their two children and returned back to Southern California. Because Terminal Island had been an area that consisted of all Japanese American families who had been interned, my grandparents did not have anywhere to turn to. With not much money in their pockets, if any at all, my grandparents eventually settled in Long Beach where my father grew up in a trailer park. To try and get their life back together, my grandfather worked as a gardener and my grandmother as a housekeeper for a rich white family.

To put it bluntly, my father grew up in the ghettos of Long Beach. He likes to say that he grew up around the neighborhoods that could also be associated with Snoop Dogg to describe just how "ghetto" his upbringings were. He was surrounded by mainly other

African American kids who were growing up as poor as he was. To help out with the family income, my father would assist my grandfather in gardening. My grandfather passed away when my father was in high school and my father was forced to make a decision. He had been offered full scholarships to Harvard and Tokyo University because of his family's poor economic background and because my father had just recently lost his own father. These hardships had made him an eligible candidate to attend either university. But because my father was the only son amongst his two sisters, he decided to decline both offers to be able to stay home and help support his family. My father would continue gardening, picking up where my grandfather had left off and eventually enroll at Long Beach State.

My parents met at Long Beach State. At the time that my parents were in college, the Asian American movement was just taking flight. They both became actively involved in the movement during the 1970's. My father helped in organizing the first ever pilgrimage back to Manzanar: the internment camp where he was born. Unfortunately, he never made it to the event, as he had flipped his car on the highway while trying to rush to the pilgrimage because he had been late.

I can say that I got my drive and passion to study Asian American history from my parents, especially my father, though it may have even been unintentional. I had never known about his involvement with the Asian American movement until I had become an Asian American Studies major. And even before that, as an elementary school student, I found the topic of the internment camps and World War II fascinating. Finding out more

on the camps had been my passion when I was younger. Perhaps it was because my family never talked about it, but I knew that I wanted to learn more. Although my father had went through hardships of his own to eventually end up at Long Beach State advocating for Asian American Studies, just imagine how different my life would have been if my father had attended one of those prestigious universities.

From writing this all down, I have come to realize that I do have something to offer about my family history. I figured as a fourth generation Japanese American that I could not compare myself to the hardships that many others had faced. What did I know about the world, as someone who grew up in an urban city with almost everything that she asked for? But my family history is as important as any one else's. The intersection of my life and history could be seen as a terrible lesson because of the difficulties that my father had faced while growing up: he was born in an internment camp during the war, grew up poor, and lost his father at a young age. But in a magnificent way my father still managed to beat down life's challenges by barging ahead and getting a college degree; a process that would eventually put him into the work force and be able to adequately provide for his family: my mom, my sister, and me. This discovery has shown me just how fortunate I was to grow up in my family. My father's own struggles in life made him want just the opposite for his daughters; my sister and I were given every opportunity available to us. So many people go through struggles and strife in their lives but can come out of those situations in a positive way. My family has done just that.