

## History as a Tool for Empowerment

By Sean Canullas

On February 1, 1984, I was born at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, California to two Pilipino immigrants, Angelita Beredo and Simeon Canullas, the former a doctor who was a research assistant at UCLA at the time, and the latter an electrical engineer. Growing up in Torrance, a city with larger Japanese and Korean communities, my sense of Pilipino identity was mostly limited to those traits that my parents would pass down to me and my sister. What that included was learning the values of family and community, and most especially hard work and struggle. Although both sides of my extended family are scattered all over the United States, nearly every vacation we had, my parents would take our family to visit someone, and since Torrance didn't have a large Pilipino community at the time, my father would bring me to Carson whenever there was some large community event happening, such as a festival on Philippine Independence Day (June 12). My parents made an effort to make sure that I felt connected to the Pilipino community or at least related to other Pilipinos personally. Also, the value of hard work was definitely a lesson pounded into my head, with my parents always reminding me that I could do whatever I wanted as long as I worked hard. As I grew older though, they would also point out that I have to work harder than everyone else because of discrimination.

However, my parents did not pass down one important thing: history, both our family history (more specifically, their own) and Pilipino history. Even though I knew that Philippine Independence Day was June 12, I had no knowledge of what exactly represented to the Pilipino community. I also had little understanding of Pilipino culture: I did not know anything about our

music, dances, or traditions; I pretty much only knew about food. Whenever I asked about my parents' lives, either for grade school reports or just for my own personal knowledge, both of them spoke of their lives in the Philippines in very simplistic terms: that they worked hard in order to come to America so they could have more opportunity. And whenever they would get angry with me if I ever acted spoiled, they would always mention how lucky I am to be where I am and have what I have. While I had an understanding that it was true, I never fully understood why until I came to UCLA.

Up to this point, my ambition in life actually revolved around tennis: I had started playing when I was seven, and I saw college as a stop along the path to becoming a professional tennis player. I did, however, understand the importance of education, knowing that things in life don't always happen the way we would most want them to, and that getting a degree at a prestigious school would at least give me good alternate options for my life if that ball didn't bounce my way. So, I opted to attend UCLA over other schools where I would have had a guaranteed spot on their team, hoping to walk on. Sure enough, the ball didn't bounce my way: the year I entered, all their freshman recruits entered UCLA as well, so they did not need to have tryouts. In addition, I had also suffered a knee injury around the same time. These two events put an important decision in front of me: do I keep going on this path that I had been on for 11 years, or do I move on? Those two events have been perhaps the most important in my own personal history, because I decided to move on.

Of course, there was also that important question: move on to what? It was a difficult question for a freshman to answer. Fortunately, the Samahang Pilipino Education and Retention project

contacted me to see if I wanted a peer counselor. That peer counselor would introduce me to Samahang Pilipino and its various aspects. Through SP, I learned more about Pilipino and Pilipino American culture, such as the role of hip hop and punk in the community, or the diversity of folk dances in the Philippines. I also learned about events in history, such as the 1902 World's Fair, where Pilipinos from the Cordillera Mountains were put on display, the role of Filipinos in WWII, and Pilipinos' place in the United Farm Workers. Most importantly, I learned that the Pilipino community has issues and needs that need to be addressed: the lack of relevant education about our community, the injustice done to WWII veterans in the past 50 years, the issues of access to higher education and retention in our community especially post-Proposition 209. Eventually, my involvement in Samahang Pilipino would lead to involvement in organizations that represent different communities, such as MEChA, African Student Union, American Indian Student Association, Muslim Student Association, Pacific Islander Student Association, Vietnamese Student Union, Queer Alliance, and most significantly, the Asian Pacific Coalition. This contributed to my understanding of other communities and how our histories and experiences are tied together.

Having the opportunity to learn about Pilipino culture, history, and contemporary issues through Samahang Pilipino and other progressive student organizations made me question what I was doing with my formal education: although I consider engineering to be an interesting topic and a valuable experience, I began to feel a need for classes that would bring personal fulfillment to my education. So, I began to enroll in Asian American Studies and Southeast Asian Studies courses, the first three of which were: Philippine history, US and the Philippines, and Pilipino American Experience. Through Samahang programs and through these classes, I began to be

able to fill in the blanks in my history that my parents had not shared, and they gave me a better understanding of why my parents raised me the way they did. I learned about Spanish colonization and the effects of “300 years in the convent” on Pilipino peoples, one of which was the implementation of an education system that supported social stratification. This explained why my parents were so adamant about me getting a college education and choosing a well-paying major when I had wanted to drop out of high school to play tennis. I learned about Pilipinos in America during the 1920’s and the discrimination they struggled through, and understood better why my parents encouraged me to work hard to overcome discrimination. In learning about the Marcos regime of the 1970’s and the Immigration Act of 1965, I learned about how my family was able to come to America in the first place, and some of the motivations they had in doing so: when I asked my parents how they felt about Marcos, I understood better their reluctance to share some of their personal histories. In learning about the immigrant experiences of Pilipinos after the Immigration Act of 1965, I understood why my parents spent so much time visiting family and attending community events: in this strange new world, Pilipinos were the only people they felt they could rely on, because they were the people they understood. Even though my parents never mentioned most of this, I began to feel connected both to their own histories as well as to the histories of our people. Both my formal and informal education in Pilipino history, culture, and community have encouraged me to continue working with other student groups through APC, in understanding the larger API community, and through other allied groups such as ASU and MEChA to understand their communities better, because what I have learned so far in my experience is that our histories, our experiences, and our communities do have connections, and that we are a part of a larger community.

C. Wright Mills believed that the discovery of the intersection of one's life with history is "in many ways a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one." For me, having gone through the process of discovery over the past four years (which I am sure will continue throughout life) could be seen as a terrible lesson in several ways. In understanding how my own history fits into that of the community, it places responsibility on me as a part of the community to address the issues and problems of the community. In a way, that's a frightening concept, that what I do as an individual has the power to help or harm those in the larger community, even those I have never, or maybe will never meet. Also, at times, I believe that it is hard to accept certain things about one's own history. Knowing that my family is where it is today because of historical oppression (Marcos) and colonization (both Spanish and US) in itself is not something that one can be proud of. The tragedies and struggles faced by the community both past and present are not really things that people wish they had. To know that I am here today because the people who preceded me faced and overcame hardship and struggle in order to create their vision of the future for my generation is a humbling experience.

However, this intersection is also a magnificent one. In one way, it is positive because it connects you to people you never thought you were connected to. For example, the Pilipino and Chicano communities are linked through Spanish colonization, Catholicism, and the Spanish Galleon trade, as well as through the Grape Strikes in Delano: in learning about these kinds of events, one can see that we have shared experiences and shared values across our communities. In another more important sense, the consciousness of that intersection is magnificent because it can become motivation through which we choose actions that will shape the future according to the needs of our community and our future generations. Through my work with organizations,

such as getting financial support for high school outreach efforts, working on an alternative admissions campaign to increase access to higher education, working to increase the amount of Pilipino studies on the campus, and providing a space through which others can share our heritage through SPCN (Samahang Pilipino Cultural Night), I know that I have helped to shape a better tomorrow for the next generation, and I know that this consciousness will continue to motivate me to shape that future throughout my life.