

From a-Z-n to Asian American Beauty

By Sarah Nguyen

Not all stories begin with “Once Upon a Time” and end with “Happily Ever After...”; however, it is the typical beginning of how my refugee parents came to the United States during the Viet Nam War which led to their not so typical love. My parents had never even met until each had settled in the States. My dad was from North Viet Nam, and my mom was from South Viet Nam — posing initial feelings of hostility and isolation for my mom because of the war back home. Nevertheless, my dad’s smooth moves and undeniable courtship eventually won my mother over, and thus, our family began and I was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts my whole life with two beautiful sisters.

For most of my childhood, I remember feeling like I constantly had to prove myself just as worthy or legitimate as the next child — because everyone around me was white and I was usually the only Asian American girl (with a depressing, bowl haircut) in the classroom. At the lunch table, I was embarrassed and horrified to bring out the lunch my mom had packed me from last night’s leftovers (despite how good my mom’s cooking was). My Vietnamese heritage and culture was not something I was proud to embrace; rather, I would cringe at the slightest public display of it — from fish sauce-smelling meals to the ointment my mom rubbed on me before school.

Around middle school, I had hit the stage deemed as the “a-Z-n pRydE” days. I started hanging out with a lot more Asian kids, and as a collective force we felt somewhat empowered (yet misguided) as we proclaimed our “AZN PRYDE” everywhere from

graffiti to online chat rooms. Although I did not realize it at the time, I had no idea what it meant to be a proud Asian American. I had fallen into a warped, superficial culture where the epitome of Asian American meant being obsessed with fast cars and/or the ultimate car accessory — in the form of the exotic, import model (with chunky, blond streaks).

It wasn't until my freshman year of high school — when I became involved with the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth (CAPAY) — that I began to redefine and truly understand the essence and beauty of my Asian American identity. I realized that what I had once believed to be “AZN PRYDE” was an illusion completely detached from the history of my people and the community to which I was indebted. CAPAY is a youth-run/youth-led grassroots activist organization which challenged my consciousness and critical thinking skills about the oppressive systems which subdue my community. CAPAY provided me with the necessary foundation for grassroots organizing with extensive workshops on Asian American history, contemporary APIA issues, power struggles, revolutionary movements, political and corporate corruption, institutionalized oppression, and so much more. Never before had I felt so enriched and alive with knowledge. Everything I was learning through CAPAY had never been addressed in my high school classes, especially Asian American history. Throughout my high school years, most of it was devoted to facilitating workshops across the state, organizing CAPAY's annual state-wide APIA youth conference, initiating a propaganda campaign — Project Leak — to defy the objectives of biased, mainstream media, mobilizing APIA youth through organizing rallies, public demonstrations and guerilla theater, putting out a

line of socially-conscious t-shirts, and much more. I developed a deep passion for my community and acquired the skills to raise collective consciousness about pertinent Asian American issues, to empower, uplift and mobilize my community for legitimate respect, recognition, visibility and positive change through a long term and nationwide effort.

In studying and evaluating Asian American history, the history of my own parents/family and the history of Viet Nam, I am excited and proud to know that I come from a long line of struggles, sacrifices, perseverance and determination. For as far back as Asian American history extends, America has been persistent in trying to break our community down and drive us out by creating the worst conditions possible. Whether it be the mining laws, Japanese internment camps, Chinese Exclusion Act, fishing rights or any other vile attempt, the Asian American community has been brilliant, innovative and determined in overcoming all of these struggles. After all, we are still here today, we are thriving, and we are the fastest growing racial population in the United States. My parents are also part of this picture: they literally came here to the United States with nothing but the love in their hearts and the fierce determination of their souls. They sacrificed so much for their children. Today, my parents are two of the brightest and most successful business owners I know and they are able to provide for me with more than I ever need to ask for.

Perhaps one of the biggest and most important revelations of my life with history is debunking the widely perceived misconception that the Asian American community is overwhelmingly passive, apathetic and unthreatening. I honestly used to believe that this

was a cultural characteristic. But after examining the history of my people in America, the history of my family and then the history of Viet Nam and the revolution where the Vietnamese people drove out the French to reclaim liberation, how can this myth possibly be true? I do not come from a community of passive and subdued culture. My culture is strong-willed, determined, and militant when necessary. The culture of apathy and submission was created and bred in our minds strictly by America itself — and for selfish, self-sustaining reasons. This is how my life intersects with history. In understanding my history of struggle, sacrifice and contribution, I am able to encompass these strong values of my community in my every day life. It is a terrible lesson, only to realize that my parents and ancestors had to endure so much pain and hardship just for me to be here; but it is a magnificent one because it provides me with the will and determination to carry on their legacy of struggle and triumph.

My parents and ancestors struggled through endless racism, discrimination and hate just to claim a spot in this country rightfully theirs by nature — and they have never been defeated. They made countless sacrifices in their own lives in order to create better conditions for me and the community as a whole. Their contributions enriched our culture and livened our community. In the same way my ancestors struggled, made personal sacrifices and selfless contributions for the betterment of our community, I must now carry on the legacy of strength and power for the generations to come after me. It is my social responsibility — despite the comfort provided with being in a seat of privilege — to recognize the needs of my community and the urgency to provide it. Not all stories begin with “Once Upon a Time” or end with “Happily Ever After,” but hopefully future

generations can reflect back and find that the intersection of life and history is solely a magnificent lesson.