

Finding the Missing Pieces to the Puzzle That Is My Life

By Vay Hoang

Growing up in Oakland, California, I've been sheltered from many experiences, but at the same time have been privileged with many others. My family has lived in various working-class communities in the city of Oakland where the demographics consist of a majority of people of color, such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and people of Chinese and South East Asian decent. I was raised with many of my parents' cultural traditions, but being the first in my immediate family to be born in the United States, I have acculturated the most to the mainstream society. I would participate in the cultural practices and ceremonies done by my family, but never took an active role or made the effort in learning and truly understanding the traditions. After the death of my grandfather, my family and relatives did rituals that lasted for days. Instead of attempting to understand the reasons for the many rituals, my focus was to play with my cousins. My family burns incense twice a day to four different altars, and often, my parents would tell me to do the task but I have yet to fully understand its purpose.

With my high school population being over 50 percent Asian, predominately Chinese, the eagerness to be different grew inside of me. There was a general trend for the Asians (at Oakland High School) to join either social or community service organizations. So with my eagerness to be different, I joined the youth advocacy group, AYPAL (Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership). The efforts of AYPAL included promoting youth leaders in the community by giving them the training and resources they would need. In

addition, it gave a space for youth to have dialogue with one another and also work on campaigns such as bringing ethnic studies into Oakland public schools and fighting against Proposition 21; the “youth gang prevention” initiative, which sounds good but actually makes laws harsher on youth such as making it possible to try 14 year-olds as adults. Although the programs and campaigns didn’t always produce our desired outcomes, it was a great first experience in organizing and activism.

In Oakland, I experienced little racial discriminations from peers, but as my life’s journey took me to college at the University of California, Santa Cruz, my eyes began to widen. Never being immersed in white culture where Caucasians were the majority, UCSC changed my perspective. It was here where I started to ask questions about myself and our society. It was here where I started to question and understand issues of race, culture, and societal norms.

Cultural shock hit me hard coming from a city where the majority consisted of working-class people of color to a city where the majority is upper-middle class Caucasians. Experiencing this and also not being adequately prepared for college level work from the public schools of Oakland, I felt discouraged, alone, and lost. I sought refuge in my resident assistant who I later found out was also highly involved in student organizations. He connected and guided me through the student organizations. Here, I got connected to resources and social support that would help me through the difficult transition. Being in an environment where I felt highly underrepresented along with tensions of being “different,” I found that student organizing work pushed me to start looking at my culture

and history. The more I learned about the history and struggles of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), the more I got frustrated but also proud of those who came before me. The more I organized for the AAPI organizations, the more I felt at home (at UCSC). Continuing on my search for knowledge, I needed to find out my own family's history. I finally started to ask my parents and siblings questions of their life, their journey, and their experiences. This is what I found out:

In the 1930s, during WWII, Japan started to invade and take over China. Because of the fear of the Japanese invasion, my grandparents on both sides of the family, who lived in mainland China, fled to Vietnam for safety. In Vietnam, my father (in 1945) and mother (in 1952) would be born. Both my father's and mother's family lived in North Vietnam in a harbor city called Haiphong. Here, my father filled his days with school and fishing in the fishing boats. My father would meet my mother and would woo her along with winning over her parents. Shortly after, they would get married and give birth to my sisters (in 1973 and 1974) and my brother (in 1976). During this time, the Vietnam was occurring and made them live their lives in constant fear. With fears such as being bombed or killed by soldiers, my family decides to take the risk and escape to China.

My family's journey to China was in a small fishing boat that came with it the constant fears of high winds and waves, capsizing, and being raided. They would make it to the coast of China and through the months, move their way up to Hong Kong. In 1981, my family was accepted to come to the United States as refugees and was flown to California. Their plane would land in Sacramento and after a few years, they decided to

move to Oakland where there were more relatives and a larger Chinese population. It was here in Oakland where I was born (in 1983).

Learning my family history has helped me to understand my life. It has helped me to understand why there's such a large age gap between me and my siblings, why my values differ from theirs, and why my parents treated me different from that of my peers. Due to their struggles and the risks they have taken, I am the person that I am today. If my grandparents didn't flee to Vietnam, my parents may have never met. If my parents decided not to escape Vietnam, I might not be here today. The major events in the world have shaped my history and my life. I have been in a constant search for my identity, and learning my family's history/culture and how it connects to the world has helped me define who I am. I have learned to embrace my culture instead of suppress it. I am continuing to make the effort to retain and relearn my culture, but at the same time adding my experiences to it. I am in the process of asking more questions and learning the reasons why certain traditions and rituals are done. As I learn more, I feel as though I am finding the missing puzzle pieces to the puzzle that is my life.

I will continue this search for missing pieces to the puzzle of my life while simultaneously, adding to it and making connections to other puzzles as well. I will continue the efforts of the movement towards social change by sharing the knowledge and experiences I've gained. I foresee the next step in my life will involve working the youth of Oakland. There are a lot of great people and programs in Oakland, but there is still so much that is needed for the youth in order to succeed. The Oakland public schools

are not providing the resources need to retain students in school nor prepare them for higher education. The drop-out rates for certain communities in Oakland are still high, and I see it every time I drive around the streets of Oakland and see high schools students hanging out during school hours. I hear of it every time I talk with my high school friend about family issues, his low GPA, not taking the right courses to fulfill college requirements, and about his many friends who are in similar situations. Every time I hear of these stories, I ask what the school system is doing to help its students. As someone who has “made it,” I feel that it’s my obligation to give back to my community that has given me so much. Being an activist in the AAPI community has provided me many resources, networks, and has empowered me so much. However, as my future plays out, I will always remember how history (personal and global) has made me the person that I am today, and I will continue to create history for the next generation.