

Making a Difference

As my second-grade teacher explained American World War II internment camps, she said, “If the government evacuated Japanese Americans today, Tomi would be taken away.” I was confused, and my classmates gave me blank stares. I wondered: “What is she talking about? Why is she singling me out? What makes me different from everyone else?” I did not understand my ethnic identity beyond genetic makeup. By delving into my family history, I now see how my cultural identity has shaped my character.

Although involved in Japanese American-affiliated organizations, I only began intentionally learning about my heritage as a teenager. In 2016, I joined an international goodwill program where I studied my family’s immigration through oral and written history. The Issei (first generation) envisioned a better life here, however, they endured harsh discrimination. Discovering these rich stories inspired me to dream bigger, and work harder toward those dreams. Connecting my life to my ancestors’ paths put me on track, in all parts of my life.

In 2017, I traveled to Japan, retracing the steps of the pioneers. I shared my family history with my homestay families, which helped us build cross-cultural understanding. My hosts were fascinated, making me feel proud of the ancestral connection. I valued these meaningful exchanges.

Last summer, I participated in an archaeological dig at my grandfather's wartime incarceration camp. This month, I will teach an internment lesson to fourth-graders. Sharing traditions that were preserved during the war years, such as folding origami and celebrating Oshogatsu (Japanese New Year)--long after the passing of my parent’s grandparents--also connect me to my ancestors. Hearing former internees talk of creating beauty from darkness and making the best of the situation made me more optimistic. Today, I maintain hope for a more united country.

My origin story has also encouraged me to be civically engaged. I am committed to upholding the Constitution, particularly on behalf of those who are oppressed, scapegoated, or otherwise marginalized. I recently did some grassroots campaign work for a school board candidate who shared these values. Careful policy-making brings us a step closer to justice.

Being of the fourth generation in this country can make the traditions practiced by previous generations seem distant. While I have made a concerted effort into seeking my cultural identity, this can be felt to any degree, which is why I will continue the search.

With this self-awareness, I developed my current beliefs and goals, and desire to advocate for others. I am using the values of my people--working for tomorrow and for future generations, having faith, seeking justice--to create Dr. King’s dream of an oasis “with liberty and justice for all.” The dreams of my ancestors continue with my actions. My Japanese American identity gives me the courage to change what I can. It is important to remember the past, cherish the present, and progress toward an equitable future. In response to my second-grade self, what makes me different is what gives Tomi strength to make a difference.