

GUAA Contest

### **Cleaning Up the Iris Chang Memorial Park**

By Sophie Yang

The sun beat down on my back as I pushed a small shovel deep into soil around the thick root of a weed. I pressed down on it, and the pressure I placed was just enough to drag the root out of the ground. Panting, I lifted the weed in victory as I used my foot to cover the hole I'd created with dirt. Then I climbed down the hill and disposed of the root in a trash bag.

Iris Chang was an Asian-American journalist and author, as well as a political activist. She wrote three books about historical Chinese events such as *Thread of a Silkworm*, a book about the Red Scare. Though I never met her, my mom is a close friend to her parents. And she's one of my idols.

Every month, my mom and some volunteers go to the Iris Chang Memorial Park to clean up—pulling out weeds, wiping benches clean, and placing flowers in honor of Iris. Especially during COVID. The cleanup used to be small, before the quarantine struck, but when COVID started, the group volunteering every month grew bigger and bigger. It was six people at a minimum and grew to thirty on the most successful days. And this Valentine's day, I got to go with them.

I helped the other volunteers spot weeds, dig them up, and fill them in trash bags. Many of the weeds grow very tall and very rooted in the ground, and it usually takes a while to get them out. But all of us were there to commit. We were there to finish the job, or else not go home. I was just as determined as everyone else there, if not more. I wanted to pull out every towering weed that I laid eyes on. Big ones, small ones, ones with thorns, ones that were at least a foot rooted in the ground.

But it wasn't just about the weeds. It was honoring Iris Chang, one of the most amazing authors of all time. I want to be what she was—an author that makes a change. Becoming a writer was always my dream, but that was before I learned about Iris. Now, I not only want to be a writer—but a writer that writes to show the world what they have. I want to tell the world that me and my people are strong. I want to write stories that deserve the kind of acknowledgement that Iris got as well: important moments in history that people need to know about.

Like the weeds, we are all rooted to something special to us. Although my roots are just cutting the surface of the earth, they have already sunk through the core in my heart, telling me that this is what I was born to do.