

Why Should We Celebrate Asian American Month?

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First Place

When my mother told me to cherish my “ almond shaped eyes,” to appreciate my olive dark skin complexion, to be proud of my thick dark hair and to embrace my cultural uniqueness and history - as a little girl still longed to be a pure blooded “American”.

True “Americanness”, in my eyes, was not attained through birthright, but rather physical attributes. Of course, under the law I was American. But when children in my grade school looked at my eyes, my hair, my complexion and my last name, I could have been an alien.

I idolized Barbie, She-Ra and the cute little girls in my 6th grade classes who had golden-blonde hair, twinkling blue eyes and were always in the “in crowd”. I never was. I was always in the “chink” , the “Jap”, or the little girl who needed to “go back to her own country”.

But other peoples’ ignorance makes you stronger and wiser.

Around 10th grade I began to realize that my pain and struggle for self acceptance was not because I was a freak or a loser, but I was part of a socially oppressed group whose obscure history or racism and discrimination was inextricably linked.

Asian American identity, Asian American history, Asian American beauty - they were concepts that have been institutionally and socially devalued throughout history. I was taught to hate myself by society, even though my mother told me to love myself. Television, textbooks, magazines, art and even dolls were socially constructed to devalue minority contributions and lifestyles, while epitomizing all those considered “white” or true “Americans”.

We forgot about the struggles and hardships our Asian American ancestors overcame. We forgot about their traumatic experiences as new immigrants, the heartache they felt when they left home, their back-breaking work building railroads, working on plantations and helping to create the foundational structure which has come to be a part of America. We forgot about them because society fails to teach us about them. We seldom hear of their triumphs their accomplishments and their contributions to American society. But we never forget the discrimination and racism. We see it in and out of our own lives every day, whether it is institutionalized or blatant.

So when people question the importance of Asian American Month, and every other month dedicated to minority groups, I explain my social upbringing. My story is not about a helpless little girl who struggled for acceptance, It is about society and its unwillingness to be accepting. And today, when I look at society, I see we have not come so far. Asian Americans are still struggling to be accepted as “Americans.” Designating a month for the celebration of Asian American awareness does not make up for the other 11 months, when our cultures are frequently forgotten by mainstream society, but it is a start.

Asian American Awareness Month helps us recognize and remember the lives, histories and struggles of millions of AMERICANS. This broad blanket category of "Asian American" awareness encompasses the Chinese Americans who first ventured to America in the 1800s with overwhelming dreams of prosperity and success, but faced discrimination, alienation, slave-like working conditions, economic suppression and isolation. The blanket term includes the similar histories of Japanese Americans, who not only faced the same hardships as Chinese Americans, but whose history is also dark from the internment camps. It includes the histories of Korean Americans, Filipino Americans and Indian Americans. And it includes the recent histories and struggles of Vietnamese Americans, Cambodian Americans, Laotian, Samoan and other Southeast Asian immigrants whose stories of war, poverty, ethnic strife and suffering are fierce. Their struggles to learn English, become educated, fight discrimination and find work in America are reminiscent of our early Asian American ancestors.

Asian American Awareness month is not only a time to reflect on and embrace the vast history of our ancestors which is commonly "left out" of the records of the sculpting of our country, but it is a time to appreciate ourselves and our individuality. The term "Asian American" is vague within itself simply because it generalizes such an enormous and diverse group, forcing us into one compact category. But aside from the ambiguity of the term "Asian American" it can also be looked at as a source of pride. It carries with it virtues of our cultural uniqueness and strength. To be Asian American is to be an American whose history is an essential part of the country; it is to be part of a group whose bicultural and bilingual attributes have taught us to appreciate both the homeland of our ancestors and our homeland.

To be Asian American is a gift within itself. I only wish society could have taught me that, rather than me having to learn it on my own.