

## “Diversity and Unity”

API Heritage Month Essay by Camille Hocog

The Northern Mariana Islands; an archipelago of islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Despite our small and rather remote location, an abundance of cultures within the Asian and Pacific Islander community reside here. Descendants from all around the Asian-Pacific region call our islands home.

As a young Chamorro woman who is indigenous to these islands, this place means a significant amount to me. I take great pride in my roots and where I come from, for it is a source of my values, confidence, goals, and morals. But there’s one thing about my Chamorro identity that has always stuck out to me; I am a result of the perseverance of my people. Among the Pacific Islands, the Marianas has the longest history of colonialism. To this day, we are still experiencing its lasting effects. As I grow and learn even more about my heritage, the more I have an understanding of who I am in this world. Each moment of understanding reminds me that because of my ancestor’s resilience, I want to live my life in fulfilling ways that would make them and my islands proud today.

Being from the islands also means connecting and building friendships with people of different cultures, majority of them being from within the API community. Reflecting on these friendships made me realize how truly broad the term “API” is, almost like it’s a bigger picture. Despite all of us being boxed into this term, looking a bit closer and seeing the great amount of cultural diversity within this group makes you realize how beautifully inclusive it is. Without a doubt, there is a wealth of culture within the Asian-Pacific region, and it’s absolutely evident

here in the Marianas. Being able to share our cultural stories, arts, and experiences with each other is, in my opinion, the best way to celebrate our similarities and differences this month.

One unforgettable experience in regards to the sharing of my culture would be in 2016, where I went on a student exchange trip to Japan. I was in 6th grade at the time. For a couple of days, I stayed with a host family of four; one mom, one dad, one daughter, and one younger son. The mom was the only one who spoke English. I remember they'd take me to different places around their hometown, such as restaurants, the park, and different Japanese sites. With them, I was able to experience firsthand what it was like to live in a Japanese household.

One morning before the daughter had to go to school, she asked me to teach her some Chamorro words so that she could show them to her friends. I taught her a few simple phrases such as "Hafa Adai" and "Buenas Dias". Her mom translated for us, and she was able to write down these words on a notepad and take it with her to school.

Having that experience at such a young age shaped the way I see culture today. It showed me that simply sharing our parts of the world and understanding each other's background is, again, the best way to celebrate our cultural diversities.

As we all know, May is a special month for us Asian and Pacific Islanders. It's a month for us to celebrate our achievements, contributions, and our heritage. It's an occasion where many within the community open up about their experiences being Asian and/or Pacific Islander. Whether it be about the struggles or moments of contentment, it would be the time to listen to and grasp onto our words. Despite this month being named API Heritage Month, we shall continue to listen to and uplift each other's voices even after May ends. All throughout time, we will celebrate diversity and unity. Thank you for reading.