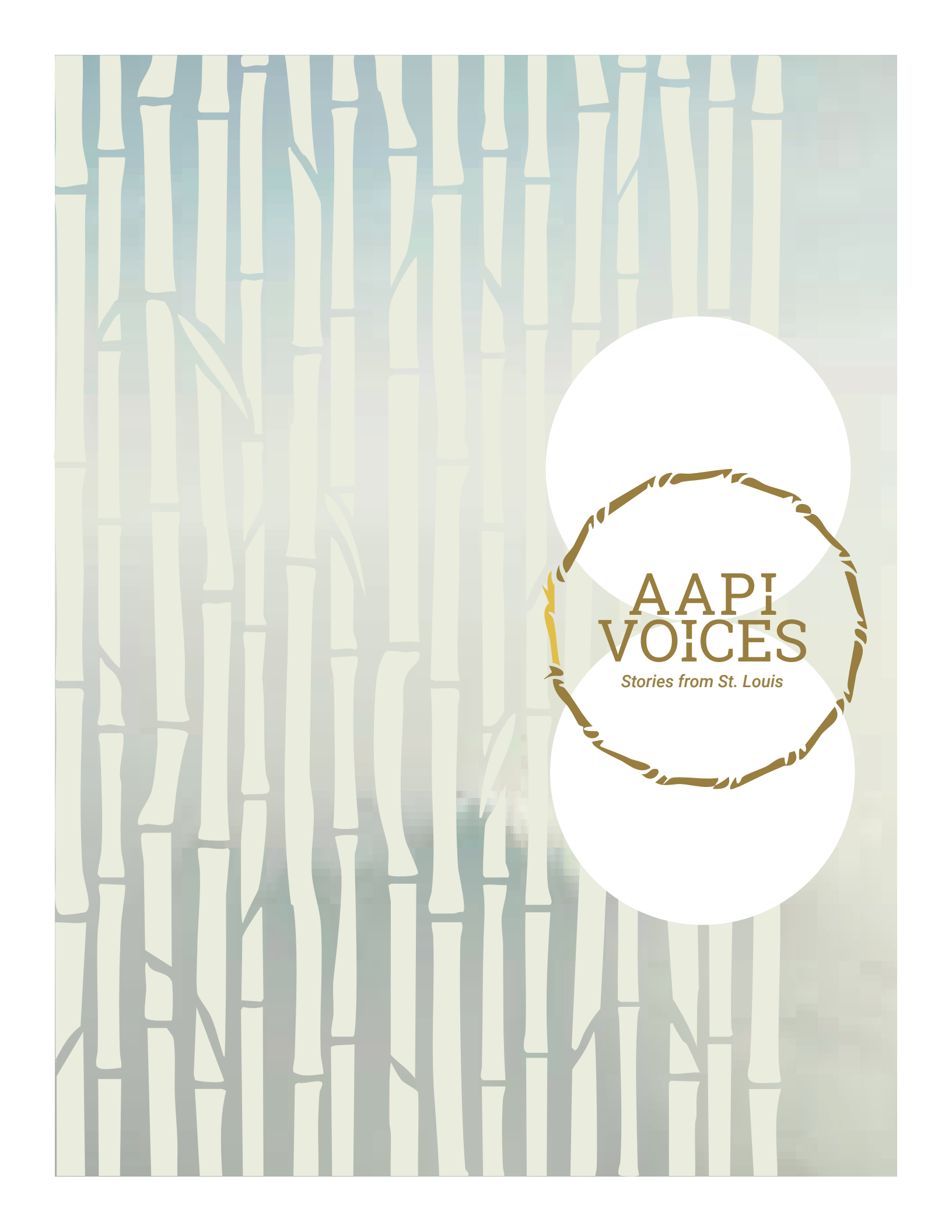




AAPI VOICES

Stories from St. Louis

AAPI Voices: Stories from St. Louis

A little girl in a Chinese orphanage is adopted by a white family in the Midwest. An American-born toddler is incarcerated as an enemy of the state because of her Japanese heritage. A political exile from Bhutan pays it forward by helping other refugees start over in St. Louis. A student uses film to show Americans that there is more to Vietnam than the war. A Pakistani woman becomes a neurologist, taking her mother’s advice that she can do anything she wants. A Pacific Islander celebrates the resilience and unity of his community during a global pandemic.

At first glance, these vignettes may seem to have little in common with one another, but together, they reflect the diversity within St. Louis’s Asian American Pacific & Islander (AAPI) community. Those who identify as AAPI may be recent immigrants or come from families that have been in the U.S. for generations. They may be just starting out in life or retired and reflecting on what they have learned over the years. Some are strongly connected to their ethnic identity, while others are just now discovering what their heritage means to them. These stories reveal the varied and evolving ways people relate to their heritage and identity.

Despite this diversity, the AAPI community is often treated as a monolith – its nuanced histories, experiences, and identities essentialized under the singular label “Asian.” This oversimplified representation engenders feelings of otherness, isolation, or lack of belonging in a landscape that revolves primarily around a Black/white binary. Many describe the paradox of sticking out as the only Asian face in a crowd yet feeling invisible much of the time. In their stories, we find that we are all seeking community, whether it be through family, food, religion, or shared history.

This oral history project shows that AAPI Americans are *both* diverse *and* similar. Within these individual narratives are unique insights and life experiences as well as touchpoints that underscore our shared humanity. These firsthand accounts of 17 individuals who live in St. Louis exemplify both the breadth and depth of what it means to be AAPI in the Midwest. As of the latest U.S. census, the AAPI population is the fastest growing minority group in the region. We believe it is timely and meaningful to give a wider platform to AAPI perspectives.

As you read this booklet, you may be amazed, delighted, surprised – and at times, outraged. But we hope that, like us, you will be humbled and inspired. We invite you to view these stories as a starting point for cross-cultural understanding and a richer, more nuanced appreciation of our diverse community.

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About the Project

AAPI Voices: Stories from St. Louis is a collaboration between Webster University and the St. Louis chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (STLJACL). Funded by a grant from ASIANetwork, the project was led by Elsa Fan, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Webster University and Robin Hattori, board member of the STLJACL. It was initiated in summer 2024 with in-person audio and video interviews, followed by post-production editing and curation. Undergraduate students from Webster were trained to conduct interviews to foster critical engagement *with* and *alongside* communities to elevate their stories rather than speaking for them.

In addition to this booklet, the project culminates in a website at www.aapi-voices.org and an exhibit at the Cecille R. Hunt Gallery at Webster University during May 2025 for Asian American & Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

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Rorke Chhouk

Rorke Chhouk (he/they) is a first-generation Cambodian American from Long Beach, California. Although they grew up in a Southeast Asian-rich community, their sense of shame around their “Asianness” led to self-isolation from the Asian American community. Now, as an adult, they are working through what it means to them to be Asian by choosing parts of their culture that resonate the most with them and embracing activism, multiculturalism, and chosen family. Rorke works as a therapist and is passionate about providing mental health support to the underserved. He is a parent to an adopted Black son.

Building an Asian Identity Less Fragile

“Everything’s survivable as long as you feel like you have community.”

What does it mean to be Asian? This is the question that lies at the heart of Rorke Chhouk’s personal journey: “That’s what I’m in the middle of, figuring out what it means to be Asian to me.” Growing up in Long Beach, California, surrounded by a large Cambodian population, diversity was something they took for granted. Yet, having that community did not automatically guarantee belonging. Instead, their exploration of identity has been an emotionally fraught process that continues to evolve.

Rorke’s parents seldom spoke of their heritage and did not interact with the larger Southeast Asian community due to historical trauma. Rorke also remembers being inundated with messages about being “too brown” or having a nose that was “too round,” which they describe as “insidious seeds of self-hatred tied to Asianness and brownness.” These messages were compounded by the intense expectations placed upon them by their parents to excel in school and be the “model minority.” Feeling like they had to suppress themselves to satisfy how they were expected to act or perform led Rorke to reject their own Asian identity and avoid Asian peers lest they be seen as “super Asian” by extension. Indeed, they spent much of their life hoping “to be seen as white-passing.”

Rorke confesses that growing up, they associated being Asian with “family loyalty and controlling your emotions.” But feeling like they were responsible for holding their family together led them to feel defeated because “it just didn’t work.” They came to realize that this mindset was neither feasible nor sustainable. Thus began their journey of cultivating a new version of Asian identity that forced them to redefine what “self-worth” meant if not tied to family piety or praise for excellence or discipline; they needed to figure out: “What does it mean to be Asian and relax?” This has not been an easy process, because, as they say, “my Asian identity always feels so fragile, like I’m gonna lose it at any moment.”

Rorke lived in different areas from San Diego to Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, where “it was a bunch of white people, and that was just my norm.” But Rorke began an “angry journey” of erased identity when moving to Ferguson,

Missouri. Living in a predominantly Black neighborhood and being the only Asian person made their Asianness start to feel more salient. As they became involved with the Black Lives Matter movement, they started to grapple with how their Asian identity could fit into social justice work, how Asians fit in the conversation of racial justice, and how it is possible to self-advocate.

On top of everything, adopting a Black son added additional complexities. Rorke was surprised by how much he cared about values he inherited from being a first-generation, Southeast Asian person. And these values and expectations often clashed with the roles and expectations for a Black young man raised in St. Louis. Though difficult, Rorke feels a little bit more confident describing the diverse aspects of themselves as well as the freedom to assume multiple roles. This, in turn, has enabled Rorke to explore their Queerness and become more confident in speaking up. They finally felt like they knew themselves, and could be more comfortable taking up space. The next step was finding ways to reintegrate aspects of Cambodian heritage into their life on their own terms. A mixture of therapy, publishing essays on their experience, and relearning Khmer helped. Whereas previous language acquisition was done “out of guilt” to better communicate with their parents, this desire “has evolved into wanting to do it for myself.”

Rorke describes themselves now as “more than just an Asian person” but also an activist, a parent, and a Queer person. All these facets of their identity inform their unique experience of being Asian, which cannot be reduced to just one term or category. Likewise, Rorke has done similar work to process what it means to cultivate community. Referencing the “beloved community” of bell hooks, they say, “not everyone has to be the same race, but as long as everyone is committed to social change and understanding everyone’s differences, that should be fine.” They have taken this to heart as they implement a new series of discussions around what activism looks like for Asians. Rorke hopes their story and work in social justice helps people reject “the lie that we’re a good minority that just keeps our head down.” Instead, they advocate to “take inspiration” and “be loud,” reminding us that “everything’s survivable as long as you feel like you have community.”

The Only Asian in the Room: Conspicuous Yet Invisible

“There are still a lot of us that are still here...and we have a story.”

Born in St. Louis in 1952, Tim Ema recalls being the only Asian in most spaces. In kindergarten, he and his siblings were “the only kids there that were Asian, and the only ones that were Japanese American, so it was strange.” Indeed, “strange,” “different,” and “isolated” are terms he frequently uses to describe his experience growing up in the city. Tim was made to feel different from an early age. Once at a neighborhood grocery store, when Tim and his brother Linus were only 3 and 2 years old, some ladies stopped them and remarked, “look at the cute Japanese kids!” That was his first realization that he was not the same as others.

This sense of “otherness” followed Tim and his siblings through his school years. He recalls them getting teased by other children in grade school. But he felt lucky that “we were isolated, but we weren’t alone” because they had each other. By the time Tim got older, things had gotten better but “I still was the only Asian in high school, and that left a kind of sour taste in my mouth.” He remembers his teen years as a time when he didn’t have many friends, something he is grateful his children did not seem to suffer in their own school days, although in speaking to them as adults they have had similar experiences.

The experience of being the only Asian in the room further intensified into adulthood, where he described the experience as “disturbing.” During his 25 years as a medic in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, he recalls a “real lack of Asian people” in his unit. This sense of not fitting in persisted later as a public school teacher. When he became an active leader with the National Education Association, he could not help but note the dearth of Asians living in the Midwest compared to the West Coast. Tim worries about the increasing number of Asian students in schools today who lack Asian teachers as role models.

Even as times change, sometimes social consciousness is slow to catch up. Tim recalls a time when interracial marriages were becoming normalized, and some friends remarked on a marriage between a white woman and a Black man as the first interracial couple in their circle. However, when asked about Tim and his Caucasian partner, they said, “oh, he’s not Asian. He’s not anything.” Tim, who had felt

different all his life, somehow became at the same time invisible.

One sanctuary for Tim feeling separate from others was his multi-generational household. Tim was exposed to Japanese culture through his mother and grandmother, who not only spoke Japanese at home but also played the *koto*, practiced tea ceremony, and perfected *ikebana* flower arrangements. Preserving and sharing such cultural practices was possible in large part because of the activism of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). The St. Louis chapter of the JACL helped found both the Japanese garden and festival at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

Tim’s father became involved with the STL JACL because of the family’s internment during WWII. Tim’s father’s family was incarcerated in California and later moved to an internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas; members of Tim’s mother’s family suffered the same fate in Hawaii during the height of anti-Japanese sentiment in the U.S. Their experiences galvanized Tim’s father to become more active civically. He demonstrated peaceful patriotism by his service in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and served as president of the STL JACL in the 1950s. Tim, now a father himself, is determined to learn more about his parents’ history and that of Japanese Americans in the country.

Learning about this history has led to more questions and an avenue to better understand his own identity. After reading about internment, he became baffled by the “anger and hatred” against Japanese Americans. He recalls as a child the importance of being a “good American” instilled into him by his father despite “the animosity... being thrown at the Japanese.” This desire to explore history gradually led him back to the STL JACL which he recently rejoined. And it is a legacy he hopes to pass on to his own *yonsei* (fourth generation) children, and *gosei* (fifth generation) grandchildren. “We have a story,” he wants to remind them, and “there’s more of our story that might be interesting.”

Tim’s words resonate with the isolation he has experienced for most of his life, and yet, they offer the promise of visibility for the next generation. “There are still a lot of us that are still here,” he articulates. As he watches his children and grandchildren grow up, he thinks about the history they inherit and the complex but proud legacy he wishes to leave them.



Timothy Ema

Timothy Ema is a sansei (third generation) Japanese American (JA) from a family that paved the way for a strong JA community in St. Louis. Growing up, he was surrounded by Japanese culture at home, but often the only Asian in other spaces. This contradiction inspired him to learn more about JA history to better understand his own identity. Passionate about teaching, he holds a master’s degree in education and is completing a PhD at University of MO-St. Louis. Tim cared for his father, who passed away at 97 in 2015, and his mother who passed away in 2023 at age 100.



Identity and the Power of Faith

“I am what I am. I don’t hide.”

From an early age, Ghazala knew she wanted to be a doctor. Reflecting on her childhood, she says, “Even before I was born, I think my career was chosen by my mother.” However, this was not a path imposed upon her; instead, she embraced the opportunity wholeheartedly and “didn’t look at any other profession.” Raised in Pakistan at a time when few women studied medicine, Ghazala credits her parents’ progressive outlook for shaping who she is today. Her mother, a writer, taught her to “live your own life the best way you could,” while her father, an architect, reminded her that “no one is lesser than anyone else; you respect everyone.” These lessons have stayed with her and continue to guide her life.

Ghazala spent much of her childhood moving around Pakistan with her family. By the time she reached 10th grade, she had attended 13 different schools. Although being on the move meant sacrificing long-term friendships, she also credits the experience with teaching her flexibility and adaptability—skills that served her well in her studies and later as an immigrant and mother. After completing medical school at King Edward Medical University in Pakistan, she moved to the U.S. for her residency in Virginia. There, she completed her medical training and eventually accepted a position to teach, practice, and research in neuromuscular disorder especially Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s Disease) at St. Louis University.

At the time of her residency, she noticed how little most people knew about Pakistan and even less about Islam, beyond the superficial portrayals in the media. She emphasizes the harm that can arise from misinformation. Instead of feeling “offended” at what people didn’t know, “I saw it as a chance to help them understand” more about her background and faith, she explains. Addressing misconceptions is about ensuring that stories *about* Islam and Pakistan are told by the people who live them. For Ghazala, learning and education is a lifelong endeavor that guides her as a physician as well as a parent and activist. While living in Virginia, Ghazala became deeply involved with local Islamic organizations dedicated to fostering understanding across faiths. Through this work, she realized that most religions share similar teachings about humanity and that the

commonalities between faiths often outweigh the differences.

Everything changed for her in 2001, on September 11th. The media’s intense focus on Islam following the attacks led to widespread misconceptions about her faith, especially regarding the role of women. Ghazala recalls being asked how she became a doctor and whether she was even allowed to attend medical school. Her daughter also faced hostility, receiving a disturbing call after the attacks telling their family to “go back to where you came from.” In that moment of fear and uncertainty, Ghazala turned to her faith for strength. She took her daughter to the local mosque, where they were met by non-Muslim community members who came to show their support. They assured her that “we will stay at the mosque if we have to,” reaffirming her belief in the fundamental goodness of people. This experience also reinforced an important lesson: Don’t judge the many by the actions of a few. The events of September 11th, rather than deter her, only strengthened Ghazala’s resolve to connect with others. Her pride in her identity as a Muslim, Pakistani American, and Asian American, has been a source of confidence throughout her life. This confidence was instilled in her by her mother, who often reminded her, “You have to be proud of your identity. If you don’t have pride in who you are, nobody else will.” As an immigrant, Ghazala sees cultural diffusion as essential in fostering understanding in an increasingly diverse world. She likens the coexistence of cultures to a “tossed salad,” where people and cultures mix but retain their unique identities. She passes these lessons on to her children, who, as second-generation Americans, embrace the best of both worlds.

In a time when positive portrayals of Pakistan and Islam were rare in public discourse, Ghazala carved out a space where she could embrace the strengths of her two cultures. Her pride in who she is extends into her community work, where she focuses on building bridges of understanding across faiths. While misconceptions about Islam persist, Ghazala sees her role as serving her community by fostering interfaith dialogue. That she chooses to transform ignorance into education is reflective of the lessons her mother inspired, to serve humanity. Referring to her years of activism, she says, “I hope it made me a better person.” More importantly, she remains steadfast in her belief in the necessity of dialogue, reminding us that, “If we don’t talk to each other, we create more problems.”

Building Bridges and Forging Community, Wherever You Go

“When you talk about everybody, I am part of the everybody.”

“Be more involved.” This is the advice that Simon Huang offers to the new generation of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) living in St. Louis. It is the mantra by which he lives his life. As a person of Chinese heritage growing up in southern India, he describes his upbringing as “normal” although he clarifies “I’m not sure what normal is.” Simon’s childhood was playing with friends and scampering home when told “your mom’s calling you for dinner.” It was taking cover from bombings during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. It meant living in an ethnically and religiously diverse compound where families would socialize and take care of one another. And it was living close to relatives and celebrating special occasions with Chinese food and red envelopes of money.

This normality gave Simon the ability to forge his own communities across diverse spaces. In India, he and his family spoke the Hindi language, managed local businesses serving Indian customers, and were immersed in society. At the same time, they maintained a connection to their Chinese culture such that Simon felt immediately at home the first time he visited China. A key aspect of this connection was religion. Buddhism and Confucianism played a significant role in his childhood. He remembers going to the Chinese temple where other Chinese residents gathered and gave thanks to the gods for their blessings.

But this was not the only religion Simon was exposed to in his youth. His mother made it a point to take him to “churches, mosques, Hindu temples, and the birthplace of one of the saints we used to pray to.” With these visits she taught him that all religions offer equally meaningful ways to live one’s life; he learned that these religions should not be judged against one another but rather, each offers valuable ways to find hope, support, and community. A key facet of this multicultural exposure that still influences him today is the value of giving back to those less fortunate, and the moral imperative to pay it forward.

He carries these values of giving back across the many journeys he has traveled. From boarding school to college in the U.S., his upbringing

taught him how to adapt, and prepared him for “being a minority, being different from everybody else.” This ethos is most pronounced in his career. After working in the private IT sector for many years, he remembers hitting an “inflection point” where “you start questioning what value you bring to this world, what is the outcome of the things you’ve done, and why are you doing those things?” Although he jokingly refers to it as a midlife crisis, he reflects on the lessons he learned about asking for support and “supporting those who could not support themselves” through his exposure to diverse religions. He realized he needed to give back and “align his work to something *more* than just quarterly profits.”

Today, he brings that spirit to his work in St. Louis city government where he emphasizes the “chance to make a difference.” His work with Connect STL, an internet equity program aimed at bridging the digital divide, is driven by his desire to see St. Louis grow “to realize its full potential.” This initiative aims to expand connectivity across the city by bringing WI-FI into public spaces, setting up Learning Labs across city recreation centers, and increasing information and resources for communities excluded by lack of internet access.

Building bridges and community is something Simon values both in his personal and professional life. At home, he combines his multicultural upbringing into his everyday life: “I have an altar...that has Chinese statues and Hindu statues and the Virgin Mary with Jesus and a Muslim saint;” he recites the prayers he was taught as a child; and he celebrates Chinese holidays and festivals. At work, he looks towards the potential St. Louis offers, stating, “if St. Louis is going to prosper, it’s going to require people coming together, it’s going to require *all of us* working together, as opposed to hoping that St. Louis can be prosperous when entire swaths are left to decay.” His goal is to be a part of leaving the world “a better place than when you found it.”

For Simon, community is not defined nor divided by any one thing be it language, technology, class, religion, or race/ethnicity. Indeed, he has redefined what community means to him, as something that celebrates diversity in all its forms. It is about taking care of each other *because* we are part of the same community. As he says, “when you talk about everybody, I am part of the everybody” and he hopes to make STL is a place where “everybody can succeed.”



Simon Huang

Simon Huang grew up in an ethnically Chinese family in Bombay, India. Even though he was statistically a minority, he never felt like an outsider because he was exposed to a diversity of cultures, languages, religions, and communities throughout his life. He went to boarding school in Southern India which helped him adapt to college in Iowa and later St. Louis for computer science and business graduate studies. He carries his appreciation for multiculturalism and diversity with him to his work in Mayor Tishaura O. Jones’ office where he is leading a project on internet equity and bridging the digital divide.



Grace Kyung

Raised in the Chicago suburbs, Grace Kyung’s parents owned a Chinese Korean restaurant where she often helped out, and her family was active in the local Korean church. This upbringing deeply connected her to her heritage—an identity that goes beyond simply being Asian and instead embraces Asian Americans as part of a strong, multicultural community where everyone belongs. Grace also finds a strong sense of self through her work for Mayor Tishaura O. Jones of St. Louis, which has led her to tackle inequities related to housing, public health, transportation and more.

Redefining “Community” to Be Multicultural and Welcoming for All

“No matter who you are, you feel like this is home.”

It’s no surprise that Grace Kyung has dedicated her career to public service. From an early age, she demonstrated a strong commitment to community engagement. Born and raised in the Chicago suburbs, she grew up helping out at her parents’ Chinese Korean restaurant, a gathering place that connected people through food and culture. Her family was also active in the local Korean church, which served as a cornerstone of their community. Instead of extracurricular school activities, Grace chose to spend her time volunteering with local organizations. These early experiences shaped her career path, ultimately leading her to work on projects such as an East St. Louis neighborhood planning grant and a regional response for the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2021 she has served as a senior advisor in the City of St. Louis mayor’s office, where she works on urban planning initiatives that seek to dismantle inequities and improve access to resources such as public health and housing.

Growing up, Grace was surrounded by a vibrant Asian community. Korean grocery stores, restaurants, and cultural events were an integral part of her upbringing, something she came to appreciate even more after moving to St. Louis. “I felt more connected to my culture because there were more people who looked like me and understood parts of my story,” she reflects. Food, in particular, played a key role in shaping her Asian American identity. Her parent’s restaurant instilled in her a strong work ethic and an appreciation for diversity. “It shaped who I am as an Asian American,” she explains.

This appreciation for diversity carried over into her academic pursuits. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Grace initially studied community health as an undergraduate and then earned a master’s degree in public health before moving on to a second master’s degree in urban planning. She became fascinated by the ways cities are designed, who makes those decisions, and how she could be part of that process. Whereas public health did not provide a clear path for how to work on these issues, urban planning did. As she describes, “I wanted to always be a part of making decisions for cities and why we design cities the way that we do.” This passion eventually brought her to St. Louis, where she sought to bridge connections between public health and urban planning.

Moving to St. Louis, however, was not without its challenges. Coming from places with sizable Asian and international communities, she found being a transplant initially a bit isolating. But joining the New Leaders Council (NLC) was a turning point. “It changed my life,” she says. The program introduced her to various roles within government, deepened her understanding of civic engagement, and helped her build a professional network. More importantly, it expanded her sense of belonging. In a city where Asian Americans are underrepresented, the NLC gave her a platform to navigate and contribute to the community in meaningful ways.

For Grace, belonging is deeply personal. “It depends on how we define it for ourselves and what communities we’re trying to belong within,” she explains. She feels a strong sense of purpose in St. Louis, not just because of her Asian American identity but because she knows her work matters. While she recognizes the need for greater Asian representation in conversations that are mostly centered on Black/white construct, her approach is inclusive. “I want to serve everyone, no matter their identity or background,” she says. Because she has a solid understanding of her own identity, she doesn’t feel the need to center her “Asian-ness” but instead focuses on fostering a multicultural, inclusive community.

Yet, being part of an underrepresented group in St. Louis hasn’t diminished her connection to her Korean heritage. Her identity is embedded in her everyday life—whether through cooking Asian dishes, watching Korean dramas, or maintaining close ties with friends and family who stay in touch across the miles. Reflecting on her childhood in her parents’ restaurant, she emphasizes the values that continue to shape her today. To her, community-building is about “building stronger relationships, like as a community...with Asian Americans and other ethnicities or racial groups, to really understand what someone else may be experiencing and doing [through] that shared multicultural lens.”

Ultimately, Grace redefines community in a way that celebrates both her Asian American and Korean identities within a broader multicultural space. She sees tremendous opportunities to make St. Louis a more diverse and inclusive city. For Asian Americans, she believes, there is “a lot of room for greater representation in local government” and more engagement in shaping the city’s future. But above all, her vision is clear: to make St. Louis a place where “no matter who you are, you feel like this is home.”

Somewhere in Between: A Journey of Adoption and Adaptation

“My experience is [an] Asian American experience.”

*Anxious, excited
Meeting my new parents soon
Oh my gosh, they’re white*

Adopted at age eight from an orphanage in Jinchang (Gansu Province), China, Claire Lott grew up in Valley Park, south of St. Louis. The first time she met her parents at the airport, was, in her words, a “culture shock” because she had never seen white people before. The haiku above describes the nervousness and excitement she felt upon first meeting them. Upon arriving at their house in Missouri, she remembers thinking, “This is our home. We have a car,” and realizing that here, you *have* things, “things that you can call your own.”

Claire’s journey has neither been easy nor simple. Like other Asian adoptees, she has struggled with not knowing her cultural history or even her health or genetic history. Moreover, she reminds us that “all adoptees’ experiences are so different, just like any Asian American experience is different.” For her, identity is inextricably tied to being a transracial adoptee. As she explains, “our Asian American identity is solely because we are adopted, not because we wanted to immigrate.” That is to say, “the *way* we became American is very different.” This is where her story diverges from other Asian Americans and yet, plays a pivotal role in her identity formation.

Claire has memories of growing up alongside her orphanage sisters in China. There, she went to school, played games, completed chores, and helped care for the younger children. Certain memories stand out; she recalls, once “we weren’t supposed to do this, but we stole matches from the drawer and we would go all the way to the back of the orphanage, and we would find trash and little sticks, and make our own little bonfire... we were wild.”

After Claire was adopted and moved to the U.S., she struggled to learn English and adapt to her new surroundings, often feeling “isolated”. The language barrier meant she didn’t always understand jokes that other people made. To facilitate her transition, her parents joined a Chinese church where she was exposed to more of her cultural heritage. But as she became acclimated to the U.S., she gradually lost her connection to Chinese language and culture.

Having been raised by non-Chinese parents, she had few shared experiences with other Asian Americans, leaving her feeling lost at times. For some, ancestry is an important part of one’s cultural identity and for others, the decision to immigrate is a defining process. As an adoptee, Claire could relate to neither.

This search for belonging impacted Claire’s college experience and proved to be a critical turning point in her self-discovery. Initially, she attended Missouri Baptist University but ultimately, she transferred because she was tired of being one of the only Asians there. Diversity turned out to be important to her because “it makes me feel like I belong... without any other Asians around me, you stand out a lot, and then it’s just uncomfortable.” For this reason, she moved to University of Missouri-Columbia and studied psychology, sociology and social work along with Chinese language, toying with the idea of working in the field of international adoption. She also joined the Asian Christian Fellowship and met what would become lifelong friends. There, she not only found community with other Asian Americans but also began sharing her adoption experience with others, something she had previously avoided. As she explains, “sharing my experience with close friends really helped me understand my own adoption journey in realizing how different it is from other people’s experiences.”

Claire characterizes her adoption experience as being “somewhere in between; you don’t fit fully in with others.” To give other Asian adoptees the space to process their journey, she co-founded the STL Adoption Group. Her motivation to start this group came from her own experiences and understanding that “everyone’s going through...their Asian American identity” where some may not be ready to embrace their cultural roots yet. The group gives adoptees a place not just to feel seen as adoptees, but just as importantly allows them to share their lives outside of adoption. After all, Claire says, “we’re people too, who are experiencing different challenges of being adults and just navigating life like everyone else.” Though Claire did not end up in the field of adoption professionally, she found a way to provide a forum where adoptees can bond with a community of others where “understanding comes from not having to explain.”

Claire’s story as a transracial adoptee is one that she now embraces and shares. As she says, “my experience is [an] Asian American experience.” Perhaps her journey will inspire others to be open minded and, when they meet someone from a different background, to simply “listen.”



Claire Lott

Claire Lott spent her formative years in an orphanage in Gansu Province, China, before being adopted by American parents at the age of eight and growing up in Valley Park, Missouri. Often left feeling “isolated” from both her Asian American peers and non-diverse spaces where she didn’t fully fit in, she describes her adoptee experience as “somewhere in between”. The search for belonging inspired her to create a support network for Asian adoptees to share their lives with each other. Today, Claire is settled in St. Louis and enjoys the logical nature of her work at a payroll company.



Nobuko Anne Mitori

Born in Los Angeles but interned at an early age during World War II, Nobuko Anne Mitori both showcases and embodies the spirit of inclusivity in her story and her outlook on life. Having spent much of her life moving between different US cities and navigating between multiple cultural contexts, Anne connects to her Japanese heritage by building a community that is expansive and respectful of differences. Her involvement with the Japanese American Citizens League in St. Louis (STL JACL) was driven by their ethos to care for people outside the majority, having herself been in that position during the internment camps.

From Trauma to Hope: Towards a Future of Acceptance

“So, I’m just all for inclusivity. I just don’t understand why people can’t get it.”

Nobuko “Anne” Mitori describes herself as “sort of between a *nisei* and a *sansei*.” Born in Los Angeles to an *Issei* (first generation Japanese immigrant) father and a *Nisei* (second generation Japanese immigrant) mother, she grew up surrounded by a rich Japanese community near Little Tokyo. Because of her parents’ hardworking schedules, she was cared for by a loving Japanese nanny who taught her to read “simple Japanese books” until she had to leave her at the age of four when World War II started. Her parents moved to Sacramento to be with extended family before they were ordered into the Tule Lake, California internment camp.

Life inside the camp for a young child was full of confusion, distress, and shame. Anne recalls the experience vividly, namely in her lack of ability to speak English due to her almost exclusive exposure to Japanese as her first language. It was all she knew, but her lack of English made her a target for bullying by her cousins. This forced Anne to learn English quickly, although it came at the cost of her Japanese linguistic ability. What had once shaped her relationship with her heritage came to remove her from the conversation entirely. Although her parent’s still spoke Japanese at home, she recalls that, “they never tried to force me to speak Japanese again because I just refused to do it.”

Thankfully, due to her father’s fluency in English and Japanese, he managed to get his family out of the camps early to work for the American military. They moved from camp to a Czech Hungarian neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio, where her mother ran a halfway house providing food and shelter for Japanese people trying to regain footing back into society. Two years later, her father was transferred to Washington, DC, where Anne grew up. In a few short years, Anne’s family had been moved from one end of the country to the other. Living in DC connected her with people from all walks of life. In fact, it was in high school when Anne met one of her closest friends, Svetlana, who was from Yugoslavia. Her exposure to other cultures allowed her to recognize the value in diverse perspectives. As she said, “I like variety. I like to know stories about all kinds of people.”

Through the experience of living in displacement, Anne found it was necessary to mix in with the rest of American society. While her parents spoke Japanese and cooked Japanese cuisine at home, Anne remarks, “I was very comfortable in the Caucasian community, and I didn’t think too much of myself as Asian.” In 1959, after graduating from Lynchburg College in Virginia, Anne’s father was transferred once more to St. Louis, Missouri. Growing up on the East Coast, which she describes as “hurry up, hurry up, hurry up,” Anne had to adjust to Midwestern mannerisms. And while she recalls that at first, “some people didn’t know what to make of me,” they were nonetheless welcoming and eventually didn’t seem to care where she was from. Today, she muses, “we’re not so much of an oddity.”

On her path to reconnecting with her heritage, Anne came to discover pride in the resilience of the Japanese Americans following internment. She remembers, “What they had to go through, what they had to give up, and how coming back out of camp was so traumatic for them.” In the uncertainty that festered after the internment camps closed and the war ended, Anne acknowledges the anxiety Japanese Americans felt about “whether they would be vilified or whether they would be accepted” in American society. But as people spoke out against that uncertainty, Anne was able to gain a new sense of self-identity in a shared struggle. She describes, “I’m just amazed at how resilient they were.”

Sadly, Anne laments that she was never able to regain fluency in Japanese, though she tried to take classes over the years. Perhaps the trauma of her early life created an insurmountable mental block. Yet despite the struggles of the Japanese American diaspora in the Midwest, Anne finds hope in the younger generation’s increased sense of inclusivity. As a grandmother of biracial granddaughters, “I just give them credit, because I think they are so accepting of everybody.” But more than that, she is inspired by this generation’s willingness to speak up and advocate for themselves. This is especially poignant in the wake of current day anti-Asian violence, prompting Anne to reveal her belief that Asian communities need to come together and “show their strength.” The refreshing sight of the increasingly diverse and vocal generation of Asians gives Anne a new hope towards a future of acceptance, where we may leave behind the fear and hate of the past.

Reclaiming the “PI” in AAPI

“I know who I am, and as I move around in the world, regardless of where I am, I know I will always be an Islander.”

Joe Pangelinan has a strong sense of identity and pride as a Pacific Islander. His uncle once said that “if you’ve listened to the music, if you’ve eaten the food from the land, if you’ve enjoyed the breeze and swam in the water and sung the songs and told the stories, that’s who you are; and wherever you go in the world, you will always know that you’re an Islander.” For Joe, these images have accompanied him across his global journey and continue to define who he is today in St. Louis.

Born on the Islands of Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia, Joe spent his formative years going back and forth between Chuuk, his mother’s island, and Saipan, his father’s island. His childhood was rustic; he attended school on his mother’s island in traditional meeting houses called “*uul*.” There, his classmates sat on the floor in a line and wrote their lessons on pieces of paper using the backs of students in front of them as support surfaces due to the lack of tables. The island did not have electricity, and he remembers doing homework as close as possible to the dim light of a lamp fueled by precious kerosene.

Joe’s mother left school after second grade to help her family harvest “copra”, the cash crop which is the source of coconut oil. So, when Joe was 4 years old, she instigated sending him to Saipan, where he found the education system to be more “developed and established,” due to influence from Japan and the U.S. In fact, Joe’s multilingual father spoke Japanese and English as well as his indigenous language of Chamorro. Joe attended a Catholic high school in Chuuk and eventually landed in a small town on the border of Kansas and Missouri as part of the Islander diaspora to pursue higher education abroad, often to Catholic colleges and universities. In the States, he found everything to be “bigger and wider,” from the farms to the mosquitos. In his school’s cafeteria he thought vending machines were magical but couldn’t believe fish patties were considered real fish. Having an uncle diagnosed with schizophrenia sparked an interest in psychology and he completed graduate studies in counseling.

Despite his strong grounding as an Islander, Joe describes being “assigned” to the category

of “Asian American” here, a term that was completely novel. He explains that at home, whether of indigenous, Japanese, German, or Spanish descent, everyone primarily identified as Islanders because “that’s their culture, their language, the way in which they think and see the world.” A minority within a minority, he wondered where he fit in among this landscape of ethnic identities, especially in the Midwest where the language to discern between Asians and Islanders did not exist.

But to Joe, this distinction is important and amplifies the visibility of the “PI” in AAPI. He shares that “I don’t see the world necessarily the same” as Asians from other parts of the world, acknowledging the tensions that exist between the Japanese and those they colonized, such as Saipan and Korea. Being placed under the label “Asian” felt like being “funneled” into a category and a stereotype where he did not really belong. Indeed, he feels more akin to those from Polynesia because they come from Hawaii, Tonga, Tahiti—places that share common practices such as storytelling as the primary method of cultural preservation and transmission rather than the written word. Joe says this distinction shapes “the way I carry myself, and how I see the world...really through the lens of my own story and my own history and my people.”

Still, Joe recognizes the complexities of terminology, noting that even “Pacific Islander” encompasses a huge swath of diverse island cultures, and “Native Hawaiian” has also recently been added to the mix. At the same time there is an undeniable affinity among AAPI cultures and Joe admits that if he feels homesick, he “seeks out Filipino or Japanese food,” as rice became a staple in the Islander diet during the pre-World War II Japanese occupation of Micronesia.

This is all part of multicultural Islander identity that he hopes to pass onto his children, such that they will always be Islanders even though they were born in the U.S, and the Islands will still welcome them. The unique connection that Joe has to the Islands remains a part of who he is and is one of the major reasons for his work promoting diversity and inclusion. Employed by a school of medicine in an urban area, his goal is to create environments where *everyone* feels like they are part of a community, regardless of where they came from. He reminds us that we are often told we can’t be different, but “different is not bad... [it’s] actually our strength.”



Joe Pangelinan

Dr. Joseph Pangelinan grew up between the Chuuk Islands of the Federated States of Micronesia and Saipan in the nearby Northern Mariana Islands, a region greatly influenced by Spanish, German, Japanese, and U.S. occupation over the years. After attending a Jesuit high school in Chuuk, he pursued Catholic-led higher education in Kansas. There he studied psychology, saw snowfall for the first time, and came to terms with the fact that “AAPI” is realistically mostly “Asian” in the U.S. A proud Islander who found his community online during COVID-19, Joe is director of team engagement & culture and faculty at WashU Medicine Orthopaedics.



Danny Poon

Danny Poon’s parents moved from Hong Kong to New York where he was born before settling into St. Louis when he was eight. It was here that he found community in the Chinese Christian church which embraced his Asian American heritage but rebuffed his Queer identity. This tension taught Danny to value authenticity, learning how to be proud of both identities. He now focuses on building solidarity with other marginalized communities, understanding the strength of unity and diversity. As the founder of STL Pan Asian Collective (PAC), he is a community leader who advocates for social justice with other young professionals.

From Acceptability to Authenticity: Owing Your Own Asian American Experience

“What would it look like for us to feel completely at peace being Asian and being Queer?”

“The best way to really own your Asian American identity is to be authentic in saying: ‘This is my Asian American experience. It’s going to look different than everyone else’s.’” The search for authenticity structures much of Danny’s journey towards the ongoing process of navigating his identity and finding peace with being Asian and Queer. He has had to ask hard questions about his authentic self, in order to help build a strong multicultural Asian American community in St. Louis where he could embrace his intersectional identity.

For Danny, this journey has been complicated and yet deeply meaningful. In the beginning, he joined his high school’s Club Asia, participating in activities that celebrated his heritage superficially because “it felt like the most acceptable form of being Asian” even though they “didn’t really mean anything.” Danny found more significant connections in a Chinese Christian church where he felt at peace with his identity simply because he could enjoy “different Asian cultures without having to explain anything.” In other words, he didn’t have to perform the labor of *explaining* his Asian-ness to others; rather, he could just be.

The church played a pivotal role in Danny’s quest to realize his authentic self. On the one hand, it offered a sanctuary that allowed him to become comfortable with his ethnicity. In college at Mizzou, he joined the Asian Christian Fellowship. This was the “the first place where people intentionally talked about faith, race, and identity. Asian Christian Fellowship was where I probably did start developing a sense of pride in my identity.” On the other hand, that same space kept him from exploring another key facet of himself: being Queer. Because of the church’s conservative atmosphere, Danny felt like his Queer identity was not only stifled but actively rejected. At one point he was told by his pastor that if he did not “figure it out,” then “we can’t have you come back to us anymore.” The judgement from his spiritual community was so difficult that he “really shut down processing anything about being Queer.”

Just in the last few years Danny finally began to feel comfortable with his Queer identity, and only recently started thinking about “how the two come together.” He describes this journey as feeling “like a teenager again, trying to process.” Early on, he found himself “pulling away from a lot of Queer spaces.” He now finds himself questioning why he doesn’t have Queer friends; is it from internalized homophobia, or whether it is “actually just lack of space for the Queer community here, especially as a Queer Asian American?” Now that he is in a place where he wants to explore his Queer identity, he has struggled to find full belonging. He describes it as being “hard to find Queer spaces that I can fit into...I have found spaces for Queer men, but it’s usually very white. It just always feels like there’s a part of me that is not being seen there.”

Danny sought dialogue with others to disentangle these feelings. His Korean American friend described himself as embracing his Queerness rather than his Asian identity, admitting he had never had anyone talk to him about that before. Danny began to question why Queer and Asian identities were seen as mutually exclusive. He wondered “if there was just a lot of trauma from the homophobia within Asian culture,” that not only made it hard for Queer Asians to *imagine* the two identities coming together, but also made them “not *want* to see the two come together.” Danny asks himself as much as others: “What [would] it look like for us to feel completely at peace being Asian *and* being Queer?”

This journey of coming to terms with his dual identity has inspired him to create spaces for belonging and inclusion not only for Asian Americans in St. Louis, but also to form alliances with other groups fighting oppression. Danny says that seeing hate crimes against Asian Americans during the pandemic was the first time he really had to confront the reality of systemic injustice against the AAPI population. Looking to make a difference in the #stopAsianhate movement, he reveals that he learned valuable lessons about grassroots organizing and community building from the Black community. Danny states: “I will always believe that my Asian American identity is intertwined with all the [marginalized] communities. Because of the Black community, I feel like I really understand more fully who I am as an Asian American.” In this way, Danny is continually finding empowerment in differences, discovering peace within his authentic self, and helping to build a stronger, more engaged community.

Sharing Culture, Forging Connection Through the Dances of India

“Dancing really does take you to a different level of being.”

From the age of five, Nartana Premachandra knew she was destined to become a dancer. By seven, she had already performed on a local KDSK children’s show called Corky’s Colorama. Years later, people still remembered her from that show. Today, it’s no surprise that Nartana is the president of Dances of India, one of the oldest Indian dance companies in the United States. Founded by her parents, Asha and the late Dr. B.N. Premachandra, the company blends the artistry of classic dance with the rich tradition of Indian storytelling. Reflecting on her journey, Nartana, who is also a writer and storyteller, is grateful for the unwavering support she received from her parents. Acknowledging that many Indian parents push their kids to become doctors or engineers, that was not the case for Nartana. “They always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted to do,” she recalls.

Nartana’s passion for dance mirrors her mother’s lifelong devotion to the art form. For Asha, who serves as the company’s artistic director, dance has always been her “life’s ambition.” Nartana fondly shares a story her grandmother told her about Asha dancing in the living room to the radio the day her younger brother was born. Asha’s love for dance is deeply tied to her appreciation for art, which she believes keeps the mind at peace. She explains, “Dance is something I do every day because it’s something that AI can’t steal from you—because it’s just you dancing.” Asha’s passion for dance even inspired her husband, who shared her love for art and music. Moved by his wife’s talent, he co-founded Dances of India with her, not only to showcase the beauty of classic Indian dance but also to introduce their cultural heritage to the St. Louis community.

In many ways, Dances of India has been a gift—to themselves, their heritage, and the city they now call home. Like many immigrants, they faced adjustments when moving to a new country. The exact day that Asha and her husband arrived in New York City was when President Kennedy was assassinated, which was a shocking introduction to the U.S. As Asha settled into her new life, she had some nostalgia for aspects of her native culture. She reminisces about how life in India was characterized by

informal visits from friends and family that forged genuine interaction. “My mother, after her afternoon nap, would always dress neatly in a beautiful saree, ready for visitors to drop by. She would make them South Indian coffee, which was really good and sugary, and they would just chat,” she says. “That kind of informal connection doesn’t happen here.”

Yet, the Premachandra’s transition was eased by the warm welcome they received from the St. Louis community. Nartana recalls having “an absolutely lovely childhood” growing up in the city, despite being one of the few Asians in the area at the time. She remembers how strangers or acquaintances responded with confusion when she mentioned she was Indian. “Oh really, I’m a quarter Cherokee,” they’d say. Instead of feeling discouraged, Nartana found humor in these moments, clarifying with a smile, “No, from the country of India.” These interactions partly inspired the family to use Dances of India as a way to share their culture with others.

This mission of cultural connection was especially important to Asha’s husband, who often reminded the family, “This is not just about us—it’s about the community and getting everyone involved.” For Asha and Nartana, dance became a powerful way to foster connection and impact lives. Nartana recalls an encounter with an American student who graduated from Dances of India. When asked what sparked her interest in Indian dance, the student shared a childhood memory of seeing a girl at the art museum performing the dance of Krishna while playing a flute. That moment left such an impression on the young girl “to want to dance; to want to learn” as she described. To her surprise, Nartana realized that the girl she described dancing in the museum was her. “I was just amazed,” she admitted, “you think ‘oh people just watch and go’ but you never know.”

Nartana, who has lived in France, Japan and England, was ultimately drawn back to St. Louis to work with her mother on the mission of sharing classical Indian dance with the St. Louis community. Now in its 47th season, Dances of India has enabled them to celebrate their heritage and also built a bridge between Indian and non-Indian communities. Nartana credits her father’s vision for this inclusive approach to the company. “He believed that classical Indian dance should not be insular—it should be for everyone,” she says. For both Asha and Nartana, the ultimate goal has always been simple yet profound: to bring people joy.



Asha and Nartana Premachandra

Asha and Nartana Premachandra, a mother and daughter duo, together form the artistic and operational heart of Dances of India, one of the oldest Indian dance companies in the U.S. Founded by Asha and her late husband Dr. B.N. Premachandra, a medical researcher of endocrinology, the performance company integrates epic Indian storytelling with the artistry of classic dance movements. There was not much of a South Asian presence when Nartana’s parents first moved here, and their passion for sharing Indian art and music contributed to a richer appreciation of cultural diversity in the St. Louis community.



Suk Sakpota

Suk Sakpota is a resettlement coordinator with the International Institute of St. Louis. Born in southern Bhutan, he was exiled from his country and spent many years traveling between India and Nepal before eventually settling into a refugee camp in Nepal. He was relocated to California before moving his wife and two sons to St. Louis. Since then, he has worked with refugees from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and other regions to help them make a new home in the Midwest. He sees his work with such a diverse population as a rewarding experience which allows him give back to others.

Paying It Forward: From Refugee to Community Builder

“Pursue what is true and follow that; that will lead to happiness.”

Truth has always been at the crux of what drives Suk Sakpota: “I am only for the truth. There is nothing I know beyond the truth.” As a young man, his pursuit of truth changed the trajectory of his life when he publicly opposed North Bhutan’s “one nation, one people” campaign, a euphemism for ethnic and cultural cleansing targeting the southern Bhutanese who were ethnically Nepali. For his advocacy, he was labelled an enemy of the state and exiled for speaking out against the monarchy. He fled to India and later a refugee camp in Nepal. There he discovered what would later become his life’s purpose: to build a community for those who have been displaced from their own.

In the camp, Suk started the Community Development Center to provide education to refugee children. He saw English as a necessary tool for survival, and wanted to prepare youth with the skills they would need to make their own way in the world. His motivation for building the center came from the help he had received from others throughout his journey. To be stateless, he describes, is to be “a person belonging nowhere, and a person nobody wants... the most unwanted people.” In spite of this, he is nonetheless grateful to the many people that supported him along the way; the institutions that “fed us, supported us, educated us, and guided us through the process...they came to help, that’s how we got saved.” And most importantly, the *people* who gave him a sense of community: “Sometimes people would just invite us to their house, maybe for dinner. That was a big blessing for us.”

Suk carried these memories with him when he came to the U.S. and settled in St. Louis. Here, he became involved with the International Institute, an organization that aids newly arrived refugees to resettle in American society. He draws on his own experience as the inspiration for his work, explaining that “because I came as a refugee... I want to help as many people as I can.” As he says, “if somebody helped make a difference in my life, I should make a difference in somebody else’s life. If somebody helped me through a difficult time, and now I’m in a better situation, if I don’t help somebody then I am betraying the person who helped me.”

In fact, it was a former supervisor who first gave him the confidence to take up a new position where he would be interacting with newly arrived immigrants. He recounts being nervous to meet people from different backgrounds and religions because he had very little exposure to diversity. He worried about “how to communicate with them, how to act around them.” His supervisor told him he was more than capable of taking on this challenge, so Suk embraced the new role, and vastly appreciates the diversity of people and cultures around him every day.

Suk aims to be the person that reassures newly arrived immigrants that they *do* belong, and that they *are* wanted. He draws on his own experience to be that bridge for immigrants: “I felt the same way on my ‘day one’ in the U.S., and this individual is on his day one, he is like me.” Suk reminds us that refugees may not remember their own birthdays, but they will never forget the first time they landed in this country, their impression of it, and their caseworker’s help. Much as he still remembers those who supported him, he seeks to be that person for immigrants in St. Louis. To him, this is what happiness is, to “make a difference in somebody else’s life.”

For this reason, he sees himself as a “community builder.” He says that his community is liberal, and linguistically and religiously diverse; “some of our people speak Nepali because they are from Bhutan, some are Christians, some are Buddhist, and some are Hindus. But no matter what happens... We are always there for each other. Everybody is united, we have a community.” One of the ways he forges bonds is through his work in an urban agricultural program that “provided us with land, seeds, fertilizers, and everything. I was growing a lot of fruits and vegetables, but as a single family we couldn’t consume everything so I would distribute it to others. It’s a way of connecting with the community and the environment.” This program is just one small way he builds community with others, and a true community “is to encourage and appreciate diversity. This is the way to succeed.”

The Things That Bind Us

“We’re here to stay. Asians and Chinese are here to stay.”

Ed Shew was pictured in his 1967 high school yearbook, although not quite in the way he may have wanted. Underneath a photo of him in the cafeteria ran the caption “Why don’t they ever serve chop suey?” This moment, in many ways, defined his experience growing up in Midtown St. Louis. In some ways, his heritage was painfully visible, exemplified in the yearbook incident. And at other times, he was seamlessly invisible, told by his classmates that “We didn’t think of you as being Chinese. You’re just Ed.” He remained largely innocuous to his classmates’ comments, although he maintained this complex relationship to his identity until a pivotal project redefined how he came to view himself.

Like many other Asians in the Midwest, Ed grew up completely surrounded by mostly white and some Black people. Apathetic at times about his heritage, he also experienced complicated feelings ranging from shame to confusion. He was often reminded of the fact that he was different by the people around him. While going out for the football team as a freshman in high school, he was a mocking curiosity for “being a five foot three small Chinese boy.” However, this was his attempt to “fit in” and to prove himself to his peers. His athleticism defined his identity as a “jock” among his classmates—allowing him to minimize his differences and defy stereotypes that he would only excel in martial arts or the violin or in academics. “There aren’t many Chinese who play football...especially back in the ‘60s,” he noted.

Ed cannot say his parents wanted him to lose sight of his roots, but they did not encourage it, either. He did not lean into Chinese culture. Perhaps, he even pulled away from it.

Ed’s father spoke little English. Because of a language barrier as formidable as the Great Wall of China, Ed did not “recall one conversation” he ever had with his father. Yet, he remembered how his father “paraded me through the kitchen [where he worked] in his broken English... ’Chun Pak (Ed’s Chinese name) plays football.’” Not understanding the sport, his father still had a sense of pride.

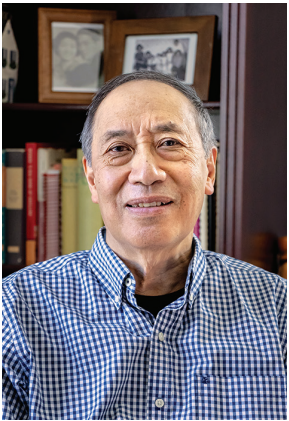
Most of his childhood memories revolved around the delicious Chinese dishes his father cooked and served, a custom Ed continues today

in his own household. But back then, his family’s cuisine exemplified their struggle to integrate with their neighbors and thwarted his mother’s attempts to fit in. Attending a community potluck, his mother contributed a Chinese dish of green peppers, tomatoes, and beef in a black bean sauce, an uncommon treat for Ed and his siblings, but one that went untouched by his neighbors. Recognizing his mother’s sadness, Ed secretly took several servings for himself. Mother now smiled.

Ed went on to marry a Caucasian woman in the 1970s, when interracial relationships were still rare, and continued to have mixed feelings about his identity and heritage. It was only after he retired in 2011 that Ed began reading more about Chinese immigrants in the U.S. and learning about their search for Gold Mountain and their work on the transcontinental railroad. In studying this history, he developed a “certain sense of pride” in himself and more importantly, as part of a deeper legacy where “the Chinese built the railroad...and the railroad built America.” What started as a passion project blossomed into *Chinese Brothers, American Sons*, a book that he wrote from the perspective of early Chinese workers who risked everything to forge a new life in America. This project not only kindled his pride in his identity; it also connected him with the wider Asian community in St. Louis in a way that he had not thought possible before. Perhaps for the first time, he realized he was not as alone in his experience as he had thought.

Being able to connect with other Asian Americans is especially important in a place like St. Louis, where Ed raised two sons and has five grandchildren. As Ed reflects, “You don’t really think of the Asian community. I think they may be invisible or something.” But at the same time, the absence of a dedicated space for Asian presence does not make their growing presence any less profound. He thinks of his own role in this community and hopes to “maybe increase the visibility of Asian Americans in St. Louis and... things we can do.” For Ed, it didn’t matter whether you came into your identity later in life or grew up with it; in the end, being Asian American is about the “things that bind us” and “bind people together.”

“I belong here,” Ed adds.



Ed Shew

Ed Shew is a second-generation Chinese American. His father, a Chinese immigrant, met his mother in St. Louis’ historic Chinatown, “Hop Alley.” The youngest of five children, Ed found fitting in to be difficult throughout the 1960s and beyond. At school and later as a human resources professional, he was often the only Asian in the room. After retiring he became interested in his heritage and began exploring Asian American history. This led him to write Chinese Brothers, American Sons, a novel that not only allowed him to express pride in his heritage but helped him to find a community of his own.



Ed Shimamoto

Ed Shimamoto was born during World War II in an internment camp conceived to contain the “threat” that West Coast Japanese Americans posed to U.S. national security. Post-war, Ed’s family sought to assimilate into American life, and Ed pursued sports in school and became an engineer for McDonnell Douglas (now Boeing). As he got exposed to more “modern” expressions of Japanese culture, Ed found spaces for building community and celebrating his ancestors. These opportunities gave him the motivation and tools to reconnect with a version of identity that allows him to be comfortable as both Japanese and American.



Beyond Assimilation: Being *Both* Japanese *and* American

“A story that needs to be told.”

Edwin Shimamoto grew up in a time when being Japanese in the U.S. was fraught—to say the least. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor and start of World War II, there were “a lot of hard feelings in California against the outsiders...from Japan.” Racism and fear led to a perception of Japanese as a “threat”. Despite the fact that Ed’s parents were Americans born in the U.S., they were eventually forced into incarceration camps along with 120,000 other Japanese and Japanese Americans. Ed’s family was relocated halfway across the country to a camp in Arkansas. At the time, his oldest brother was a year old, and Ed and his next oldest brother were born in the camp.

The incarceration not only took away people’s livelihoods and freedom but left lasting psychological scars. In the camps people were told to renounce their Japanese citizenship and young men were drafted to fight for the U.S., even as their families remained imprisoned. After the war, Ed’s family moved to St. Louis to try to start over. Though generally welcomed, the new Japanese settlers were advised “not to live all together,” so instead, they “spread out into the community, made new friends, and assimilated into the communities.”

This push to be accepted dominated much of Ed’s early relationship to his identity. He felt like he had to choose between being Japanese and American in a climate where Japan had been viewed as “the enemy;” thus Ed came to devalue his heritage because, he recalls, “as a young child, I knew we were different...anyone would recognize us as not being regular Americans. But I wanted to be more...Americanized.” To be a “good” American meant he had to divorce himself from Japanese language and culture. He and his brothers played softball and ran track in school, earned good grades, were voted class presidents, and became model citizens involved with community activities. The experience of being *othered* for his ethnicity deeply shaped Ed’s desire to be “non-Japanese.” In order to belong he had to be fully American. Moreover, he was subtly reared to believe that if he did anything bad it would reflect not only on himself, but the family and entire Japanese community.

This was how Ed felt about being Japanese for most of his life, but as he got older, he began to explore his heritage further as a

result of personal and societal shifts. He became fascinated with history and came to appreciate “what history does for us.” He found a sense of pride for the contributions Asian Americans made to this country, ever since the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Likewise, history gave him an understanding of the discrimination that Asian Americans faced, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, and common justifications for such ill treatment. This knowledge allowed him also to grasp the severity of what his family went through during the war and while living in the camps. He remembers that “we tried to talk to our parents and folks who were in the camp, but they didn’t want to talk about it. They just wanted to forget that.” Studying history helped him understand why.

Ed also made a point to research “what was actually going on in Japan from the feudal days up to more recent times.” This knowledge, coupled with Japan’s technological advancements in the automobile and computer/TV industries, gave him a newfound sense of pride in his heritage. As he recalls, “early on, into high school, I was denying my Japanese background, I was not embracing it.” However, in the 80’s “the biggest [change] was the introduction of quality products that were coming from Japan. I could be even more proud of them.” His sense of pride was furthered by the Japanese festival and Japanese garden at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis. While he listened to the *taiko* drums and walked through the garden, he found a “more modern,” version of Japanese culture that truly resonated with him. Ed and his family members have now been part of the planning team for the festival for over 40 years.

For Ed, assimilation allowed him to find belonging at a pivotal period in American history, when looking different could get you locked up. Today he feels compelled to share the experience of the war and the camps because “it’s a story that needs to be told.” This tale is not just one of suffering; it is also one of resilience, of building community and of learning to appreciate history and culture. From personal experience, Ed found that getting involved in the community helped him to finally accept that he was *both* Japanese *and* American, and that there was space for him to appreciate and express aspects of each.

More Than the Vietnam War: Sharing Asian Culture Through Storytelling

“We have stories to tell.”

“Through my movies, I can bring the community together,” explains Evelyn Linh Truong, a film student at Webster University and a first-generation immigrant from Vietnam. Her dream is to showcase diverse perspectives on Vietnam and transform how it is represented in the film industry. Driven by her passion for art, film, and poetry, Evelyn draws from her personal experiences as an immigrant to “inspire and ...[make] people more aware about Asians in the Midwest.” Keenly aware of the limited portrayals of Vietnam in U.S. films—most of which focus on the war—Evelyn emphasizes, “We have stories to tell” that go beyond these reductive depictions.

Evelyn’s family immigrated to St. Louis from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 2014. She recalls the excitement she felt as a child about attending school in America, tempered by the lengthy wait for her family to gain travel approval. However, the transition was anything but smooth. She describes the initial experience of immersing herself into American society as going back “to zero,” in a new town, with a foreign language, and a big set of responsibilities. As the eldest daughter, Evelyn carried the weight of her family’s expectations while navigating her own path. Her English proficiency enabled her to secure work and earn a driver’s license making her the one responsible for helping her family adapt to life in a new country. The pressure of juggling her family’s needs with her personal goals left Evelyn feeling like life in the U.S. was a “broken dream.”

In search of liberation, Evelyn left the U.S. and embarked on a new chapter as a flight attendant with Emirates Air, headquartered in Dubai. Her job allowed her to travel all over the world, including the opportunity to visit her remaining family in Vietnam and friends in other countries. On her off-days, she finally had a chance to pursue interests and expand her social life in a way that did not feel feasible at home in the U.S. She was able to pursue a childhood desire to learn guitar and renew her previous study of Mandarin. Still, Evelyn had challenges adjusting to life in Dubai—often feeling “lonely” or as though the city was merely a “transit place.” Upon leaving her job and returning to her

family’s home, she continued to have mixed feelings, mourning her loss of freedom and independence and wondering what to do next.

Back in St. Louis, Evelyn resumed her studies with renewed determination. A poetry course at St. Louis Community College reignited her love of writing. She describes the experience as a moment of revelation when she “woke up” and realized her passion; she quickly realized: “I want to do that.” After enrolling at Webster University, a film production class gave her the opportunity to write and direct her first short film. The experience of creating her own film crystallized the passion that she had been searching for, from “writing your story...and seeing that you make it become true.” For Evelyn, filmmaking combines her love of storytelling with the visual artistry of bringing narratives to life.

Her pursuit of film also deepened her connection to St. Louis, a city that she says now identifies as “home.” This connection did not stem from the shared culture of its Vietnamese community but rather from its diversity that gave her the space to define her own relationship with being Asian American. In her own words, “I don’t need to actually be in a [Vietnamese] community to feel that I am Vietnamese.” Indeed, her identity is more complex than the category of “Asian American.” One way she connects to her roots is through food, describing her love for Vietnamese dishes like *banh mi* and her fondness for shopping at Asian flea markets. Even though she sometimes feels that she is “not...American enough because... I still don’t like some of the American food,” she appreciates the freedom to embrace her cultural heritage on her own terms, “without being isolated or restricted by some of the [Asian] traditional norms.”

Today, Evelyn is committed to pursuing her dreams in filmmaking and poetry. She is determined to challenge the narrow portrayals of Vietnam often seen in American media, which focus predominantly on the Vietnam war and its aftermath with little regard for the country’s rich culture as it exists today. Her goal is to create stories that represent Vietnam beyond its historical trauma. She also hopes her films can show that Asia includes more “than just Japanese and Chinese” narratives. It is through films that Evelyn aspires to encourage American viewers to leave behind the stigmas that mar the image of her country and present a story that instills pride in the Vietnamese identity.



Evelyn Linh Truong

From Asia to the U.S. to Dubai, Evelyn Linh Truong’s journey to discovering her passion was anything but conventional. As an immigrant from Vietnam, she struggled with balancing cultural expectations and carving out her own path. It wasn’t until she traveled the world as a flight attendant that she finally allowed herself the freedom to pursue her passion for filmmaking. Her love for storytelling drew her to be a student researcher on this project, and her deep connection to her heritage fuels her desire to showcase Vietnam as a place of cultural richness rather than historical trauma.





Thanh Duy Vo

Dr. Thanh Vo’s story is one of perseverance, but it is also a testament to how service to one’s community can emerge from hardship and sacrifice. Born and raised in Vietnam, he studied medicine and worked his way up to become Chief Medical Officer in the military, only to have his life upended by the Vietnam War. He came to the U.S. as a refugee, determined to reclaim his medical career. After starting all over again, he now provides care to others through a successful clinic and inspired his daughters to become doctors themselves.

One Doctor’s Journey: Starting Over and Giving Back

“I’m happy to be in America because what I need is freedom.”

Dr. Thanh Vo’s life is a testament to sacrifice, perseverance, and the pursuit of freedom. Born in Phu Yen, a province in Central Vietnam, he grew up during a time of political turbulence and war. His journey took him from a small town to Saigon and eventually to the United States where he rebuilt his life and career.

Thanh’s early life was shaped by both hardship and aspiration. His physician father introduced him to medicine at an early age, while his mother worked in business and sales to support the family. His older brother, a high school graduate who worked for the French government, later joined the Viet Minh and became a well-known revolutionary hero. Thanh’s path, however, was different. He attended Bang Lang Catholic School, which was free under President Ngo Dinh Diem’s administration. Initially, his father encouraged him to learn a trade, and he began studying sewing with the expectation that he would become a tailor. But after a few months, he realized this was not his true calling. Instead, his passion for medicine was ignited when he suffered a severe fever. His fourth brother, a nurse, took him to the hospital where he worked. Thanh recalled, “He knew about infections... he helped me clean the wound... sometimes, I was short of money, and he gave me money. He’s a good man.” That experience, combined with his deep admiration for his brother, inspired him to pursue medicine.

Thanh excelled academically. He was one of the top 40 students chosen to study engineering in Canada, but his mother refused to let him go, a decision that left him feeling a deep sense of responsibility toward his family. Instead, he continued his education at the Saigon School of Medicine and served in the military as was required. After three months of training and three months in military health service, he was assigned as Chief Medical Officer for his unit. His medical career, however, would be shaped by the growing instability in Vietnam.

The war in Vietnam intensified, and by 1973, following the Paris Peace Accords, the U.S. began its withdrawal. In April 1975, as Saigon fell to communist forces, he made a desperate escape.

Thanh fled on his sixth brother’s bicycle amidst gunfire. His brother had given him gold bars and told him to wait while he fetched water. But fearing for his life, Thanh left without waiting. He boarded the Truong Xuan boat, which carried about 4,000 refugees to safety. After reaching international waters, he was rescued by a Danish ship and taken to Hong Kong, where he spent five months before securing passage to the States. He ended up in a refugee camp in Pennsylvania, where he met and fell in love with his future wife, whom he followed to Springfield, IL, where she and her family had been sponsored.

His first job in America was as a dishwasher. Determined to return to medicine, he later found work in a nursing home as a medical assistant. When he saw a job opening for an EKG technician, he took a bold risk and applied for the positions even though he lacked certain qualifications. Nonetheless, he was able to pass the practical test and secure the position. During this period, Thanh moved frequently, from Illinois to Florida to Ohio and then to Missouri. He worked at Southern Missouri Clinic and took on prison care jobs at night. Despite facing subtle discrimination—such as a patient telling him, “I don’t care who you are, just give me my nicotine injection”—Thanh persevered. Eventually, he earned his doctorate in general practice, allowing him to fully reclaim his medical career.

As he settled into his life in Missouri, he saw the need for culturally competent healthcare within the growing Vietnamese community. He opened a private clinic, where he provided care to Vietnamese immigrants who, like him, were striving to build a better life after the war. As he explains, “when I opened the clinic...they needed me.” His wife also contributed by opening a hair and nail salon, supporting their family and their community. His commitment to service extended to his children as well. His two daughters, Mimi and Thanh-Mai, followed in his footsteps and became medical doctors, continuing his legacy of giving back to the community.

Dr. Vo’s story is not just one of personal triumph but also a reflection of immigrants who left everything behind in search of a better future. Through his dedication to medicine and the immigrant community, he leaves a lasting impact on the many people he has helped along the way. For this reason, he is grateful for the freedom afforded to him by his adopted homeland and resolute in his drive to give back.

Being Seen: A Journey of Discovery as an Asian Adoptee

“I am me, and I think my Asian identity will always be a part of me.”

“I’ve never felt more seen in my life;” this is how Lauren described the adoptee group with which she is involved in St. Louis. Having been adopted from Kunming, China when she was 10 months old, she was raised in O’Fallon, Missouri where Asians are still scarce. Growing up, she recalls being confused about how to answer the question “*where are you from?*” At times, she answered “China” because, as she stated, “I’m adopted.” In other instances, she said “O’Fallon” even as she thought to herself, “what am I supposed to answer you?” These questions led her to avoid providing details about her background lest she had to repeatedly share her origin story. Indeed, one of the things she appreciates the most about the adoptee group is that “you don’t have to explain anything, you understand.”

Lauren’s journey of navigating what being Asian means to her is just beginning as someone who “look[s] Asian” but doesn’t necessarily feel it yet. Being surrounded by white family, neighbors, and peers, she would sometimes “look in the mirror and forget that I’m Asian.” It is often others who point out her Asian identity leaving her to wonder “do they think I speak a different language, or do they think I have an accent?” To Lauren, she feels a stronger kinship with being adopted than anything else, as a result of her parents always making her feel proud of her adoption. It meant that “my parents loved me so much that they flew halfway across the world to get me, they chose me.”

As an adoptee, she did not have shared experiences with many of her Asian peers. Lauren describes how some seemed to have “a lot more pressure on them from their culture” such as getting into an Ivy League school. There was always “sort of [a] disconnect because I don’t know how that feels.” To be sure, a large part of Lauren’s journey has been informed by feeling misunderstood. In O’Fallon, she grew up surrounded by “a certain majority all the time” and wonders whether growing up with Chinese heritage, “I might not have felt so isolated.”

Her sense of isolation was exacerbated by Asian representation, or lack thereof, in the society. She came to know “Asian” through stereotypes and the odd sense that enjoying Asian cultures such as anime or manga was “weird.” Media

representation played a pivotal role in Lauren’s identity formation. The TV shows she grew up watching had few Asian people in them, and she surmises that “not being represented enough in the everyday life had more of an impact on me than I thought.” At the time she did not realize the extent of this impact “that shaped me in the way that I didn’t really love myself.” For this reason, she often felt like “no one understands me, no one around me looks at me and sees me.”

In recent years, aspects of Asian pop culture—like boba tea and anime—have become more mainstream; she allowed herself to enjoy the Studio Ghibli movies and started to embrace her identity more. She felt the need to find community with other Asians and adoptees who could understand her experience and wanted to find places where she feels a sense of belonging. In college, especially, Lauren found an ignited desire to learn more about being Asian and connecting to her culture.

One way she has done this is through her work on this oral history project and interacting with those she has met along the way. Her desire to “learn and connect with more adoptees” gave her the opportunity to seek out spaces where “I’m not outcasted. Everybody else here is the same as me” as she described the first time being in a room full of other Asians. By connecting with other adoptees, she has been able to learn “more about my own story.” More significantly, she explains that she has “never felt understood in that way before... it’s kind of world changing that someone could really understand that part of me.”

Lauren is making a concerted effort to find spaces where she and other adoptees can share in crafting their own identities as they go. She says, “I don’t even always know, but that’s the whole point of your 20s, you’re growing and you’re learning, and you’re discovering more about yourself.” Her advice to other adoptees is to “find someone who understands your story and connect with them; and give yourself grace.” She hopes that this project will help others “step into my shoes” and try to understand her the best way they can; “I hope that they can learn more, be more, and have compassion.”



Lauren Walther

Lauren Walther is a Webster University student majoring in psychology with a minor in sociology; she is also one of the student researchers for this project. Adopted from an orphanage in China as a baby, she grew up in O’Fallon, Missouri. Raised by Caucasian parents, she has been proud, curious, and unsure about being Asian. Her journey of coming into her identity is still in process as she grapples with what she describes as her “in-betweenness.” Connecting with other adoptees has allowed her to understand herself more along the way.

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