

Isabella Wada's autobiography

My hero is my grandmother. A 5'4, resilient, creative woman, with neatly trimmed bangs and one who always brings her A game when it comes to fashion. She played a large role in my childhood, making early breakfasts, taking me out shopping, picking me up from school. But most importantly, she incorporated and connected me to my Japanese heritage.

Since I was young, she hosted a large gathering on New Year's Day yearly, otherwise known as Shogatsu. Our whole immediate and extended family would celebrate the New Year as my grandma slaved away in the kitchen making all kinds of traditional Japanese dishes from osechi to gobo. My grandma has tied the strings of my Japanese heritage firmly to my wrist as I will carry these memories and traditions with me throughout my life. In my U.S. history class, Junior year, I was flipping through the wrinkled pages of my U.S. history textbook, eagerly awaiting the section about the Japanese Internment Camps, being that my grandma was born there. I was disappointed to find just a few sentences about this very important part about my family's American history. Where was our story? My grandma's? I wanted to learn more about my family's past, our history. I wanted to know the story written by my people.

So, I approached my grandma and asked about her experiences growing up in the internment camps. My grandma brought out her photo album as she unpacked her old memories of running around with the other younger kids, or seeing the strain that was tolled on her parents. I became engrossed in her stories and my fascination with my own culture grew. From this moment, I wanted to be more connected to my own people, my own American people, my Japanese American people.

In April, 2021, Asian hate crimes were on the rise, and I wanted to do something, to help in some way. I went online and found a community center in Little Tokyo in Downtown Los Angeles. They would deliver food and care packages to the elderly Asian but mostly Japanese people living in the community, who were unable or too afraid to leave their homes. As I spent hours packaging boxes of food and wrapping hundreds of chocolates, it was rewarded by the warm greetings from each person accompanied by sweet smiles, thank yous, and comfortable small talk. The elderly spoke of their experiences and the young volunteers told stories that sounded so similar to the ones my grandma told me.

Spending more time in my community has filled a void in me that I wasn't even aware of. Through this, I have found one more piece of my puzzle that is my identity. From connecting to my culture, to my grandma, to my people, this experience has made me more curious about all of the other stories that weren't included in the U.S. history books. My journey of learning about "everyone's" U.S. history has begun.