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Hana Uno Memorial Scholarship Essay

Growing up in a Japanese-immigrant household while attending an American high school - definitely made me question which culture I related most closely to; sushi, Doraemon, and Ramen, or hotdogs, 4th of July, and the Kardashians. While I was conflicted the first 12 years of my life, I found a common ground between the two: dance.

When I was 9 years old, my obachan took me on a trip to Japan where we went to visit her hometown, Tokushima. While there, she introduced me to "Awa Odori," a traditional Japanese dance birthed in her hometown. She took me to a museum where I learned about its history and how it came to be. I learned about how this dance was used for mass entertainment and even symbolized reconstruction for the Japanese people during World War II. We then watched one of the most famous Awa Odori teams, Godyahei, perform in a parade. When watching these dancers perform with such precision and emotion, I was inspired, both as a dancer and as a young half Japanese girl. My obachan then took it upon herself to introduce me to the team's head director. She then asked if I could participate in a few of their rehearsals, which looking back, I'm not sure how she did it. My eyes widened and my body froze, but luckily, he agreed and welcomed me to train with the team the following day.

It was the next day and I was extremely nervous, yet still excited and inspired from the previous performance. For several hours, I was able to work with three Godyahei dancers who taught me the precise technique behind their flawless dancing. When returning back to the states, my obachan found a nearby Awa Odori dance group for me to join who performed in the annual Nisei Parade. Training season had begun and I was able to teach my peers the technique I had learned in Tokushima. For weeks, we all practiced together to synchronize our steps and our chants, as we passionately yelled, "Ayatosa! Ayato yato!" with our carefully crafted movement. The day of the Nisei Parade had arrived and I was thrilled to showcase a piece of my culture and identity. Dancing around the block in Little Tokyo while hearing the crowd cheer allowed me to discover a deeper passion of mine.

Since then, I have participated in every Nisei Parade since 2014 with the same group. I even started an afterschool dance class at my local Japanese school, Pasadena Gakuen, where I taught children Awa Odori every Saturday. I taught them the history and technique behind the dance, and together, we participated in the Nisei Parade every summer. In teaching Awa Odori, it not only contributed valuable knowledge to young children, but it also provided them with an environment for them to feel welcome and safe in, while expressing their passion for their own identities as well, which is what Awa Odori did for me.