

Your Fear is Not My Fear

by Stephanie Ray

When I was four years old, my mother took me to McDonalds for my weekly Saturday treat. The aroma of French fries made my mouth water. Just as the young woman at the counter asked me for my order, my mother took my left hand and briskly led me out the steel glass doors to her 65, red and white Chevy.

I started to cry and she looked at me and said, "We can't eat here." "We can't eat here anymore." "Why? I asked?" She mumbled something about a Jap working there and she told me he would poison us.

During the drive back to Plano, no words were spoken between us, only silence. Every now and then, I could hear my mother mumble something, undetectable, under her breath.

When we arrived back to the house, my mother made me a chicken salad sandwich and gave me a cold glass of milk. The wooden chair scraped on the linoleum floor as she pulled up a chair to talk to me. It was there in my mother's kitchen with the starched gold and white curtains, gold refrigerator, and immaculate cleanliness, I learned about the Japs and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She told me that her uncle Bill, my great uncle Billy was stationed at Pearl Harbor and the Japs snuck up on the

American soldiers and bombed them. They were "sneaky" she told me, and "could not be trusted." Momma said Uncle Billy was missing for several weeks, and he was presumed dead.

She then told me how she, Hen Marie, John Edward, Gracie and Ann Maupin would pay a nickel to go to the picture show every Saturday, reminding me that the Negro children had to climb the long, long, long stairway to reach the balcony because in 1941 Negroes could not sit in the same section as the White patrons. Momma told me before the feature film; the audience was shown newsreel from World War II. She told me she saw Japanese airmen in their Kamikaze Suicide planes, flying to their death with big grins on their faces. The Japs she said are sneaky and cannot be trusted, and you cannot eat their food because they will poison you.

We did not stop visiting McDonalds. However, my mother would sit in the car and I would play the role of a spy. I would go in first as the decoy and if the Jap was not working I would signal back to my mother and give her an all clear signal so she would know it was safe to come in and eat.

Growing up in Bowling Green, KY did not afford me many opportunities to meet individuals of Asian descent.

When I became a little older, I decided that I would not allow my mother's fear to be my fear, and her hate to be my hate. In fact, the experience heightened my curiosity to learn more about Asians and Asian culture. When I started working at McDonalds and made my own money, and had access to my own automobile, I drove to the only Asian restaurant in town, The House of Wan. I sat down and ordered my first Asian meal. The food was delicious. And you know what? I was not poisoned! I did not die.

I started working at Georgia Tech in 1997, and a few year later this very bold, very outspoken young, Korean American woman, Hannah Cho, walked into my office and questioned why none of the diversity offices served Asian Students. Georgia Tech was over 25% Asian for God's sake. So students like Hannah Cho, Daranh Hun, and Andrew Chang collaborated with my Office to host the first Asian Cultures week, which led to the creation of the Asian American Student Association and The Association of Asian American Engineers and Scientist and a social fraternity for Asian Men.

As I bring my 30-year career to a close, I can honestly say my greatest honor has been Asian American students allowing me to opportunity to serve them.

Talking about race has never been easy. I am often reminded of the 1949 Rogers and Hammerstein Musical, the South Pacific and

how the musical caused quite a stir in this county because it caused us to look at reality in the face. My favorite scene was when Lt. John Cable sang these words.

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!