

Doris Cronkhite

What It Means to be Asian American

Presented May 19, 2020

\*\*\*Edited for clarity\*\*\*

Hi! My name is Doris Cronkhite. I'm an Assistant Director in the Office of Industry Partnerships in the Purdue Research Foundation and today I'll be sharing on the AAARCC's story.

I was born in the US during the Vietnam war and my American father didn't want me and my brother to be stigmatized by speaking Vietnamese. Or maybe it was because he thought we would talk about him when he couldn't understand what we were saying. Later on, when I started school, some kids in the neighborhood would call me names because I was Asian and all I wanted was to fit in and be accepted. I didn't realize that I was denying an essential part of my identity through trying to make people accept me by fitting in. As to my specific sense of my identity, I would describe myself as having brown eyes and black hair. And if my mom overheard me saying that, she'd be in the background going, "And Vietnamese!" I told myself I was saying that because it wasn't because I was ashamed of being Vietnamese, but that it shouldn't matter what my ethnicity is. And now, I severely regret the time I wasted that could've been spent embracing my heritage and I really wish I could understand and speak my mother's language. My mom and step dad had a Vietnamese-Chinese restaurant, so even though I was made fun of when I was younger and I felt so angry because of that, later on, I started to learn more about Vietnam through spending time with my mom at the restaurant and hearing her talk about her journey here.

I can't even describe the pride and affinity I felt when, as an adult, I went to the store and bought my first set of chopsticks. I was talking with a friend one night and I shared with her how I've always felt invisible and I've never felt special. And she said "Are you kidding me? You have such a special heritage and Vietnam has such a rich history!" And it was like she had turned the lights on and I could see things clearly. And when I break it down - I am an American and I am Vietnamese, and that's one more culture than most people. So I don't know why it took me over 40 years to be receptive to hearing that and finally acknowledging and embracing my ethnicity, but from that day forward, I stopped trying to ignore the vital piece of what makes me, me.

I mainly connect with my heritage through my family. I managed to get my little brother to move here, but my mom and the rest of my family live in California. And when we go to Little Saigon, I still feel like a fringe outsider, because I don't speak the language. I can't even understand it, except when my mom tells me to brush my teeth or turn off the lights. And if I try to speak the few words that I know, my mom is the only one who can understand me. She patiently tries out every intonation of a word because tonal languages are one syllable long. So she patiently tries out every intonation to get to my meaning. And I ask my mom what it was like when she was growing up, and I try to absorb and remember everything she has to say. My husband reinforces the importance of my heritage, and when he sees documentaries on TV, he'll record them so we can watch them together. And we want to go to Vietnam someday, because I've never been.

I didn't realize, growing up, how all the influential factors conspired to make me feel inferior – TV and movie portrayals of pidgin spoken condescendingly (and inaccurately), very few famous Asian actors ... it's insidious and pervasive but it's subtle ... and it's still going on today – forces that make you think like that subconsciously – so no longer! If someone is trying to make you feel guilty, don't just agree with that! You shouldn't feel guilty for something over which you had no control. Who we are, our history and genetics – also things we had no control over – these won't change but we should be proud of who we are. So, pay attention to whoever and whatever might be trying to make you feel guilty so you can try to overcome that! And think for yourself because when you let others dictate how and what you should feel, their goal is to control you and make you submissive, and I think the easiest way to do that is to make you want to conform to their construct of reality.

So, please learn from my mistake – I wasted over 40 years of my potential by trying to fit into someone else's mold. Now no one can ever make me ashamed or embarrassed of who I am and what I look like because of their narrow-mindedness or expectations!

Now I revel in my own special background and I respect and appreciate the struggles from history (like what we're experiencing now) that permitted me to arrive specifically where I am today! I'm so thankful that I can love and appreciate every part of my makeup, especially my Asian American heritage.