

The Home of the Brave

Whether our homeland is searing hot or as frigid as ice; whether we speak with an Asian accent, or an Irish brogue; whether we came here over churning seas, or on a jet plane; whether our old flags were striped or one solid color, we as American immigrants share a common spirit. It takes the right stuff to leave the only country you've ever known, to search for a better life for you and your family, no coward is willing to brave the unknown, to travel to a strange and foreign land. Though our languages and cultures may separate us from one other, we are all bound together by the American spirit, the drive to struggle and to succeed, to fail and try again. In 1991, infused with this spirit my family gave up everything, friends, work, and the home my parents worked so hard to get. We packed what we could carry, and set out for the promised land of "milk and honey", the United States of America.

I am originally from the Philippines, life in my home country was certainly not easy for my parents, who were both college educated people, even though they could have been considered well-to-do. The Philippines was still in recovering from the Marcos regime when we left; Ferdinand Marcos was President of the Philippines from 1965 – 1986, during his stay in office the country reached an all-time high, and an all-time low. After trying to amend the Philippine Constitution in 1971 so he could run for a third term, he declared martial law under the pretext of defending the country against the threat of Communism and became a veritable dictator. It was not until 1986 that he was finally ousted by a relatively bloodless revolution, but not before grafting billions of dollars from the country. Two years later, I was born. My father was a creative director for the

PMP(*Partido ng Masang Pilipino*), a populist, and left leaning political party, and made advertisements. My mother ran a garment factory in Manila.

We left Philippines for quite a few reasons, but all those reasons centered on the welfare of us as a family. As I said earlier, Philippine's economy was in tatters and was slowly recovering, even now though, many people live on less than \$2 a day there. My father, because of his line of work put him at odds with those who harbored antagonistic feelings toward his party. One day he received a threatening letter in the mail, telling him to stop his work; they felt threatened by the efficiency of my father's ad campaign. Later on he received a brown Manila envelope containing another threatening letter, a black square studded lapel pin commonly worn by family members in mourning, and a funeral wreath, he had been marked for death. My maternal grandmother and grandfather, and most of my aunts and uncles, and my cousins on my mother's side were already in the U.S., so my family decided to seek political asylum there. I cannot remember much from the journey there, I do remember stopping over in Seoul, South Korea, as I exited the plane I felt cold, different from in Philippines where it is tropical, warm, and humid, for the first time in my life, I shivered. On the flight the attendants were friendly, and continually offered me cheese, which I gladly accepted, I thought if this is what it's like to live in America, than it is truly a grand country. I knew little of America except what I saw on television and heard from my family, who always spoke of it in a reverent tone.

Coming to America, I knew little about the culture, and the people, starting fresh here was tough. My family moved in to my aunt and uncle's home, and we slept in the living room; it was uncomfortable to say the least. My grandparents also lived there; it was quite a full house considering it was a 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom home. My other aunt

and uncle lived next door also. Thanks to the hospitality of my family, my parents and I were able to scratch out a living, and for that I'm thankful. My father wanted to go back after the Even though my parents both graduated college they worked low-wage jobs, my father started out as a busboy and worked his way up to clerk, my mother worked for AVIS at the Los Angeles Air Force base, which were nothing like the relatively comfortable and stable jobs they held at home. I learned to speak English well enough in the Philippines as well as the native language Tagalog, but my accent was thick and heavy. The first day I went to Pre-School at age three, I was excited and bursting with energy, when I got there I saw ethnicities I'd never seen or heard of before; African, Mexican, Vietnamese, European, American. When the teacher asked me to introduce myself to the class, I opened my mouth and began to speak "My name is Mark, and I'm from the Fee-Lee-Feens" my words elicited more than one snicker from that sea of faces that had their eyes fixed solely on me, for the first time I felt ashamed of my tongue, and how my words sounded like tin crumpling compared to the smooth flowing English of the others. I made friends eventually, of all nationalities, and was surprised to see that many of them were also immigrants, one of my friends Miguel came here from El Salvador to escape a bloody civil war, and my friend Tinh came here from Vietnam with his mother to live with his uncle's family. After a while we had a place of our own, an apartment while it was even smaller than our previous place, with just one bedroom, with one bed, one bathroom, and a cramped kitchen, at least it was our own, and a place we could call home, we were happy. After a year living in the apartment, my younger and only brother Erik was born, he was born prematurely and had to be placed in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit inside an incubator to keep him warm and to keep germs

out, he was hooked up with wires to a dozen different machines, and a respirator, he was the first generation of our family to be born in America. As soon as he was born my father left the operating room and went to the Chapel connected to the hospital and prayed. My brother was in the hospital for a long time, I'm not exactly sure how long though, through the glass of the incubator I could see that was extremely small and had rosy pink skin. When we finally took him home my father had already constructed a crib made of plastic, after about a year my family gave away the crib to other family members who had a baby of their own coming. Though four people sleeping side by side on one queen size mattress is not quite a snug fit, it became even less cozy as I grew taller over the next nine years, my father had to sleep at the foot of the bed, perpendicular to the rest of us. My parents started going to the local community college, El Camino in an effort to get better jobs, my mother studied nursing, and my father studied computer science. After working a couple of different jobs, my father finally got hired at C.B. Richard Ellis as a computer technician, and my mother started working at a hospital in Torrance, CA, for Little Company of Mary. Years later we moved here to San Diego. It was around that time that I became part of the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program at my elementary school, by this time I had all but lost my accent and had begun to speak, write, and read English better than even the average child my age born in America, many people are surprised to learn I was not originally from here. I'd have to say at that point we had achieved what many people call the "American dream", a satisfying and successful way of life.

In December of last year, on Christmas Eve my family and I got aboard an airplane which had a final destination of Manila, Philippines, after 15 years my parents

and I were coming back to our home country. As soon as I got off the airplane the first thing I noticed was the hot humid air, which I inhaled as soon as I stepped off the plane and which warmed my lungs. Home never felt so foreign to me. The weeks leading up to our departure, I imagined that as soon as we touched down, the memories would come flooding back and I would be able to speak fluent Tagalog, neither actually happened. After about an hour of trying to get our luggage, we finally exited the airport, it was 7:00 A.M. and it felt like it was 90 degrees Fahrenheit. We were picked up by a driver and taken to my paternal aunt's condominium in the heart of the city. On the way there I noticed that the hotel next to the airport looked dilapidated and abandoned, as we drove further into the city though I saw burned out buildings next to skyscrapers, and literal shantytowns made of scavenged brick, mortar, and aluminum sheets separated by a highway from pristine mansions that had long driveways and Olympic size swimming pools. I saw children as young as five come up to car windows and with arms outstretched and hands pressed upon the glass to ask for alms. My aunt's condominium had all the amenities of America, it had television, hot and cold running water, and most importantly, air conditioning, the condo even had the same electrical sockets. During our month long stay though we traveled around the Philippines meeting and greeting old friends, family, and meeting new friends. Many people would ask me if I remembered them, and most of the time I would have to shyly respond "No, sorry I don't..." and then they would go on to tell an anecdote about me. At first people tried to talk to me in Pidgin English, but after telling them that I still understood Tagalog they would converse with me in that instead, while I may have not been able to fluently speak it, I had not forgotten it entirely, I had not forgotten where I was from. While I was there, I lived in a

condominium and at different times a hut with no electricity or running water, I also did a lot of personal reflection and came to realize how lucky I really am in America, while the economic gap in America is widening, at least it is not so wide that a rich man's neighbor is not living in squalor, and that while I may have not have my own room it is nothing compared to the cramped quarters I found out one of my grandmothers lived in. You really can't appreciate America and how good life is there until you actually leave it, it's one thing to be told you're better off than others and another to see how much better off you really are.

My mother and father gave up the life they worked so hard to make back in Philippines and traveled to America seeking a better and safer life. From refugees during World War II seeking safety, to the Pilgrims who dared cross the Atlantic to live in the New World, to be free of religious persecution, and to even the ancestors of Native Americans who braved the Bering Strait to venture into a then unknown land, it's the ability to take a risk, and the will to start over new that makes America "the home of the brave" and that defines what a new American is to me. I think the importance of being a new American in America is to show the people who were lucky enough to have been born here the strong work ethic and tenacity of many immigrants, and to reinvigorate the American work ethic which was unprecedented for a long time. Being a new American was certainly not easy for my family and I; experiencing racial and class prejudice, and just struggling to survive and make a decent living, but in the end everything worked out for the better and came to fruition. I can proudly say that I am an American immigrant.