

Opinion: Living a multi-generational, multi-national journey of American immigration

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Webster Groves student Bella Nguyen, daughter of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, with her Japanese host family.

Photo courtesy Bella Nguyen

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Perhaps you have heard about people like me as debate and discussion roils concerning immigrant families. But may I have a word?

I am a second-generation Vietnamese American. I recently underwent a transformative experience as part of a program called Quest, which provides a first foreign trip to top high school students from marginalized communities. Last summer, I traveled to Japan to study and stay with a host family for five weeks.

As a child, I would never have imagined myself to be a “top student.”

From kindergarten to second grade, I received 100 tardies each school year. My mother, the sole English speaker in our family, juggled various roles for our family, ranging from the owner of a nail salon to Vietnamese translator. After misunderstanding drop-off time, and with all her other responsibilities, she had a hard time getting me to school on time.

Both my mom and dad, Loan and Sonny Nguyen, felt out of sync with American parenting styles. To assure our safety, they kept my brother and I extremely sheltered, limiting our social interactions to family and babysitters.

Although American-born, I started school without the knowledge of English, forcing me to take English as a Second Language classes. Over time, I adapted to the school environment, became more independent, and took on more responsibilities to assist my family.

Witnessing my parents' relentless work ethic and adjustment to a new life instilled empathy in me, allowing me to foster a passion for helping others. I have put in over 100 hours in community service throughout my high school career at Nerinx Hall, a Catholic college-prep academy in Webster Groves. At the same time, I've managed to excel in my classes.

It was this journey of personal growth and community service that made the email I received a year ago from Mary Dubose, who was then Nerinx's director of equity and inclusion and now associate principal for student affairs, even more meaningful.

"I wanted to see if you had any interest in the Quest scholarship program for studying abroad ... all costs would be covered."

Of course, my answer — with my heart skipping a beat — was yes.

My decision to study in Japan was purposeful, influenced by my interest in learning Asian languages. I was a native Vietnamese speaker, learned Mandarin in school, and acquired an understanding of Korean through media consumption and online lessons. Learning Japanese was the next step for me. Before I knew it, I was positioned in front of my host parents, Shun and Shiori Kato.

The people I had seen in pictures had come to life, and I could finally put names to the faces of my host siblings, grandparents, uncles, and friends. Communication came easy with only a slight language barrier, because six out of the eight adults had English-speaking backgrounds. We exchanged an abundance of questions, trying to grasp an understanding of the other person's country.

Although I physically blended in, it was only to a certain extent. My attire was not that of a typical student in uniform during weekdays, and my skin carried a Southeast Asian tan. Despite these differences, I was still accepted. Surprisingly, some people even initiated conversations with me in Japanese instead of English.

The Japanese language school I was assigned to had a fast-paced and rigorous curriculum with instruction in Japanese from the first day. While classes were intense, I stayed afloat because I was well-versed in language learning. Seeing the genuine joy on my host family's faces when I understood their speech made the challenging curriculum worth it.

Through this experience, the relationships I built were what made it so hard to leave. I had never encountered such kindness from people who were once strangers. They did whatever they could to make the most out of my time in Japan. Day trips and daily acts of service, like three home-cooked meals a day and tending to my laundry, were simply routine for them, yet they meant the world to me.

Without the Quest scholarship, I never would have imagined forming such heartfelt relationships in such a short time. I would not have had the means to experience a lifestyle outside of my own. I now have a second family in, of all places, Japan. Ms. Dubose took a chance on me, and Quest opened the doors for me.

It is said we are a nation of immigrants, though for some of us that initial immigrant experience goes back several generations. But I would be willing to bet that if you are both happy and successful, someone opened a door to one or more of your family members. I hope you will consider doing the same for others like me.

Bella Nguyen is a senior at Nerinx Hall High School in Webster Groves. Her commentary was edited and supported by the River City Journalism Fund.