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2020 High School Scholarship Essay Contest \$1,000 Award Winner

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How I Found Peace in Sacramento

“Are you sure you wanna trust him? He just came from the Philippines a year ago.” I was eating my breakfast in the cafeteria when those words interrupted my conversation with a friend. My friend and I were shocked.

Last year marked my first year in America. It was a critical period in my life - one graced by personal growth but mired by my first encounter with xenophobia. Encounters as such was the reason I retracted my Filipino heritage when I came here. I didn't want to be singled out as foreign. I made poor attempts to hide my background, dodging questions of what language I speak, who my teacher was last year, what school I came from, and ultimately what country - questions that fueled my fear of rejection.

Outside I appeared calm and collected, but inside there was this constant turmoil: a conflict between a desire to express myself and an instinct to assimilate to my new community. I was beset by the anxiety that expressing myself would detach me from my new community. And so, I was both cautious and punctilious about how I behaved. I told people nothing about my background, talked the same way they do, tried to hide my accent, and more to erase any hints that I came from foreign lands.

However, I gradually unfettered those shackles, as I met people of all backgrounds, culture, walks of life. Sacramento celebrates all backgrounds, identities, and heritage. Sacramento's diversity and inclusive environment showed me that I should no longer feel the need to bury a part of me, because no matter who I am or where I came from, I'll always be accepted in Sacramento.

No longer fearing rejection and as a means of expressing gratitude, I began to engage in my community. I volunteered, interned, and participated in civic programs and events. I founded the Filipino Club in our school. It taught people our culture and helped new students transition to the community. I also worked with a group of people my age to address the lack of childcare access in Sacramento and presented before the city council regarding the issue. I am currently working on a project to bring a Student Support Center to our school and soliciting community partners to provide mental health resources and services to students.

Looking back to when I first came here, I realized that I've experienced a much needed personal growth for which I thank Sacramento. Coming from a country with a lot of bloodshed and

extrajudicial killings, I feel much physically safer here. Yet, I was troubled by insecurities and anxieties of being excluded. I sought acceptance by rejecting a part of me, but Sacramento showed me that was not necessary - something I reciprocated with service.

Peace, I learned, is not merely silence nor freedom from bloodshed. True peace is solidarity, people working towards the common good for a better future, and that includes making a better community for everyone, no matter who they are or where they came from.