

Filipino Amerasians' Lifelong Fight Against Stigma



Story tools

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BRENTWOOD, Calif - Even after 21 years of living in the United States, Rose Cruz still has trouble sleeping at night. She flinches when her husband tries to hold her.

"It's so hard to sleep. Every little noise, I'm awake," says Cruz, now 38 and living in Brentwood. "I just became defensive, totally defensive."

Cruz still remembers her horrible experiences staying with a family that sexually abused her while her mother was away during the week. Her mother had to work as a stay-in housemaid for three American families at the former Clark Air Base in Angeles City, Philippines.

Cruz was only 11 years old when six of the eight sons in that family raped her. Even now, Cruz still cringes at the words they said to her about her mother.

"I asked them 'why?' and they told me because your mom was a prostitute...at least you'll enjoy it," Cruz says, her fingers nervously writhing. "It hurts... every time I think about it. Why do they treat us that way?"

Then she pauses. "Because we're Amerasian," Cruz answers her own question.

Cruz asserts that her story isn't the typical Filipino Amerasian story. The Amerasian phenomenon is concentrated in localities where U.S. naval and Air Force bases were prominent before they closed down in 1991.

Though Cruz is one of the estimated 52,000 Amerasians fathered by U.S. servicemen when U.S. Navy and Air Force bases were prominent in the Philippines, she states that her mother was not a bar girl or a prostitute, which is a common stereotype for Filipino mothers of Amerasian children, particularly in the cities of Angeles and Olongapo.

"If a mother is raising a child in the Philippines who is Amerasian, the child is not only stigmatized, but the mother also has to deal with discrimination, with the fact that she's classified as probably a bar girl or a prostitute," says Ron Muriera, who runs the Santa Clara Valley chapter of the Filipino American National Historical Society.

Clint Applegate, a Filipino Amerasian who was born and raised in Cavite City, says his mother worked as a babysitter for an American family at the former U.S. Sangley Point Naval Base. "The stereotypes about mothers being prostitutes became even stronger [in Angeles and Olongapo] when the base closed down in Cavite City."

Dealing with discrimination from peers

Cruz used to sing in the choir at her local church in Olongapo City, and she often heard disdainful comments whispered from the pews.

“People would talk behind my back and talk to the music director, asking ‘Why is she in there? She doesn’t belong there,’” Cruz remembers. “Others would say, ‘She’s a prostitute’s daughter. She’s a sinner just like her mom.’”

Discrimination followed her at school.

Even in kindergarten, endless name-calling by peers and adults, from “putok sa buho” (illegitimate child) to “anak ng puta,” (child of a prostitute) became commonplace for Filipino Amerasians like Cruz.

A relentlessly scrappy child, Cruz fought classmates at Olongapo Wesley School in Olongapo City to protect her fellow Amerasians. She felt it was her duty to stand up for the ostracized group in school.

“I’ve always been in fights. I actually stabbed someone with a pencil just because I needed to protect my fellow Amerasians,” Cruz recalls. “We felt like we were trash, like we don’t belong.”

According to a three-year study in Angeles City conducted by Dr. Pete Kutschera of the New York-based National Amerasian Research Institute, bullying was one of the factors contributing to mental illness among Filipino Amerasians.

“Many Amerasians repeatedly witnessed schoolyard bullying, street gang attacks, intrafamily abuse, or general violence directed at their friends or acquaintances based on stigma-laden and discriminatory behavior,” Kutschera stated in the study.

Amerasians of African-American descent, the study found, experienced considerably more discrimination and were more vulnerable to depression, anxiety and stress.

Tracy Young, who is a half-black Filipino Amerasian, says that people abided by a racial hierarchy when she was growing up in Angeles City. Her half-brother experienced less discrimination since he was light-skinned, Young notes.

“If you’re half white and you’re a baby, everybody thinks you’re cute. But if you’re half black, nobody wants you,” says Young.

At school, Young also dealt with constant bullying, fighting and name-calling, especially with other girls in her class.

“Filipino Amerasians are being stigmatized in the Philippines for being of mixed blood,” says Muriera. “The stigma stems from colonial mentality and of course, you know, the Philippines being a very class-oriented society.”

Searching for his father and moving to the U.S.

Applegate and his twin brother were only two years old when their father, who was in U.S. Navy, left them and their mother behind. It wasn’t until he gained sponsorship from the Pearl S. Buck Foundation that he was able to locate his father 17 years later in the United States.

“From that organization, I learned more about Amerasians and what it would take to find my father. We started looking for our father. At that time, I went to the Thomas Jefferson library in Manila, and that’s where I found my father’s information,” says Applegate.

The Pearl S. Buck Foundation is a nonprofit that is committed to improving the quality of life and opportunities for children. It also promotes a better understanding of other cultures.

“Our sponsored Amerasian children in the Philippines is much smaller in number than it was when Pearl Buck first began her program there,” says Teri Mandic, a spokesperson of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation in Perkasi, Penn. “Our target populations now comprise of children from very poor families who have been moved into Resettlement Camps and smaller groups of second and third generation Amerasians who may reside alongside these marginalized populations.”

With help from the branch stationed in Angeles City and the documents his mother kept, Applegate was able to prove that he was a legitimate child.

“The foundation processed all my paperwork and the next thing I knew, I got a letter from the U.S. Embassy saying that I was a citizen. I came over here July, 1988,” Applegate recalls.

Although Applegate’s father hasn’t been around for most of his life, Applegate insists that maintaining an emotional connection with his him is enough. He is able to maintain contact him by phone on a regular basis. There’s no need to see him physically, he says.

“I chose not to see him because for me, the communication is good enough. We’re both adults, and I don’t want to cause any trouble or disrespect for the other family,” Applegate says. “Emotionally, there is a communication. But physically, there’s not.”

Applegate now lives with his mother and his twin brother in San Jose.

Unlike Applegate, the majority of Filipino Amerasians are not able to get in touch with their estranged fathers. Many Amerasians like Cruz feel that disconnecting themselves from their fathers is for the best.

Many Filipino Amerasians Experienced some form of abuse

“My father was mean, an alcoholic, a womanizer and physically abusive to my mother,” Cruz says. “He left me when I was only six months old.”

The physical and sexual abuse Cruz dealt with while growing up eventually influenced her decision to run away from home at 14.

According to a study made by the University of the Philippines’ Center for Women Studies, the majority of Filipino Amerasians have experienced some form of abuse, including domestic abuse. The study noted that half-white, female Amerasians are highly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

At 16, Cruz and her friend were offered jobs in Japan to work as entertainers in various bars. Before she embarked on her trip, Cruz needed to make a stop home to gather all her paperwork and passport.

While rummaging through the documents, Cruz realized that her passport and birth certificate looked different from her mother’s. Cruz discovered she had a social security number and was a U.S. citizen. Her father had signed her birth certificate when she was born, which gave her U.S. citizenship.

“My mom never told me I was a U.S. citizen because she wanted me to just focus on school. If people know that you have citizenship, they’ll use you,” Cruz says.

She moved to the U.S. in 1990, when she was 17, and felt like she was much more at home.

“When I arrived here from the Philippines, I felt like I belonged. I felt that my heart is here. I’m not embarrassed being an Amerasian. I’m not. I’m actually proud to talk about it,” says Cruz.

Cruz’s father died six years ago, and they never met.

Acknowledging Filipino Amerasians as American citizens

Facing rejection from the larger society, many Amerasians long to be recognized by the U.S. government. But the current law makes it difficult for Filipino Amerasians to become U.S. citizens.

According to the Amerasian Act of 1982, children fathered by GIs during the Vietnam War would be eligible for U.S. citizenship. This gave preferential immigration to children from Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea and Thailand. The act tries to mitigate the negative effects of years of U.S. troop deployment in the region.

These troops left “tens of thousands” of Amerasian children to face prejudice and negligence in their homeland countries, says Joseph Ahern, author of “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: United States Immigration Law and Policy as Applied to Filipino-Amerasians.”

The 1982 act, however, excludes Amerasian children from the Philippines and Japan. “The reason was probably because the U.S. didn’t see that they were involved in a war at that time in the Philippines,” notes Muriera.

“But there’s information that contradicts that. A lot of the Filipino Amerasians are facing severe racial discrimination. They’re being stigmatized in the Philippines for being of mixed blood,” he adds.

The only way for Filipino Amerasian children to gain U.S. citizenship is if their fathers claim them when they turn 18. However, this isn’t likely, according to Muriera.

“Many military men aren’t going to claim that they had illegitimate children in a country they were stationed at. It takes individual responsibility on the father to claim that they fathered a child in the Philippines,” says Muriera.

Despite a tumultuous past, Applegate looks at his experiences as a source of growth and says that growing up as an Amerasian molded him to the person he is today.

“I’d say growing up as an Amerasian is a blessing and not a curse. I’m a very optimistic individual. When someone treats me bad, I look at it as a source helping me to be stronger,” says Applegate.

As for Cruz, now a mother of two, she hopes to raise awareness of the Filipino Amerasian experience by telling others about her turbulent beginnings. She still wants to protect and help other Amerasians back in the Philippines, just like she once did when she was in school.

“I don’t ask people to pity me. I use my experience to tell others here in the U.S. that we exist. There are a lot of us back home who should be here,” says Cruz.

Matt Maxion is a journalism student at San Francisco State University. His reporting is part of a special ‘Stories From the Diaspora’ series profiling the lives of immigrants across California and beyond.

Ref.: <http://newamericamedia.org/2012/05/filipino-amerasingians-forge-a-sense-of-belonging-in-the-us.php>

Look MUCH more here: www.Amerasians.PhilippineChildren.ph