



## Lessons my mother taught me

By Stefanie Nagata-McNeal, May 17, 2021

---

Being a fourth-generation Japanese American has been and continues to be an interesting journey.

I grew up in Hawaii, where the vast majority of my friends were just like me — Asian American. Sure, I had friends who were Caucasian, Hispanic or Black — Hawaii is a melting pot where you can meet people of all races — but I grew up around a lot of people who looked like me.

My mother made sure that I understood what Japanese American experience meant — what resilience means, what internment means, what sacrifice means, what defending a country that didn't want you means.

I've always been proud of who I am, and proud of the people who came before me. From a young age, I understood who I was, where my family came from, what they sacrificed, what hardships they endured. I'd like to believe that I have an understanding of what racism is, what prejudice is.

My father joined the foreign service when I was 17, and my sister was 13. We always knew there was more out there than our small part of the world, and our world became even larger.

Right after I graduated from high school, my family moved to a small town in The Netherlands called Noordwijkerhout. That fall, my sister started her high school career at the American School of The Hague, and I got on an airplane and flew back to the United States to a town I had never been to before — Ashland — to begin my college career.

Life has never been the same since. Moving to Europe changed everything for my family. Going home meant going to Europe. My summer jobs were at the American embassy. I learned so much more than I ever thought I would. The world was my classroom.

Right before I graduated from college with a master's degree, my parents moved again. This time, they went to South Africa. The world is a big place with a myriad of different looks, beliefs and cultures, but learning about apartheid, seeing what it was like, meeting people who lived it, that changed my life and opened my eyes even more.

I lived in Africa for a year after college, it gave me a chance to slow down and think about what it was I really wanted to do and where I wanted to be. Though I loved being in Africa and will always treasure my time there and the people I met, I knew it wasn't the place for me to stay.

I moved back to Ashland and worked several different kinds of jobs — character building, I think it's called. I found my home at Paddington Station, and have been there for 14 years. I met some of the best friends I have because of working at Paddington. More importantly, I met my husband, Jason, here.

When we got married, I hyphenated my name. After everything I had seen and done, I knew it was important that my name reflected the way I looked and the person I am — not a "new person" because I chose to marry a Caucasian. When my children were born, I explained that it was important that their names reflected who they were too. Yes, they are Eurasian, or "hapa" as we say in Hawaii, and their names needed to reflect that.

Now, I am a mother myself. All the lessons, the knowledge, the history I learned as a child, I need to pass on to my own. All the worries and fears my parents had are mine now, but in a different way because of where I am and the times we are living in.

Am I worried about their experience in school, here in this very Caucasian area? Yes, I am.

Am I worried about how they will be treated, because of the way they look? Yes, I am.

Do I look at the world around us, with the hate and prejudice, and wonder if they will be OK? Yes, I do.

Am I overly cautious when we are out? Yes, I am.

Will I let this fear control me, control my children's upbringing? No, I will not.

These experiences shaped me to understand that I am always learning about the world around me. I'm not perfect, I have so much to learn about our changing society. Most importantly, I know that my experience — my family's experience — is different from everyone else's, and I can learn more and grow.

*Stefanie Nagata-McNeal is floor manager/stationery buyer at the Paddington family of stores in Ashland.*

---