“My Immigration Story: Angel Island”

When I was growing up, I was always good in school. However, the one subject that I always had to work a hundred times harder on was history. It never made any sense to me. I remember forcing myself to remember what seemed to me as random facts about dead people that were not relevant to me, or my life. I remember my mom helping me make flash cards of the things I needed to know for history tests and drilling me for what seemed like countless hours to try to help me memorize these disjointed facts. History was not about me, my people, or my life.

The one and only history teacher in all of my K-12 schooling experience that I remember taught the history of how the United States was imperialistic and how they always tried to puppeteer other countries. What I remember from his class is the only history that I remember from my K-12 schooling. I never learned about my history as a Chinese American or Asian American.

Fast forward to college. I went to the new student orientation over the summer where students were introduced to college and, at the end of orientation, they all sign up for classes. I remember finding Asian American Studies and was so excited there was even a subject called that. Later, upon finding out that I was not only able to take Asian American Studies classes but that I could take the Asian American history course to fulfill the history requirement that all undergraduates needed to take to graduate, I was ecstatic. I was literally in disbelief that that was even possible.

Once the class began, I really enjoyed history for the very first time in my life. I didn’t know anything about Asian American history although I am Asian American and it was my history. After taking that class, I was hooked. I took Asian American History Part II and part of the class included a field trip to Angel Island. I learn that although it is often referred to as the Ellis Island of the West, the Angel Island Immigration Station had a much different relationship with immigrants than Ellis Island and served as a detention center for Chinese immigrants. The average detention was 2-3 weeks, although it was not unusual for detainees to stay for several months. This class was perhaps the most impactful class on my life that I ever took. I thought it was cool and all to have a field trip as a part of a college class, but upon finding out more about the history of Angel Island through the class leading up to the field trip, I did the math and deduced that my grandparents must have come to the US through Angel Island. I called my parents and verified that my paternal grandparents did in fact come to the US through Angel Island.

The visit itself to Angel Island was an amazing experience. I grew up my whole life in the Bay Area with Angel Island in our backyard. Yet, I had never been to the Immigration Station. Stepping foot in the very same space and buildings my grandparents were in the very first time they stepped foot in US soil was heart wrenching knowing what they went through to come to the US and in the inhumane conditions that they were kept in while basically being imprisoned there.

With my newfound appreciation for history, I realized that America does not learn from its mistakes in mistreating immigrants. Today, refugees from Central America are still being treated
in similar ways as my ancestors were treated over seventy years ago. What I learned through my own history is that immigration is not just a Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian, Mexican, Salvadorian, or Guatemalan issue. It is a human rights issue.