

2009 ESSAY CONTEST

First Prize Winner Essay

Shannon Zin

Stuyvesant High School

Grade: 10

“My Experience as a Burmese American”

The first-grade task was simple: make a poster about where your family is from. On the day of presentation, the little children all carried oak tag sheets that rivaled their own heights. Many were painstakingly ornate with bits of cloth, arbitrary amounts of glitter, overenthusiastically disproportioned illustrations, and bold Crayola words. The teacher nodded at us all in approval as she walked around the room to peruse our fruits of labor. However, she stopped in front of mine for a longer amount of time. “Interesting, Shannon,” she said, peering over her thick-rimmed glasses, “Your family’s from Burma?”

Being a Burmese-American, there were many differences between my peers and me. For one, I wasn’t quite like all my friends, who were mostly other Asian ethnicities. While they easily communicated amongst one another, I often found myself taken aback by their swift, precise syllabic conversations. This language barrier set me apart from a social grouping joined by native tongue. But it never bothered me because I got back at them by speaking Burmese to family. The advantage? Not everyone can laugh at Stallone’s accent in Rambo. The disadvantage? Knowing Burmese doesn’t help when you want to order at a Chinese restaurant.

Something Burmese that’s been attached to me and has been affecting me since birth is my last name “Zin”. One can easily tell I’m not your average Chinese person with that name, which relieves me of being expected to understand them. In addition, if there’s anything my last name taught me, it’s where I stand in alphabetical order. Even the kids who had last names of “Zhang”, “Zhao”, “Zhe”, “Zheng”, “Zhong”, “Zhou”, “Zhu”, and “Zhuge” were ahead of me by one letter. I’ve often called the back-left corner of classrooms my “territory”.

Lastly, I’ve noticed that many Burmese people are connected with each other. As a kid, I stopped having interest for those powder-scented pink envelopes for wedding invitations that came oh-so-often. It’s amazing that my parents know so many people that happened to get married, but what’s more impressive is how many people they indirectly know besides that. Whenever my parents meet a new Burmese person, they try to find out if that person is related in any way to anyone they know. Recently, I found out a teacher whom I used to be a monitor for got engaged to a Burmese woman. When he let me speak to her to find out what food he was mispronouncing (it was gna pi jyo and weh tha hyin, if you’re wondering), she asked me in Burmese “Do you know Burmese?” It really can be a small world, after all.

My experiences have been for better or worse as a Burmese-American. It’s given me something that makes me unique, but at the same time it’s excluded me from being the same. It’s made my childhood extremely pride-filled and my life different from the average. And hopefully, I’ll be on that road less taken for more time to come.

Second Prize Winner Essay

Stephanie Chin

Russell Sage JHS 190

8th Grade

My Experience as a Burmese American

My experience as a Burmese-American has been one of uniqueness, culture, and unrecognition. Burma is a small country between India and Thailand, and not many people know what Burma even is. This country has been over showered by the more famous countries in Asia, such as China and Taiwan. Even when tsunamis and cyclones hit Burma, there wasn't a major news flash worldwide, like there was during the earthquake of China. Even when the citizens of Burma struggled to rebel against the military, only a few countries offered to help. Citizens of the rural side of Burma, mostly living in poverty, hunger, and poor aid still strive to survive. Life in America, compared to Burma is almost a paradise. People don't really know what it's like to live in misfortune, and complain about their own lives. Studying for grades and trying to fit in are the only problem children usually have living in America. The children of Burma are barely granted an education, and if they were, instead helping their parents work in the farms and search for food and water.

America, with overpowered buildings, hiding the true pulchritude of nature compared to Burma, a rural, yet calm land, grasping nature as its only necessity to live on seem like two whole different things. Experiencing both, as a Burmese-American, I remember a time in first grade when we were asked for our origin, where we came from, and how we lived our lifestyle. Knowing my teacher, not even knowing where Burma was, I tried to hide my ethnics, actually ashamed of being a Burmese-American. Such a small country with unpopularity lead me to a life of obstinacy and uncertainty. Later on, during my year as a first grader, I had the courage to announce where I was actually from, pointing my country out on the map. This grabbed the curiosity of my teacher, and encouraged her to research more about my country. The culture, traditions, food we ate, and much more, interested her as I wrote about my life. Noticing her curiosity and amazement towards where I came from, I grew fond of my country, overcoming my fear in taking account of what others think of me and my ethnics. As I walked down the auditorium, graduating from first grade, I had a hat, with the grandiose words on it that spelled "Burma." Walking down that stage proudly, and exuberantly grew my confidence, and made me become even more patriotic of both of my countries, Burma and America.

The food, traditions, and religious aspects of Burma are big parts in my life. I would eat "monhinga," "lahpet thohk," "sanbyohk," and much more, enjoying the delicious sensations they bring to my mouth, compared to American junk food. Every night and morning I would pray to Buddha, believing that this would bring good luck for the future and the present. Buddha is one of the most important symbols of my religion. My parents would often tell me some sort of fable that gives you a life lesson, or tell you how something ended up this way. Even if these lectures were boring, and time consuming, I feel as if these lectures have helped me grow in both wisdom and philosophy.

Being a Burmese-American for me, is something to be proud of. Even if some people aren't familiar with your country, it doesn't mean that you should be ashamed of where you came from. Being a Burmese-American has added uniqueness in my life, and makes me different from most. I wouldn't change where I was from, even if I had the chance.

Third Prize Winner Essay

Ashley Lê

George G. White Middle School

7th

“My Experience as a Burmese American”

“The United States of America” is mixed with a diversity of cultures. Burmese is just one of the many cultures in the U.S. Most people who came here wanted a better life for their future generations. There is so much you can have in the U.S. You don’t have to be rich to go into college or get your Master’s degree or even a Ph.D. The government here can support you no matter how low your family income is. It is so much more peaceful in the U.S. Unlike other countries we accommodate and tolerate our citizens, so no revolts happened, only peaceful demonstrations. The U.S. is a democracy not a dictatorship.

I am Burmese, Chinese, and Vietnamese. My mother who is an immigrant from Burma tried to expose my sisters and me to her religion; Buddhism. We frequented the pagoda which is currently under construction in Englishtown, New Jersey and a temple in Brooklyn, New York. Just like any other parent my mother tells my sisters and me to treat people the way you want to be treated. She talks a lot about karma. Karma, to me, it means what goes around comes around. My mom tells me bad people are always punished in the end. This usually discourages me from doing anything abominable.

My father is a refugee from Vietnam. He came to the U.S. alone. My dad tells my family stories about how it was when he came here. He lived with foster parents, not his own. My father does want my sisters and me to know about all the opportunities in this country because he didn’t really know what was here in the U.S. until much later. My dad tells us college is a must and nowadays so is a Master’s degree. My dad is Roman Catholic. I do C.C.D. which is like a school to learn about the religion’s teachings. It is interesting only if you have a good teacher, but I usually enjoy it. I enjoy practicing Buddhism more than Catholic. It is more entwined with nature and kindness.

Sometimes I feel a little pressured, but I know both my parents want me to get the best of life. Both of their families were not rich in their home country, in fact they were poor. They lived day by day. It’s a great relief to know I don’t have to worry about things financially. I enjoy learning about both of my religions I practice. I got even more into Buddhism this past year because I learned more about the religion’s origins in school. I recently noticed how much more opened up to the world I am then other people my age. Both my parents tell me the struggles of other people who still live in third world countries like Burma and when I think about this I feel very fortunate to live in a democratic country.

Honorable Mention
Ma Susu Aung
William Cullen Bryant High School
9th Grade

My Experience as a Burmese American

As I have moved to America from Burma , I have faced the newest and never forgettable experiences in my new environment. My aunt and uncle came to the airport and picked us up to their two-story house. After staying freely four days , I started school. At the beginning of the school days , a lot of problems regarding as my experiences began.

First of all , in the morning of my first day to school , I was so nervous at home because I was not only a new student but late for school one month as well . My aunt drove me to school. Entering the building of the school was my first problem. I did not know that I had to go to the cafeteria first, swipe the ID card and then to the classes. So, without swiping the card , I directly went to my classes through the main door which is used as an exit door for all students. In this way, the very first school day in the United States of America became my only absent day of the whole year. The next day when I went to the school I found out I needed to go to cafeteria and swipe the card.

Secondly, the classrooms are not as crowded as in my native country's and all were new for me. I saw strangeness and coldness in the eyes of my classmates and I felt lonely at the beginning. But later this feeling disappeared when I got some friends who were very friendly and helpful. When gym period came, I didn't know where I had to change a uniform. I asked a student where the locker room was. In the room ,when I was going to change the uniform , I had no idea how to use my strange lock. I asked one student for help and she showed me. After changing, I was late when I arrived the main gym. My gym teacher warned me not to be late again.

Everything was fine for me a few days later. Another new experience came out when the machine which the students have to put their ID numbers to get food broke down. I did not know that so I lined to get lunch as usual . While I was lining , I saw the students holding the lunch tickets. I was surprised when I saw it . I quit from the line but did not know where to get the tickets. There was not enough time to ask the students and get lunch. That day, I missed my lunch.

While facing new problems and struggling for them, I have completed one school year. Now I am getting used to solve the problems. Moreover, when I solve the problems, I realize I need to calm down my mind first and then try to figure out how to deal with them. These experiences I had faced in the beginning of the school days will exist in my soul all my life.

Honorable Mention
Sanda Min
Montgomery Upper Middle School, Skillman, NJ

“My Experience as a Burmese American”

As a Burmese American child I feel perfectly fine. No one is different than me, I feel different from no one. We are all equally privileged and we are all equally treated. I love how in America no one is better than another and we all have freedom. Life doesn't get any better! You can be European, African, Muslim, Japanese, Burmese, but none of that matters. Everyone's equal and not one of the many races are better.

Living in a small New Jersey town, everything seems fine. Everyone is nice to each other, I'm nice to others and everything is happy and good. Things are perfect. There are a small number of mean kids, who think they are greater by being mean and crueller than others, but they are wrong. Not only do they have poor character, but no one really likes them. We all start out equal, but one can do stupid and mean things that will make others treat them negatively. But in the end, everyone is really equal. Enough in which everyone is equally privileged. For example, last year my friend and I tried out for a soccer team and none of us were treated as if we were bad people because of our race or religion. We both made the team, The coach of our team did not prefer one over the other because we are all equal.

It doesn't matter what race I am. Burmese or not I'm still an American citizen and a boy who loves his country. No one threatens us with guns or other weapons here, no one picks people over others because of skin color, no one is liked more or less because of religion, no one has more friends because of race, and everything is equal. I love being Burmese, but it doesn't matter what race I am here. Everything's is great in America.

Honorable Mention
Andrew Kyi

“My Experience as a Burmese American”

To be a Burmese American is a blessing. It is a feeling of uniqueness that is not entitled to everyone. The power to educate and spread awareness of a relatively unknown country is not an opportunity everyone gets. This results from the fact that there are only a handful of people that understand that Burma is a real country. Only people who study it thoroughly or have relations to the native country can fully grasp the meaning to be Burmese. In present day society, people only learn of Burma through the media; the world is only exposed to the hardships that the juntas exert on the nation. Although this is true there is more than politics and turmoil. I've learn this personally as a second generation Burmese. I am frequently reminded that I am fortunate to be able to express my thoughts freely; there are no limitations to what I want to do in this country. I feel sympathetic towards the citizens of Burma and it has given me a deeper level of connection to my native country.

I recall my earliest exposure to the Burmese culture was through food and social events. To be able to unite people of the same beliefs, background and family was truly a memory that could last a lifetime. It was through these events that strengthened my beliefs in Buddhism.