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Prior to the Youth Civic Engagement and Leadership Fellowships, my understanding of my Asian American (or more specifically, Indian American) identity was severely restricted. While I've been fortunate enough to grow up in a family that actively engages with our ancestral culture and have been a member of my area's India Club, I never truly had an opportunity to critically analyze what this identity meant in the broader scope of America. In other words, my Indian culture was simply a segment of my identity that was distinguished from my other interests, rather than a backdrop that influenced everything that I did. This fellowship enabled me to realize that by allowing my ethnicity to affect my understanding of all of my interactions, I wasn't relegating my heritage to a place of lesser significance in my life as one may infer from "backdrop". In fact, I was doing just the opposite. For the first time, I learned to bring my culture to a place of prominence in my life as I understood the impact that this newfound understanding could have on my engagement within my community.

I found myself changing the norms I had lived with for my entire life immediately after beginning this fellowship. Our very first assignment was to peruse a webpage called "A Different Asian American Timeline." I had heard the occasional story about the lives of Asian Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but I had never seen such a clear, visual representation. Additionally, I was pleasantly surprised to learn about the histories of Indian Americans who came to the United States in the very early 1900s or even the 1800s. While I've enjoyed learning about and felt connected to the histories of many Asian American groups because I've often broadly identified as an "Asian American", seeing people whose families originated from a place near to my own allowed me to develop an even stronger interest in the subject. Upon reflection, I realized that this was the first time I had ever learned about the history and lives of Indians (and more specifically Indian Americans) in an organized setting. This undoubtedly created a unique experience that I wish I could share with every other Indian American youth I know.

However, this wasn't the only time I learned about Asian American history. Throughout the fellowship, our cohort watched one episode of the PBS documentary *Asian Americans* a week. These episodes animated many of the historical events that we read about on the timeline from the beginning of the fellowship, allowing us fellows to understand the stories in more depth than could be provided by a brief description on a website. Prior to this, my only in-depth engagements with history had come through my AP United States History course. Though I had researched historical events on my own, they didn't seem to come off the page like they did in this documentary. In fact, this enabled events that I did learn about in APUSH like the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II and the aftermath of the Chinese Exclusion Act to be explained in further depth. Entire hours were dedicated to discussing monumental events in Asian American history that were only mentioned for minutes in school.

But the Asian American history that was discussed wasn't limited to these monumental events. I learned about more events that I hadn't even heard about. While it was initially humbling to realize that I did not know as much about a group that I identified with for my entire

life as I thought, I felt empowered by my new knowledge. For the most part, I had associated the idea of “Asian Americans” with the immigrants who moved to the United States in and after the 1960s. Most of the people I know in the Indian community in my town of Grand Blanc immigrated in this way and I was never really exposed to Asian Americans whose ancestors migrated here in other ways. However, this documentary demonstrated the vivid history of those who had lived and changed America before, and even after, the passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act.

One group in particular, the Third World Liberation Front, especially stuck with me. Understanding the dynamics that led to the creation of this organization, including the historical distinction (and sometimes, lack of distinction as during World War II) of the ethnic groups that form what we consider to be an “Asian American” identity forced me to consider what it meant to be an Asian American. I ultimately realized that I found it difficult to lump any American whose ancestors lived in Asia into one group because of the differences that we live with. Being interested in geography, I always took a very literal interpretation to the census-designated title of “Asian,” but often felt confused when my Indian-American identity did not qualify me as Asian in the eyes of many. Creating this distinction in my mind helped resolve this confusion. However, I also learned that this didn’t mean that Asian Americans couldn’t stand together in solidarity, especially with other minority groups, for the benefit of all minorities. This is the biggest lesson that I will be taking away from the fellowship, especially because our cohort’s group experiences exemplified it.

Each week, my fellow fellows and I were able to engage with topics that ranged from movement building to the model minority myth, which only further elevated the lessons that I learned from our independent assignments. My newfound understanding of the diversity Asian America was one such lesson. I enjoyed the opportunities that we had to work in small groups to reflect upon our shared experience as Asian American youth. I learned that despite the fact that many of us would mark “Asian” on our Census’, none of us shared the exact same cultural background. Similarly, none of us had the exact same upbringing as we were raised in dramatically different environments. This exemplified the adage that many organizers espouse: diversity brings about a variety of valuable perspectives. I’m thankful for the opportunity to develop new friendships and we certainly bonded over our experiences (especially while phone and text banking).

While I learned so much from our meetings, individual historical reflections, community mapping activities, and phone and text banking experiences, I most appreciate how this fellowship has allowed me to engage with my community. My favorite activity was most definitely conducting 1-on-1 interviews. I wanted to use this opportunity to go out of my comfort zone, so I reached out to many people I had never even had a conversation with before and only knew through mutual contacts, to conduct interviews. While this was initially nerve-racking, I had in-depth conversations in the context of the Indian American community that I never had before. I learned more about my community’s interactions with political systems, both local and national, its stigma against mental health and domestic abuse, and the variations in perspective between first generation Indian Americans in my generation and those who are my parents’ age

just by talking to community leaders about their lived experiences. Not all of my interviews were with community leaders, though. I also interviewed many of my friends. Even though I've known some of these friends for as many as 15 years, these conversations allowed me to learn new things about the way that they thought about their communities, reminding me that our greatest resources aren't always the biggest names, but can sometimes be our closest friends.

This reminder was further demonstrated in my community listening session. Given that my school in particular has experienced a lot of backlash recently for its handling of racially charged incidents, I wanted to offer my peers, especially those who are students of color, an opportunity to speak not only about COVID-19 as we had planned through our mock listening session, but also about how race has impacted them. In particular, I wanted to generate specific ideas that could be taken to my high school's newly formed Social Justice Committee in order to create an equitable learning environment. To create a robust discussion, I learned to reach out to people who I had never met before, making connections through teachers at my school. While I did something similar for my 1 on 1 sessions, I had previously relied on other people who had strong personal relationships with my interviewees to make connections. This time, I had to cold message people on my own, which gave me a new skill that I can carry on to a multitude of activities. I drew from the lessons that I learned over the course of this fellowship during our conversation. For example, I cited ethnic studies courses as an example of a change that an ideal school would contain. Without this fellowship, I would not have understood the significance of these courses and the need to teach them, even at the high school level. One of my personal interests is conducting empirical research and framing my 1-on-1s and Listening Session as a way of collecting information about communities helped expand my idea of what research can be.

Looking to the future, I will miss our weekly conversations. However, I am excited to use the lessons that I've learned to help impact the communities that I interact with in the future. In particular, I am planning on continuing a research project that I have been working on that investigates the Model Minority stereotype's impact on the jury outcomes of Asian defense attorneys. Research has shown that a defense attorney's race affects their client's likelihood of being found guilty and it is my hope that this project will contribute data that will provide justice organizations with the impetus to take policy action that will help promote equity within the judicial system. I plan on staying connected with Rising Voices with this project, as they will help me identify these organizations. In addition, I hope to stand in solidarity with my peers who have attended my listening session in order to demand changes within my school's Social Justice Committee. Finally, I hope to continue to engage in "Get Out the Vote" activities like phone and text banking with Rising Voices as the next election nears, placing a particular focus on my friends and family, especially those who are a part of the Asian American community. After all, if I've learned anything from this fellowship, it is that I have a duty to be an active citizen.