

MADELINE GUPTA

When I applied for this fellowship, I did so to better understand the culture and history that makes up a whole half of me. Although I've had the time and opportunity to explore my Indigenous heritage, not a lot of Asian American or Indian American serving organizations exist, especially for youth or civic engagement. Over the past eight weeks, I feel that Rising Voices of Asian American families has not only taught me a lot about myself and the people in my community, but empowered me to teach others and apply what I have learned. I definitely think that I have achieved the goal I set out for with this fellowship--connecting to my heritage and educating myself and others on what we can do to better our community and our world. I have also made friends with the other youth fellows and enjoyed having a way to meet other Asian American youth in Michigan.

I have especially enjoyed our virtual learning sessions. Having a space to foster conversation free of judgement or pressure is something that I believe strongly encourages learning and has been essential to the growth I have made as a fellow with Rising Voices. I also found the slideshows and interactive lessons to be interesting and often, very thought provoking. In time where we are mostly at home and social distancing, having a weekly or biweekly meeting with the other fellows and program leaders made me feel connected to the outside world and like I was still able to make a difference in my community despite the circumstances. As a whole, I took away valuable lessons in leadership, community, and history that I will continue to think about for a long time. One example of this was our third session, where we discussed power and oppression. Although I had discussions about it before and knew the background, seeing it in a very broken down and scientific way through the axes and faces of oppression was very eye opening.

Another session I particularly learned a lot from was Session 8 and the Model Minority Myth. The strong connection I felt with this lesson was about affirmative action and how Asian Americans sometimes blame affirmative action for the discrimination against them in college admissions processes. Yet, white people continue to make up the majority of United States college campuses. Recognizing that common oppressor and the long lasting detrimental effects it has had on the African American and Asian American communities in college admissions was mind blowing. In a system where I feel we have been encouraged to turn against my fellow minority groups, this lesson helped me to break out of that social conditioning and feel that I recognized the true history of not just one group of people, but all people and their relations to each other in a less whitewashed scope. This session followed an episode of PBS's Asian Americans

where they discussed this myth and how it has harmed not just Asian Americans, but surrounding minority groups.

This PBS documentary also helped me to clearly see how my education and school has failed me. As someone who has taken numerous United States history classes, including AP US History, most of the information in the documentary was about people and events that I never learned about. In the rare occurrence it had been in my history book, it was at best briefly mentioned and at worst used against the minority group it talked about. For example, most of my non-Asian friends and family would not classify Asian Americans as a minority group or as people of color. Even many of my Asian American friends did not know much of our history or identity. That's not their fault, but the fault of the whitewashed curriculum and education we are receiving.

As part of the fellowship, I also phonebanked and textbanked for the census and absentee ballots. I preferred text banking for the ease and greater reach of people, but phonebanking did make me feel more connected to the people I was helping than text banking did. That being said, I was able to help many more people via text. The few people I was able to help on the phone made it worth it though. After dozens of calls where no one picked up, having someone pick up and being able to help them felt amazing. One thing I would have changed about it would be having the ability to speak a language that some of our community speaks. I think it would have been very useful for outreach, in addition to simply making the people I was calling more comfortable with asking for and receiving help. In the future, I would like to reconnect to some of the language I have lost in the disconnect with my Asian American identity.

The one on one meetings ended up being one of my favorite experiences in the fellowship, although I did not expect them to. When I first started recruiting people for it, I thought it would be difficult to find interested participants in my community, but people were very willing to talk and share their experiences. One of the women I spoke to worked in an immigrant law firm and the stories she shared with me about the people she had met and the procedure they follow in the firm was incredibly insightful and educational. Knowing that other youth in my community are experiencing the same problems and events as me was very comforting and made us stronger than we would be alone. More than anything, the one on one taught me not to undervalue the power of a conversation.

Similar to the one on ones, the listening sessions gave my community and city an opportunity to speak up and talk about the changes they wanted to see. I had fun in our listening session with Matt and I wanted to replicate that open and safe conversation

space for the listening sessions I was helping host. Our participants had a lot to say and many good ideas for changes to help their school and families. Because we were in a group setting, we were able to build off of each other more than just when it was two people in the one on one. I would say it was a little scarier for participants to speak in the larger group though. I walked away from our three listening sessions my group did with more experience leading larger groups that I really appreciate.

In my community, I will be making sure that my family and friends are registered to vote, as well as request an absentee ballot if they would like one. Many of my friends have just turned 18 or will be before the election, so I will be encouraging those who aren't as politically involved as others to use their voice and put effort into making sure they can vote, especially with this year being such a crucial election. My neighborhood is also a place where I will try to encourage people to vote and be able to keep up with them to make sure they request their ballots and do vote.

Past my fellowship with Rising Voices of Asian American families, I will be continuing to work on my project making houseless voting kits. I'm very excited to plan this out and make it happen. In Washtenaw County, those experiencing homelessness are often the most forgotten about and I want to be a part of trying to help this group access voting and be able to have their voice heard in their government. Depending on who the pilot of this project goes, I may be able to help expand it to areas of Detroit with the partnership of Detroit Action. I also follow the Rising Voices instagram and will definitely come to some of the seminars and talks that are hosted.

As a whole, I have gained so much knowledge about civic engagement overall from this fellowship. As someone who is under 18, I never realized how little I knew about voting or how complicated the process was. The system is set up to prevent some from voting, especially in the circumstances we are under, and it is each of our responsibilities to change this and alleviate it while it still exists. I still have a lot to learn about voting and how the process truly works, but I definitely know so much more than I did eight weeks ago. My experience with the other fellows and amazing opportunities I have had through Rising Voices have only affirmed my belief that history and education are the keys to justice and a better future for all.