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ATTORNEYS AT LAW, NEW ORLEANS

Volume 2, Issue 5 May 15, 2022

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Reflection – Everything is Earned

I did not think that I would be here: in this profession, at this office, a part of this life. Often times, children are asked what they want to be when they grow up. Answers like "firefighter" or "astronaut" dominate the conversation. I never thought that I would have that type of job, let alone be a lawyer. In fact, I could never find an answer to that question as a kid, and it always confused me why that was. As I've grown, I now understand why: I didn't want to work. This feeling was not laziness or "millennial entitlement," but fear.

As a Vietnamese-American man, I grew up learning a few lessons. First, NEVER forget to cook the rice before your parents get home for dinner—your unspanked behind would thank you later! But second, nothing is freely given, and everything is earned. As a child of first-generation immigrants, this lesson is the most captivating for me, especially as I have grown to appreciate the sacrifices that my family made to lay the foundation for where I am today.

My family, like many other Vietnamese immigrants, fled from the Communist regime in Vietnam after the war's end in 1975. And my family, like many around them, boarded makeshift rafts and boats filled past capacity in hopes of escaping. My mother only recently told me that my grandfather wasn't just a passenger but he was actually the captain of the boat that held my grandmother, my four-year-old mother, and dozens of other passengers. My grandfather, to this day, is spoken of as a legend.

After arriving to the United States, my grandfather operated his own lawncare service well into his 50s, despite knowing barely any English. My grandmother worked in a factory fabricating conveyor belts for as long as I could remember. My grandparents put my mom and her siblings through school by working hard, manual-labor oriented jobs. I was raised in an environment where my family often worked and sacrificed their blood, sweat, and tears to provide for their family. Ironically, it was my grandparents who laid the foundation for my fear of work because I misunderstood manual labor as the only acceptable form of work.

My Grandparents at their 50th Anniversary Celebration in Hawaii

But as I grew up, and as my education progressed, I realized that work comes in many forms. I realized that I did not have to sacrifice my bodily health to make ends meet like so many of my Vietnamese friends and family continue to do. I could take the lessons of hard work and apply it to my education. Like my grandparents, I worked hard, but through college, law school, and the bar exam; I worked in a different way with the same goal of giving my future family more opportunities.

According to the American Bar Association's National Lawyer Population Survey, only 2% of all active attorneys in the United States identify as Asian, and nearly 0% percent of all attorneys identify as Hawaiian/Pacific Islander as of 2021. These statistics show how rare Asian-American presence is within the legal profession, and I feel that. It sometimes feels jarring to have a professional job, especially in the context of my own background and experience. I did not think that I would be here; in this profession, at this office, a part of this life. I thought that I would be cutting grass. I thought that I would be fabricating conveyor belts. I thought that I would be working day and night, sacrificing my blood, sweat, and tears to provide. I thought that I would work in fear. I was wrong. Instead, I am part of the 2% of Asian attorneys and I am proud of it. Instead, I can make a difference without sacrificing my health. Instead, I am in a position to work peacefully, unafraid.

Our entire family flew in to celebrate!