

NASAA Diversity, Inclusion and Equity

Ohayo gozaimas.

When Laura Smith called me about this award, I was a bit embarrassed. I never had DEI goals or a plan. In reality, my lived experiences taught me how to navigate this complex country. I don't even know when, diversity, inclusion and equity entered my lexicon.

Adopted at age 7, I came to America on a freighter. Released from a TB sanitarium in Tokyo after 9 months in isolation, I was beyond excited. That disappeared with my first meal - a boiled hotdog and canned spinach on a flimsy paper plate. Seeing my tears, someone told me that it wasn't a smashed puppy but a smashed pig stuffed into a tube. "Be polite." Mother whispered. I thought, I will die. Thank goodness, after a few months we returned to Japan.

When I was a teen, my parents retired in Kansas City. My first week in high school, two boys yelled "Bomb the Chink!" peppering me with trash. I asked my mother, what is a Chink? She replied, lips quivering, "A chink is a crack in a dark wall through which the light always shines." Her gentle expression didn't remotely look like that of my tormentors. It took me a while to understand the magnitude of her response. To be a good chink, she said, learn something new every single day, be good, even when no one is looking, and always light the way for those in darkness. And oh, always wear clean underwear.

Learn something new. I stumbled through *To Kill a Mockingbird* and James Baldwin. I studied America's ups and downs. Manifest Destiny, the Anti-Oriental Exclusion Act, hanging Chinese men by their braids, Abolition, Tulsa, internment camps, Emmett Till, lynching, desegregation in the military, Selma, Civil Rights Legislation, Caesar Chavez, Stonewall, the exploitation of immigrant workers, Asian Americans called the Yellow Scourge and their women, including me, invited to "do it to me Geisha style." Liberty and justice for all? I was so confused. Privileged voices consumed all conversations while they stopped the marginalized often in unspeakable ways.

The despicable terrified me and but I learned. I learned about nice, white people too. Eleanor Roosevelt, Rachel Carson, Willa Cather. A teacher let me design and build theatre sets. A teacher took us to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. No bullies, quiet and endless art. The blonde biologist horrified when an advisor told

me I was not college material, brought me college and scholarship applications. I eventually married him.

My first opera at age 19, Madame Butterfly, here in K.C defined representation before I knew what that word meant in performing arts terms. They put makeup on a large white lady for the role of Cio Cio. Seriously, the whole cast looked weird with sharp, black penciled eyelids.

Then, I worked at white dominated art and history museums, taught college freshman and began my work at our arts agency as their first asterisk designating race/ethnicity on an NEA BSG application.

I survived. Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Utah Opera's first Asian Cio Cio San. Suzuki, a Japanese American. The little boy, Sorrow, the real life child of Suzuki and a hakujin, an authentic little male version of me on stage! I cried.

I'm teased about all the events and exhibitions I attend. They are where I learn most and/or find solace and inspiration. Now more than ever, they give me a safe haven while emphasizing hope and possibility and guide me in how to be the best Chink.

I have and continue to have mentors. Barre Toelken, adopted by Navajos and world scholar, took me to reservations to meet elders and artists. Build relationships, he said and know that which is good grows at the speed of trust. When colleagues discouraged me, he pushed me to apply to NEA. Remember mailing applications to NEA? \$85,000 demonstrated the power of responding to the marginalized voice. I witnessed magic and I never looked back.

In 2006, our first Poetry Out Loud winner, Claudia, nailed it with Rina Espaillat's Bilingual/Bilingue. Because of her status, NEA's ruled against her national participation. So, we pivoted. I dislike that word. Private donors funded a special university scholarship. She graduated with honors. Our financial officer finessed the payroll process. Claudia worked for us until this past April. Now a stay at home mom, she chats with me while I rock her babies. I'm old enough to be her mom and she remains my steadfast mentor.

So many teachers. The little 2nd grader: "I ain't met no Mexican dancer before and I liked him anyway!" The patients with HIV who spent Saturdays with a teaching

artist making art. The Navajo family's hogan where I woke up each morning to the cadence of rug weaving and bird songs. Kids with profound disabilities making art. A former prisoner who taught poetry in our state prison and edited our Manual for Artists Working in Prisons.

When I see strategic plans, pronouncements, and DEIA courses, they note how to achieve DEIA. I'm always relieved because our arts ed program has always intuitively operated by those principles and AE doesn't have to reinvent anything. As we continue, I have our ED, Vicki Bourns, and our staff family. We don't always agree, I blurt out words. I continue to struggle navigating America, now more divided and at times, horrifically mean. Just ask the children along the border looking for mom and dad.

I still reach for the light and continue to learn. I worry about the impact of homophobes, racists, assault weapons, polarization and so much more. I respond to the clarion calls by artists for social justice and planetary survival as I keep moving forward sheltered by my beloved family and friends who support my AE work.

Thank you to those who nominated me, especially Laurel Cannon Alder and Claudia Borjas, I finally slowed down long enough to know what you gathered for this and last year. Thank you NASAA for blessing me with your grace and kind words.

Domo arigato gozaimashita.