



Is Democracy Worth Preserving?

IS DEMOCRACY WORTH PRESERVING?

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art and Design

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

May 2024

**Laguna College of Art and Design
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Approval
Signature Page**

Thesis Title: Is Democracy Worth Preserving?

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ABSTRACT

The people that I have painted in my MFA thesis series have suffered indignities, hardship, and sometimes the loss of their individual freedoms. Due to a variety of circumstances, they found themselves in situations that were dire. Often, their lives were threatened. Some are natural-born American citizens. Others are immigrants who found their way to the United States from their native countries. All of them made choices during times of extreme stress, which ultimately led to a return of their freedom. Before I painted them, I interviewed each person about their lives and personal struggles. They expressed their harrowing stories in different ways. Some, due to age, related events stoically. Others, who are younger, shed tears as they spoke. Every person shared tragic notes of intolerance and degradation. Through these trials of dehumanization, each individual relied on their own instincts to survive. Two mothers bravely made decisions for their children with the hope of improving their lives. In the end, all of them expressed gratitude for the lives they currently lead. Emotional scars serve as reminders of their endurance, but they are admittedly happier, wiser, and stronger.

Their pain and resilience reflect our nation's history. We live under a framework that is fragile. Racism and greed are as much a part of our society as liberty and equality. Our ability to address issues through compromise has sustained us. We have progressed. To assure our survival, we must genuinely recognize each other as fellow human beings and the uniqueness that each story contributes to our collective journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Laguna College of Art and Design for extending me the privileged opportunity to pursue my master's degree. I am thankful to H el ene Garrison for officially offering me the chance to be a part of the MFA program. Gratitude and thanks to the MFA Department Chair, Peter Zokosky, for his guidance through this excellent program. Thanks to Susan King for her advice and instruction throughout the MFA thesis project. Thanks to John Brosio for his thoughtful time and insights as my mentor. Loving thanks to my wife, Mary, and son, Andrew, for their generosity and patience while I pursued this important degree. A grateful thank you to my mother-in-law, Beverly Clark, my sister-in-law, Barbara Clark, and my friends, Tyra Kalman and Joann Pitteloud for their assistance with introductions to some of the people who participated in my thesis project. Thanks to Sharon Flanders for her clerical support and friendliness throughout the program. A supreme thank you to all of the people who took part in my thesis project as portrait subjects in order of being interviewed and painted: Jun Kato, Lam Nguyen, Vivian Vu, Tyra Kalman for Sam Kalman, Milagro "Milly" Perez, Wendy Schulien, Patricia V. D'Souza, and Jacqueline Frances Sherrill-Nunez.

This project was only possible because of their gracious willingness to share their stories. It is my sincerest hope that people will learn from their experiences and choose to build bridges with others.

DEDICATION

To my family.

EPIGRAPH

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we’re giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That’s one of the things that connects us as neighbors—in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver.”

-Fred Rogers

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Is Democracy Worth Preserving?

DESCRIPTION

I have looked into the eyes of fellow human beings. They have looked into mine. We have had as many different experiences as people on this planet, yet we know one another. Our differences are petty, but our commonalities bind us. When we feel the love of our family, we are fortunate. When this good fortune is cast further, we may receive food, shelter, friends, and education. Ideally, a healthy conscience grows, and we show gratitude for all of the good people and things in our lives. Privileged people who are not careful may begin to take life for granted. A desire to nurture others can wither, causing deep emotional or psychological distress. Boundaries then appear and walls are built. Fear is cultivated and learned. Greed demands protection. Powerbrokers and conflicts emerge. Wars are fought. We suffer at our own hands. Again and again.

Such is the history of humankind.

We are the most highly adaptable species on earth. Sometimes, we can choose to change our circumstances. Other times, we must suffer with our lot. But if an opportunity shows itself, many of us take advantage. That is very much a part of our nature. When humans find themselves wishing for a better life for themselves or their family, we pursue that vision. The color of our skin, how much we earn, nor the nation in which we live, matters. We instinctively yearn for stability and dream of happiness. Whether borders or oceans must be crossed, we venture into the unknown to chase this illusive vision. Will the outcome be a better life or a miserable death?

If we are indeed fortunate enough to be born with personal freedom and civil rights, what happens when we lose them at the hands of others? Do we cower for fear of suffering violence? Or do we fight to preserve liberty and justice?

My thesis project involves a portrait series that focuses on eight people who have made those very choices. I can only intellectually grasp their stories because I have not directly seen anything like what they have witnessed. Their stories and situations vary considerably. Yet they share commonalities. They have suffered to the depths of their souls.

Some are citizens. Some are residents. Some are immigrants. I seek to capture their emotions by photographing them in a calm familiar environment. With a darkened background and a single light, I ask them to recall the difficult events in their minds. What did they feel as their former lives were transformed by the fear and ignorance of others? The eight portrait paintings that make up this series are meant to reflect each sitter's memories.



Figure 1. Jason Dowd, *Patricia V. D'Souza*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16"x12".

I arrived at Patricia V. D'Souza's (Fig. 1) house on a sunny summer day. Pat is a Black American. She welcomed me into her home with a gentle smile and a warm handshake. After exchanging pleasantries, we spoke about the purpose of our meeting. I asked Pat to describe some of the events in her life that involved racism directed at her and her family. In one example, she explained how white men had followed her parents home after seeing a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These men

proceeded to burn a cross on her families' property while they huddled for safety in a nearby barn. As I listened, I envisioned painting Pat with a warm light on one side of



Figure 2. Jason Dowd, *Sam Kalman*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16"x12".

her face. This yellow-orange rim lighting represents the firelight of the cross. This serves as a visual reminder of her struggle for freedom from racial bigotry.

The last time I saw Tyra, Sam Kalman's (Fig. 2) daughter, she was a little girl. Sam fought in World War II as an American GI. After locating Tyra's contact information, I sent her an email. She responded with enthusiasm. We

joyfully discussed memories of her dad. While we talked about how I was going to paint Sam, Tyra mentioned the day that he died. After being with him at the hospital, she went to his house. She looked through some of Sam's personal effects that she had not seen before. One of these was a canister of film. After having it developed, she saw post-war black and white photographs of Sam. His expression revealed that of an angry young Jewish man who had experienced the oppression of anti-Semitism. Sam had been imprisoned in a POW camp for fourteen months after being shot down on his first bombing mission over Germany. When she shared these photos with



Figure 3. Jason Dowd, *Jun Kato*, 2021, oil on Arches oil paper mounted on hardboard, 16" x 12". Final framed.

me, I looked into Sam’s eyes. I knew immediately that I had the perfect reference from which to paint Sam’s portrait.

Jun Kato (Fig. 3), at 94, seemed to stare through me. Thick glasses magnified eyes that had digested so much history. “...But my family never talked about it.” His unceremonious tone was low and steady. Flashes of black and white film clips clattered through my mind. “We learned about the war on December 7 of ‘41. About three or four months later, we were gathered together in camouflage-covered stables, next to Santa Anita racetrack.” Tears filled my eyes. I could not see or speak. I bowed my head and put my hand in the air motioning him to pause. Minutes passed while he silently waited. Guilt squeezed my chest. Wiping my eyes with my handkerchief, I apologized for the emotional lull. For two more hours, he graciously answered my questions. His stoic nature was interrupted by a chuckle once or twice, as he remembered the joy of long-lost friends. Jun and his family were interned by the United States government for three years during World War II. Their freedom was lost, though Jun harbors no resentment against our country.

I met Lam Nguyen (Fig. 4) and her daughter Vivian Vu (Fig. 8) at Lam’s home. They graciously welcomed me. We sat on a comfortable couch while we talked. Since Lam’s English is limited, Vivian interpreted some of my inquiries about their difficult journey to the United States. I listened as they described a dark five-year existence under communist rule in South Vietnam. Their harrowing tale of sharing a small boat with



Figure 4. Jason Dowd, *Lam Nguyen*, 2023, oil on Arches oil paper mounted on hardboard (in progress), 16” x 12”.

fourteen people made me consider their relationship. I envisioned the difficult decision Lam had to make to escape Vietnam. I pictured her in my mind's eye looking tenderly downward toward her daughter. Her expression would be that of a concerned mother. I would use blue lighting on her hair and face to portray the night that they were rescued



Figure 5. Jason Dowd, *Milagro Perez*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16"x12".

by Japanese fishermen.

I visited Milagro "Milly" Perez (Fig. 5) and her daughter Wendy Schulien (Fig. 6) at Wendy's home.

Many windows inside of their home showed the cool overcast day outside. They greeted me with warm brown eyes and expressive smiles. Milly was stoic as she told

her story of dangerously crossing the border illegally to come into the U.S. Her manner was decisive and direct.

She said finding better employment was the reason for her leaving San Salvador. I knew that I had to paint her looking at the viewer. It would not be a confrontational stare, but rather a look of confident intent. She sought a better quality of life for her family.

Wendy contradicted some details of Milly's story with her own perspective. Wendy thought that there was too much violence in San Salvador. She had vivid memories of brutish soldiers and loud helicopters. They harassed people at gunpoint, separating the men from the women and children. Her eyes often filled with tears while her mind wandered through dappled memories of



Figure 6. Jason Dowd, *Wendy Schulien*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16"x12".

chaos. Her tilted head and watery, glazed eyes showed her inner fear. She shared her humanity in a vulnerable way with which many viewers could identify. I believed this would be the best way to portray her in my painting.

Jacque Nunez (Fig. 7) was doing what she had done for many decades when I met her. She was setting up tables at the San Juan Capistrano Mission to display



Figure 7. Jason Dowd, *Jacqueline Frances Sherrill-Nunez*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".

objects that represented her Native Ajachemen peoples. Through educational outreach, Jacque taught many audiences about the tools, clothing, food, and housing of the Ajachemen tribe. The sun shone brightly on her grinning face as we met by the columned arches inside of the mission. She was dressed in her Native regalia. Her abalone shell necklaces layered over beige and gray animal skin dress impressed me. On her head was a woven bowl-shaped hat upon which spanned repeating

designs. It was not difficult to see how I wanted to paint her. She posed gracefully by a textured brick wall. I photographed her looking hopefully up toward the sky.

Jacque was very natural as she talked about her experiences growing up as a Native American in California. She told me about being spat on when she went to a movie theater as a child. She also talked about her mother having received facial slaps regularly by nuns at St. Boniface. This had a negative influence on her parenting skills toward Jacque



Figure 8. Jason Dowd, *Vivian Vu*, 2022, oil on Arches oil paper mounted on hardboard (in progress), 16" x 12".

and her siblings. But this behavior made Jacque adamant to instead build bridges and heal the pain of others.

Vivian Vu (Fig. 8) recalled her escape from Vietnam with her mother through the lens of a 10-year-old girl. She recalled that they had not brought much water. Her mother Lam, for reasons unknown to her, had brought along a bag of sugar. Everything went wrong. After five days, their boat was floating helplessly on the waves somewhere in the Sea of Japan. All on board were delirious. Hearing her story, I imagined Vivian looking up innocently. I would compose her in the painting gazing upward. The blue light in Lam's painting would be used in the same fashion for Vivian. The paintings, hung together, could become a diptych.

In each case, the portrait is a visual record of the point at which they felt the loss of their individual freedoms and the subsequent emotional impact of that experience. For some, I have created graphite pencil drawings (Fig. 9) in preparation for the paintings. Others are more directly painted from my photographic reference such as the portrait of Jacque Nunez. The size of



Figure 9. Jason Dowd, *Jun Kato*, 2021, graphite on paper, 8" x 7".

the paintings is 12" x 16". The first three portraits *Jun Kato*, *Vivian Vu* and *Lam Nguyen*, have been painted in oils on Arches oil paper, mounted on hardboard panel. The remaining five paintings are painted on an oil-primed hardboard. The paintings are framed with dark frames. Decoration is minimal. The frames feature a flag that represents the sitter's country of origin (I printed and affixed these flags in the bottom,

center of each framed painting). For example, Vivian and Lam escaped Vietnam, a communist country. Their flags show a yellow star on a red field.

The LCAD advancement review committee helped me decide on painting eight people for my thesis project. This number struck everyone as a reasonable body of work to complete in a practical amount of time. Choosing whom to paint was my decision. I knew that I needed to represent a cross-section of people that would seem balanced. I carefully considered the gender, race, and backgrounds of my fellow human beings who would become the subject of my thesis project. I soon realized that I did not personally know many of the people that I sought. This was a perfect opportunity for growth on my part. I talked with family and friends, inquiring whom they knew, and thought might be good candidates. Over some months, I gathered names, phone numbers, and email addresses. Slowly, I located people willing to talk with me. Thankfully soon after all eight sitters had agreed to take part. The heart of the project could now be realized.

In 2016, the election of Donald Trump to the office of President of the United States signaled an extremist white majority backlash against outgoing President Barack Obama. This shift toward authoritarianism was a multi-layered process - decades in the making. It is a cold civil war. More specifically, this “rich white civil war,” according to New York Times columnist and author David Brooks, is being fought between the most politically active groups on the left and right. According to Brooks, the left is represented by progressive activists (8 percent of Americans), while the right is represented by devoted conservatives (6 percent). Interestingly, Brooks

points out that both groups are the whitest, richest, most highly educated, and thus enjoy what could be termed “the most personal freedoms.”

My own political standing is center, leaning left. I listen to both sides of a story before offering my opinion. I closely monitored the politics between 2016 and 2020. I observed the tactics being used on the extreme right, which included stoking hatred for immigrants and people of color. This was something that I saw as intolerant and anti-American. Many of my close friends are highly educated, successful professionals, raising families of their own. Most of them are non-white.

How much freedom or respect as an individual do you enjoy as a citizen or resident of the United States? The answer to this question will certainly vary and be widely interpreted. Where you were raised, the heritage you celebrate, your level of education, wealth, whether you are a U.S. citizen—these are some of the factors that influence how you will be viewed and treated. Such treatment affects our individual perception of what it means to be free in our country. The people that I am painting are sharing their stories about their experiences in the U.S., or how they came to this country. From the privileged to the common, the evolving conversation of what our democracy is continues to be a great experiment.

“Immigrants are here to murder Americans and take our jobs!” Wendy Schulien was shocked when a female Trump follower confronted her with this hateful insult. Wendy is an American citizen. Her mother, Milagro “Milly” Perez came to this country in 1976 from San Salvador, El Salvador to find a better life for her and her daughter. Braving the dangerous desert crossing that so many immigrants endure, Milly and Wendy eventually settled in Los Angeles. In 1987, they benefitted from

President Ronald Reagan's use of executive power granting amnesty to immigrants living in the United States. With this government assistance and her mother's hard work, Wendy overcame difficult language barriers and bullying from fellow students to graduate from high school. She went on to complete her undergraduate degree at UCLA. As a U.S. citizen, she now contributes to our nation as a teacher in the public school system.

I feel privileged and honored to be learning from all of these people. As an instructor, I am usually teaching. Here, however, I am very much a student. My own insular upbringing collides with their harsh experiences, which contributes to my personal growth. It is this growth that I would like to share with my audience.

In the past, portrait paintings had been reserved mostly for the wealthy. Paintings of people of rank and wealth fill museums across the globe. Yet countless common people live and work, largely anonymously. I follow in the footsteps of Norman Rockwell who portrayed common people more often than the famous. For example, he painted *Freedom of Speech* (Fig. 10) to show how every citizen in American democracy has the right to voice their opinion.



Figure 10. Norman Rockwell, *Freedom of Speech*, 1943 oil on canvas, 46" x 36", The Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, MA

As I have interviewed immigrants, citizens, and residents of the U.S., I recognize that each of these people is unique. They were surprised and obliging when I invited them to share their stories with me. Vivian and Lam spoke as I scribbled my longhand notes with a scratchy ballpoint pen. Their harrowing journey from Vietnam

to Japan was akin to a Steven Spielberg movie. Bad luck followed them every treacherous mile. Vivian's mother, Lam, had a simple vision—find a better life for her daughter. The communists had robbed them of all worldly assets. The last bit of wealth they possessed was two gold coins, which gained them passage on a fishing boat. Days later, Vivian, then a ten-year old girl, scooped salt water from the ocean to cool her sunbaked skin. The slight vessel bulged with fourteen souls aboard. It was never meant for travel on the high seas. The girl's mother Lam gazed at her. Her only thought was whether they would perish together. Had she made the right decision to leave their country? Weakness permeated her body as she stroked her daughter's hair. They had not eaten for days. Their water was almost gone. In her heart, she believed they would meet their destiny together. It was 1980, and five years of oppression had brought them to this place.

At the end of seven days, they were rescued by a crew of Japanese fishermen in the Sea of Japan. Everyone survived the perilous journey. Vivian, the girl in the story, is now a successful hair stylist in Tustin, California. She said “life is easy” after such an experience. She also praised her newfound freedom in the United States. Her American dream has been realized by hard work and the freedom to make her own choices. This churning of new blood and hungry visions keep our democracy vibrant. Our nation thrives on the diversity of its new citizens.

A willingness to show tolerance for one another strengthens our common bonds. Being good neighbors enlightens and contributes to our better natures. Our tradition of welcoming immigrants to the United States is held up to the world as an ideal of our American democratic system. This system is, however, still fallible. Yet

the case can be made that we remain a beacon to many fellow human beings around the globe. We are the authors of our nation's free will.

Currently, the U.S. faces an existential domestic threat. If we are to preserve our republic's delicate framework, we must unite as Americans. The color of our skin or the origin of our birth is not important. Coming together as a force for good to protect and defend our nation is our struggle, as it was Abraham Lincoln's during the civil war. Lincoln (Fig. 11) expressed that it would not be an outside force that would cause our democracy's destruction:

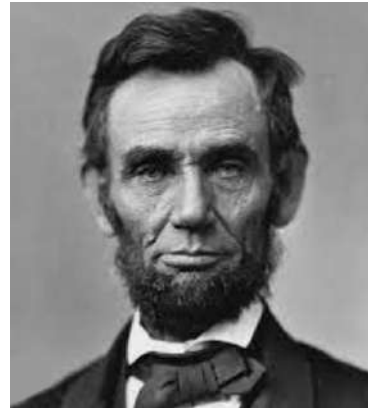


Figure 11. Alexander Gardner, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1863, photograph, The White House.

From whence shall we expect the approach of danger? Shall some trans-Atlantic military giant step the earth and crush us at a blow? Never. All the armies of Europe and Asia...could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River or make a track on the Blue Ridge in the trial of a thousand years. No, if destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men we will live forever or die by suicide.

RESEARCH

Research, research, and more research. Does this sound boring? Looking at Leonardo da Vinci is research. Looking at Rembrandt van Rijn is research. Studying Vincent van Gogh's life is research. This is the first part of my creative journey. I look at the lives and paintings of great painters to discover why they are considered great. There are almost endless examples of mediocre paintings. A strong supply of good paintings exists. However, it is the great paintings that are rare. Why is the *Mona Lisa*

from 1503 (Fig. 12) considered a great work of art? Because it was the first painting to truly reveal an inner personality of the sitter being painted. The slight smile on Lisa del Giocondo's face is a keystone to the Italian High Renaissance (1490-1530). Her expression, captured by Leonardo, represents the best of our human spirit. She reflects education, curiosity, and progress. With this brilliant portrait as a guide, I may better understand how a great painting stands uniquely apart from other works of art. This adventure tingles my senses, ignites my spark of inspiration, and sends me again and again on the quest for producing excellent paintings.



Figure 12. Leonardo da Vinci, *La Gioconda*, c. 1503-1519, oil on poplar, 30" x 21", Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In addition to researching great paintings and artists, I consider reading to be a fundamental part of my own education. I read *The New York Times* daily, and I particularly enjoy David Brooks' ideas on an array of subjects. "Scorn and the American Story," a *New York Times* opinion column published on October 14, 2021, parallels some of my ideas regarding immigrants, degradation, and loss of freedom in my thesis project. He refers to the evolution of our national story as we revisit, reinterpret, and integrate the darker details of our history. He cites African Americans, Latinx, Jews, and the Irish who have come to the United States, either willingly or in bondage. Their struggle to maintain cultural identities associated with their homelands while enduring racial slurs and housing and employment discrimination from a privileged and dominant white society is beyond the comprehension of many who have not experienced such treatment. Since I am

privileged and white, I need to be reminded of their struggles to flourish here. In comparison, my life has been easy. Their stories are a part of our inherited national history, and I feel a need to listen carefully to them.

Brooks discusses how those who were scorned, most often minorities like Wendy, reacted with “creative action.” Brooks references *The Omni-Americans* by Albert Murray to show how African American musicians playing the blues sought a creative response to their own experiences of oppression and bigotry. The resulting form of jazz music, as created by Louis Armstrong (Fig. 13) and



Figure 13. Eric Schwab, 1947, photograph, *Louis Armstrong*, Agence France-Presse (AFP).

other black artists, is a soulful outpouring of emotion, which harnesses the expressive power of art. Their suffering and endurance resulted in a uniquely American sound that has impacted and enriched the world.

Sam Kalman set out to dismantle the Nazi war machine. Being a Jewish American made his intent more personal. He entered World War II as a U.S. Army Air Corps officer, ready to battle the Luftwaffe. Braving combat as a B-17 nose gunner, his group’s plane, known as “Black Puff Polly”, was shot down on their first bombing mission over Germany on February 21, 1944. Farmers armed with pitchforks captured Sam and handed him over to the Gestapo. Soon, he found himself among fellow American soldiers in Stalag Luft 1, a prisoner-of-war camp located in Barth, Germany. After fourteen months in the POW camp, he was liberated by Russian forces. News of their thunderous approach caused the guards to abandon their posts and flee for their

own lives. Although Sam was once again a free man, he had endured anti-Semitism not only from his Nazi captors, but from within his own ranks who identified him as Jewish to his captors. He had helped to defeat fascism in the name of democracy, yet his struggle against hate would continue at home.

What happens if we allow authoritarian-minded leaders, such as Donald Trump, to triumph over the traditional principles and practices of our democracy? We, the people, would risk losing our individual freedoms and liberties that so many Americans like Sam have defended, sometimes sacrificing their lives, to that end. U.S.-born citizens could suffer the same fates as the people like Vivian and Lam who seek our country as a safe haven from communist dictatorships. In a *Freedom House* article “A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy,” Sarah Repucci cites the unethical immigration policies enacted by the Trump administration from 2017 to 2020. If bigoted leaders are allowed to gain power, skewed caste systems similar to Jim Crow laws could potentially become federal policy even today. A blow like this could undo decades of progress that began with the civil rights movement.

Given Trump’s beliefs, democracy could also face a leader in power abandoning presidential term limits. In 2018 Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China, declared himself “president for life.” Trump stated, “He’s now president for life, president for life. And he’s great... Maybe we’ll have to give that a shot someday.” We may be facing such a crisis in 2024. If we are to preserve our democracy, civic-minded people residing in the U.S. must work toward justice for all. This involves registering and voting in elections. Canvassing door-to-door for candidates, writing letters to encourage voter participation, signing petitions, or

phone/text banking to promote causes are all forms of democratic action. As an artist, I have done, and will continue to do, all of these things.

I am painting people who wish to enter our democratic way of life. They have made their decisions to journey here to find economic opportunity and a more stable life. In Zoë Lescaze's *New York Times* article, "T Agitprop Series (second installment), 13 Artists On: Immigration," artist Felipe Baeza (Fig. 14) expresses "the power of art to win over broad audiences when multidimensional, complex stories are told." My paintings and supporting written descriptions explore their complex stories.



Figure 14. Clifford Prince King, *Felipe Baeza*, 2023, photograph, www.felipebaeza.com/a

How do I engage my audience? In my painting, *The Submariner* (Fig. 15), I sought to capture the emotion of

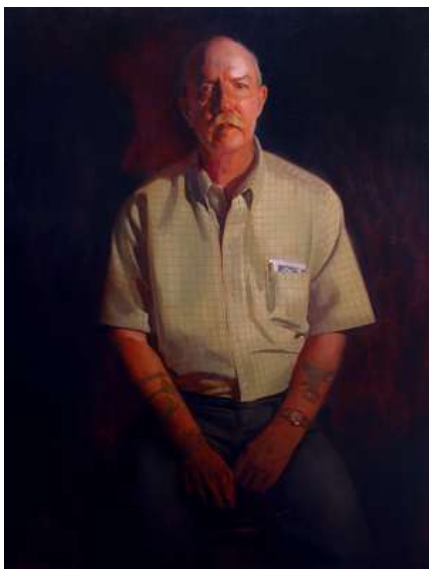


Figure 15. Jason Dowd, *The Submariner*, 2009, oil on canvas, 40" x 30".

the sitter by way of his arresting gaze. I am also inspired by Rembrandt's light. Rembrandt's painted depictions of form in light and shadow is famous the world over. I wonder however, how many people truly appreciate the nuances and transitions from light to middle tone to shadow, and then understand the wondrous voluminous reflected light. This is Rembrandt's "hook." His craft is so masterful that he is able to arrest and focus the attention of the connoisseur and the

layperson alike. The high drama that he creates brings life and a sense of ultimate

importance to his subjects. His paintings have lived since his brush left the surface of his canvases. In *Self-Portrait (1636-38)* (Fig. 16), Rembrandt confronts his viewer with an expression of confidence and sophistication. The strong chiaroscuro bathes the simplicity of the warm scene. He wears elegant fashion representing a man who has achieved respect and stability in the world. For the moment, he basks in the light of success. He commands our attention. Beneath this layer of status, we look deeper into his eyes and see the serenity of one who is loved and one who



Figure 16. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1636-38, oil on panel, 25" x 20", The Norton Simon Foundation.

loves others. We see empathy. He remains alive. I seek to capture this type of engagement in my own portrait paintings. Rembrandt's illumination of his subjects is still relevant today. When properly executed, the painterly characteristics of his works continue to open a conversation. If I am sensitive to my sitters' stories, expressions, and gestures as Rembrandt was, I will have a better chance to communicate who they are to my audience. I wish to share their importance on today's world stage.

Though my portrait paintings are on a much smaller scale, I hope to fill my subjects with charismatic effects of light and shadow. The glint of highlights shining thickly on a forehead moving down the rounded bridge of a nose toward sensitive rosy lips can be dramatic and appealing. Dark hair cascading gently over a shoulder casts a rich shadow that punctuates a yellow blouse. The stroking of bristle brushes

deliberately transforms abstract hunks of paint into bone and muscle. When a subject is dreamt in the mind of an artist who is deeply connected to their expressiveness, artistic visions are realized.

METHODOLOGY

Past experiences and recent interactions continue to enrich my perspective on American democracy. I feel challenged as an artist to meet the positive and negative sides of our national conversation.

When I began this series of portrait paintings, I had an idealistic perspective. I derived meaning from my personal experiences. What has become very apparent to me is that my experiences differ greatly from the people I am painting. I have experienced personal growth due to this realization. By interviewing and then painting my subjects, I am forging a connection with them. The painting process helps me to digest their stories. I reflect on who they are, rather than who I am. This shift of focus allows me to be an integral part of the creative process, but I feel as if I am looking at the world through their lenses and seeing the meaning of their lives.

The first stage of my creative process is talking with a candidate about their experiences. By interviewing my portrait subjects, I better understand the perspectives of people who have come to the U.S. seeking a more prosperous life. However, I want to temper my enthusiasm with examples of people who have, as American citizens, suffered losses of personal freedoms. My first painting in the series was *Jun Kato* (Fig. 3), a Japanese American who was interned at Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming from 1942 to 1945. The basis for this internment was simply his Japanese heritage. The December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor left deep wounds and demands

for retribution. The U.S. government, representing a predominantly white society, punished and discriminated against an innocent group of people. Although Jun does not hold a personal grudge against our government for such treatment, it remains a national tragedy.

During the second stage, as I do with all of my sitters, I have a photo reference session. Asking questions while I take pictures is a standard part of my procedure. When sitters recall certain intimate memories that they may or may not want to share verbally, their expression might divulge a feeling of vulnerability.



Figure 17. Jun Kato, 2021, Jason Dowd, reference photo.

I asked Jun (Fig. 17) to recall his memories as I photographed him. At age 94, his expression did not change. He had long ago processed and accepted his past. I directed him to move his head so I could observe subtly different angles. At times, I shifted the light to investigate how the shadows affected his facial features. As my camera clicks, I reflect on the challenge to balance observation, direction, and interaction with a sitter. There is a certain flow that develops between us. I am a painter – not a photographer. However, I find that one photo usually stands out among the others. Due to modern digital cameras, I am able to review images immediately after a photo session. If I feel I do not capture a strong descriptive photo after 15 to 20 minutes, another session is scheduled. A sitter's energy and attention fades within that timeframe, so it is imperative to work quickly. It is rare that I need to schedule a second photo session.

The third stage is carefully reviewing the photos of my sitters. Deciding which expression most conveys who they are is crucial. The light is also a serious consideration. In this series of portrait paintings, I am using a high value contrast of light and shadow or chiaroscuro, punctuated with a dark background.

The fourth stage is sketching my sitter from the selected photo reference. Returning to my studio, I created a graphite drawing on paper, using a combination of tone, hatching, and cross-hatching to describe the volume of Jun's form (Fig. 9). He is the oldest person I have yet drawn and painted. Rendering the crevices and wrinkles brought about with age was mysteriously satisfying. Once I captured his likeness in my drawing, I was excited to move forward with the painting.

The fifth stage is creating the oil painting. I decided to paint a very realistic painting, as I want the viewer to feel as though they are interacting with a real person. If the painting is hauntingly realistic, the impact of the encounter may resonate more fully. The success or failure of my series rests with the connection, realization, and conclusion that people should be freely treated as equals within our democracy.

Prior to painting, I visualize how my paintings will differ from my photo reference. The brushwork, which shows hard or soft edges as well as the varying thickness of paint layers, is a defining characteristic. The single most important factor of drawing and painting is composition. Initially, I thought that I would compose my portrait paintings in a larger format, 24" x 20". While it would be wonderful to paint this large if I had unlimited amounts of time to dedicate to any single project, this was

simply impractical given my timeline for completing the MFA program. Time is always a determining factor when it comes to any painting or series of paintings. I



Figure 18. Jason Dowd, *Jun Kato*, 2021, oil on Arches oil paper mounted on hardboard (in progress), 16" x 12".

believed a 16" x 12" format would allow for an engaging subject with regard to the sitter's head size (Fig. 18). At this size, Jun's head would be scaled to follow my interpretation of Rembrandt's portrait paintings, making a subject's head just smaller than life-size.

I also considered the shape format upon which I would build my composition. A pyramid is a traditional, time-tested compositional strategy. As the primary focal point, the head rests in the upper section. This

is the most important area of this geometric shape. The neck and shoulders create a base in the lower portion of the pyramid. The base is critical for solidifying the "weight" of the composition. The base, like the ancient Egyptian pyramids, gives a sense of permanence.

Light is a defining quality of how we perceive a subject. Overcast light conveys a melancholy mood. Rim or spotlighting is dramatic. *Contre-jour* lighting, or lighting a subject from behind, adds mystery. I have chosen a single artificial light source with a temperature balance close to the sun, approximately 5000 degrees Kelvin. This strong light creates shadows that pronounce the forms of the anatomy.

Jun is elderly, which means he has many wrinkles describing his longevity. The bold light emphasizes his facial lines.

Per discussions with my mentor, John Brosio, and my advisor, Peter Zokosky, we decided that I should place flags representing the home country of origin on the lower portion of the frame. The flag on the frame of *Jun Kato* (Fig. 3) serves as a narrative symbol of his birth in the United States. Color and brushwork contribute to the emotion of a painting. I am using warm light to illuminate Jun's face and neck, while his tee shirt is a cooler temperature and a darker local value. This is a value strategy for allowing Jun's head to be the lightest, and thus the most strongly contrasting area of the painting. This reinforces that his face is the primary focal point. I have always been attracted to a dominantly warm palette of colors. These colors include Cadmium Yellow Light, Yellow Ochre, Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Red Light, Cadmium Red Deep, and Transparent Red Oxide.

I balance these warmer colors with neutral and cooler colors such as Titanium White, Raw Umber, Permanent Green Light, Sap Green, Ultramarine Blue, Quinacridone Rose, Alizarin Crimson, and Ivory Black. As I paint, I also build impasto layers. When these layers have dried, I glaze rich transparent colors (Indian Yellow) over this ragged surface then wipe some of the pigment away with a clean cloth. The filling of pigment allows the valleys of the strokes to become more evident. This process is a rich, indirect form of painting.

Jun and I spoke for three hours. He talked about his family, his friends, and his life prior to 1942 and how things changed drastically that year. Some of the details he shared gave me insight into the injustice that exists in our culture. I asked him to recall

his memories as I photographed him. At age 94, his expression changed very subtly. His mouth was the most expressive part of his face, only sometimes revealing a smile. I thanked him for his service as an American WWII veteran and told him that I would begin work on my painting of him.

CONCLUSION

I entered the Laguna College of Art and Design MFA program thanks to a promotion I received in 2015. LCAD, via Hélène Garrison and Michael Savas, graciously extended the privilege of pursuing this degree to further my education as an instructor at the school.

Research, lengthy interviews, class discussions, as well as internal reflection, have shaped my views on our democracy. As I look to others for their interpretations of American democracy, I have heard descriptive words used such as “opportunity,” “freedom,” and “stability.” These are positive statements from immigrants speaking about successfully resettling in the United States. Others, who have lived their lives here have used critical terms like “racism,” “too idealistic,” or “inequality.” When these words are digested, they begin to form a complex definition of our society. Democracy is an imperfect framework, yet this system has sustained itself for over 200 years. Those who choose to participate through voting, political activism, and staying informed by way of credible media sources, may see their efforts rewarded.

In the eight years that it has taken to earn my degree (taking one class per semester), I have learned to consider new conceptual and technical approaches to painting. My mentors, Peter Zokosky and John Brosio, as well as my advisor, Betty Shelton have taught and challenged me with regard to questioning my perspectives. The most significant example is the Advancement Review Committee (Peter Zokosky

Cynthia Sitton, and William Neukomm), who were highly influential in shaping my thesis framework. We discussed my desire to paint historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Tubman. The consensus was that these famous individuals had already been painted many times and more of the same would not be particularly interesting to a contemporary audience. Internally, I bristled. It was not what I wanted to hear. My thinking was that I was here to paint what I was most passionate about. Should I not have the last word on what interests me as the artist working through this program? We continued our discussion about other possibilities. While considering the country's political circumstances and my passion for wanting to defend our democracy, Peter brought up the contrary idea of painting common people. This idea stuck. An evolution was now taking place. Though I did not fully realize it at the time, I later reflected that being in a program means there are many voices to contribute, analyze, and critique the artist. While this now appears rather obvious, when I was in the midst of this stormy banter, I had not fully absorbed the information that was provided to me. As I told people about this fresh direction, they responded enthusiastically. My good friend and fellow illustrator, Robert Rodriguez, thoughtfully stated, "I couldn't stop thinking about the idea for your thesis." Others agreed. I know from Norman Rockwell's teaching that when people react strongly to an idea for a painting, you know it is good. And so, this collaborative project began in earnest. I too saw many possibilities and began to examine the complexities of how common people represent American democracy. Critical questions arose. "How will you determine who will be the subjects of these paintings?" one MFA student asked during a discussion. I replied that I had carefully considered the gender, race, and backgrounds

of each potential candidate. As the intricate layers weaved together and subjects were identified, I started to work.

Through the interviews described in this paper, my insights into what our nation *means to other people* formed more clearly. My lens became one of many. My preconceptions about our society were altered. Each of the people I interviewed made gritty decisions to precariously advance toward a better life, and during that course, they endured hardships to simply survive. Their efforts, recorded in Appendix B, do not make them famous. The challenges they overcame were, however, heroic.

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APPENDIX A



Plate 1. *Patricia V. D'Souza*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 2. *Sam Kalman*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 3. *Jun Kato*, 2021, oil on Arches oil paper mounted on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 4. *Lam Nguyen*, 2022, oil on Arches oil paper mounted on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 5. *Milagro Perez*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 6. *Wendy Schulien*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 7. *Jacqueline Frances Sherrill-Nunez*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".



Plate 8. *Vivian Vu*, 2023, oil on hardboard, 16" x 12".

APPENDIX B

Each portrait subject referred to in Appendix B kindly allowed me to interview them. I heard their stories first-hand and recorded their statements via handwritten notes as faithfully as possible. As a special note, I relied on Sam Kalman's daughter, Tyra Kalman, for her written story about her father. To mention, I was good friends with Sam and heard many first-hand accounts from him during visits he made to my father's art studio in St. Louis, Missouri.

Name: Patricia "Pat" V. D'Souza

Born: 1955

Birthplace: Washington, Georgia

Date Interviewed: March 22, 2023

Pat D'Souza grew up in the Deep South in the 1960s. Her African American heritage was a source of hardship for her and her family. Bigotry and segregation against Blacks was legislated in Southern states via Jim Crow laws.

In 1962, Pat's mother and father went to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. They decided not to take their children due to the potential for violence. When they returned home that evening, they were followed by a group of armed white men in trucks. Pat's dad took his family to their grandfather's home to take refuge. He also gave guns to each family member. "Stay down!", he told them. They were ready for trouble. A storm had just rolled in. Hunkering on the ground in a barn, they surveyed the landscape through a window. Every time the lightning cracked from the dark clouds, they saw the silhouettes of men holding shotguns. Minutes passed slowly. Then they saw it. A cross was grimly burning on their property. The family stayed low

and waited. When it started to rain, the men got into their trucks and left.

Pat's parents were active members of the NAACP. By her ninth-grade year in high school, Pat was the secretary for her NAACP chapter.

An African American eighth-grade English teacher at her school made it known that "there might be trouble soon". A white male student came forward and accused this teacher of beating him. No evidence, other than the boy's word, had been offered. The teacher was immediately fired. The NAACP intervened to try to help the teacher get her job back. The Black community protested. The students marched out of school, refusing to attend classes until the teacher was reinstated. Blacks boycotted local stores and marched carrying signs professing the teacher's innocence. Whites could not believe the "audacity" of Blacks to take such measures. One white store owner responded by shoving a shotgun in the faces of Pat and her friends, who were seated in the back of a truck. He shouted at them, "Niggers, get out of here!" He then shot a hole in a nearby wall. Black parents feared for the safety of their children. A meeting was called by the NAACP at the Masonic Hall to discuss the situation. The local sheriff came to the meeting, angrily stating that "he was tired of you niggers." The Georgia State Patrol made their presence known outside of the hall. Shots were fired. A shootout between the police and meeting attendees caused everyone to flee the building. Pat ran to her brother's car. She recalls a friend diving into the car as it sped off. The State Patrol cars followed. They drove as fast as they could until they could not see the pursuing police cars any longer. Eventually, they stopped at a house to rest. When they returned later, they learned about what had happened to others who were at the meeting. One person had hidden under the church to avoid the violence. Two

NAACP members were beaten and arrested. Another meeting was held in a different county. The NAACP retrieved the men who had been arrested. They were brought directly from jail to the meeting. Their faces were bloody and bruised. The people at the meeting were horrified by their condition. Shortly after these violent clashes, the boy who made the accusation came forward and confessed that he had gotten into a fight with a schoolmate. He had lied about the whole story. The Black teacher was not rehired.

Black children refused to attend school for one year. A different school was built for their safety. Because of these changes, many white families left the area. The Black community referred to this as “white flight.” Facilities, such as libraries and pools, were also closed to block access to Blacks. Dentists’ offices were also segregated.

Pat attended graduate school in Ohio. The difference in how she was treated by people in Ohio was “soothing.” Many international students were in attendance and made her feel welcome. She earned her Ph.D. in Business Administration in 1983. She received many job offers from universities around the country.

She decided to take a job in Georgia. The faculty was racially split, 50/50 (white/Black). After her years in Ohio, over time, she envisioned that circumstances would be better now in Georgia. They were not. There was no interaction between white and Black faculty members. Pat became ill with Crohn’s disease and was hospitalized. No white faculty members acknowledged her illness or visited her in the hospital.

In 1985, Pat began to consider moving to California. She spoke with a colleague who recommended Cal State Fresno as an opportunity. Pat successfully found employment within the California State University system. She moved from Cal State Fresno to Cal State San Bernardino, where she recently retired. Her experiences at these California institutions surpassed her expectations. Pat still suffered from Crohn's disease while working in California. The business school faculty, many of whom were white, donated their sick leave so that Pat would not have to go without pay.

Even in California, Pat has experienced racism. In 2001, a driver in a truck riding through her neighborhood sped toward her and her husband while they were on a walk. The driver yelled at them, "Niggers, get out of the street!" Pat called the police immediately. The officers who responded to the call said that there was nothing they could do. The police department assigned a detective to investigate the incident. The detective learned that the perpetrator was a 17-year-old white neighbor. Pat met with the boy's mother. After a discussion, Pat accepted an apology from the boy and did not press any charges.

Between 2016 and 2020, racial slurs and related incidents toward Pat increased. With the election of President Biden in 2020, Pat said that she is hopeful for our country. She actively works to register voters and gives talks on the importance of participating in our democracy.

Name: Sam Kalman

Born: February 22, 1921

Died: April 6, 1999

Birthplace: St. Louis, Missouri

Date Interviewed: Written text provided by Tyra Kalman; not formally interviewed by Jason Dowd

Samuel Kalman was born in St. Louis, Missouri on February 22, 1921. A first-generation Jewish American, Sam's parents fled the murderous pogroms of Warsaw, Poland and Kiev, Ukraine in the early 1900s and settled in St. Louis. As a young boy, Sam hustled newspapers on the streets of South St. Louis. He went to Soldan High School, was a student at the local shul, was a cantor's apprentice, and was the only kid tough enough to catch his brother Sidney's fast ball. Sam faced antisemitism throughout his childhood so when World War II began, he enlisted with one goal in mind – to kill Hitler. A nose gunner of a B-17, he was an officer in the 8th Air Force, 457th Bomb Group. On February 21, 1944, he was shot down over Nazi Germany, captured by German farmers, and turned over to the Gestapo. His final stop before liberation was Stalag Luft I, North 1 – a POW camp with a specific compound to house Jewish GIs. Unlike some of his Jewish counterparts in other Nazi POW camps, Sam survived. The American Red Cross provided food parcels which kept him alive despite the starvation diet provided by the Nazis. He kept a clandestine journal where he recorded his time there, documenting the mundane and the hideous.

The Jewish GIs knew what was happening to the Jews of Europe. Sam heard rumors of gas chambers masquerading as showers and recounted the first time he was

allowed to shower as one of the most terrifying moments of his capture. In transport to Stalag Luft I, Sam's train stopped and he disembarked with other POWs to relieve himself. From where he stood, separated by a narrow field, was a parallel track and a train of boxcars. The occupants were terrified young Jewish Romanian women. Sam spoke to them in Yiddish. They were being transported to a death camp to service the Nazi rapists before being gassed. The conversation was abandoned with the arrival of a machine gun to his temple and an order to be silent.

He faced Nazi hate and the antisemitism from his fellow POWs – American GIs knew that Sam was Jewish and revealed this to the German guards. In the face of this betrayal, he proudly leaned into his Jewish identity, with a stoic determination to survive. But the experience left him forever changed, and he struggled to reconcile his Jewishness with what appeared to him as a holy abandonment. Unquestioned and unchallenged and flourishing in the minds of so many, fascism, anti-Jewish bias, and antisemitism sanctioned a genocide, erased multi-generations of Jews, and changed the trajectory of a young Jewish man from the slums of St. Louis.

Sam's experience as a Jewish POW in Nazi Germany ran parallel to the experience of his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins of Poland who did not flee to America before the war but stayed and braced themselves against the rise of hate, antisemitism, and fascism. Sam's parents never spoke of who they left behind and years later, after Sam's death, his daughter found the records of the murder of their Polish family. While Sam languished in Barth, Germany in the desolate POW camp, his extended family was transported to the death camps of Treblinka and Auschwitz where they were gassed.

Sam returned from the war to attend Washington University on the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the G.I. Bill—a government sponsored program crafted to provide soldiers coming home access to higher education, unemployment benefits, and low-interest bank loans. The bill did not address the racially discriminating Jim Crow laws of the South or the racist anti-Black gatekeeping of the banking and housing institutions across the United States. It created hurdles for many Black servicemen who sought higher education and a chance at equity and wealth. In many cases it widened the economic divide between Black GIs and their white counterparts. Black veterans who returned from fighting fascism and racism abroad returned to a society in which their humanity was degraded, their personhood disenfranchised, their existence discriminated against, their lives policed, and their families terrorized; much like many European Jews in the decades that preceded WWII and resulted in the Holocaust.

After two years at Washington University, Sam transferred to the University of Missouri, receiving a degree in Journalism, the first offered at the university. He went on to found community newspapers and to write plays, short stories, and poetry. He painted abstract, and in some cases mind-bending art, which at times reflected his internal turmoil. For over 40 years, he ran a successful advertising and public relations business that catered to local and state politicians and the booming St. Louis real estate market. He was known to seal a deal with nothing more than a handshake. He was gregarious and loving and created safe spaces for a diverse group of friends of all ages and backgrounds. No one was a stranger to Sam. He struggled throughout his life with the aftermath of his imprisonment, both emotionally and physically, balancing his

crippling PTSD with his outgoing nature. In his final years, as an act of healing old wounds, he put on his 457th squadron baseball hat and penned his memoir, transcribing the contents of his war time journal. Once completed, he took off his hat and told his wife of 30 years, “I don’t think I need to wear this anymore.”

Sam wanted his story and the story of millions to be told, to be learned from, to not be forgotten. The current rebranding of Nazism, fascism, the sensationalizing of authoritarian doublespeak, the permissive spaces that harbor racism and dangerous revisionist histories, are a threat to the progress made by people like Sam. His story is one of survival. The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Holocaust and genocide survivors are the continuum of this survival. These offspring are the dreams of their ancestors – a record of resilience, of luck, of grace, and the failed attempt of fascists to eradicate the entirety of a people. Their existence and persistence are our call to action, to dismantle that which does not serve the greater goodness, the better angels, of humanity.

Tyra Kalman copyright 2023

Name: Jun Kato

Born: 1927

Birthplace: Los Angeles, California

Date Interviewed: June 11, 2021

At the age of 14, Jun Kato and his Japanese-American family found themselves in a tenuous situation. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 caused the United States to enter World War II against Japan. A ferocious backlash against anyone of Japanese descent living in the U.S. ensued. Racial division in a majority-white society ran deep. Americans wanted swift and decisive retaliation.

Approximately three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jun and his family were gathered together, along with other fellow Japanese-American families, by authorities of the U.S. government. Initially, they were housed in stables covered with camouflage netting. Under the restriction of guards, they soon built sturdier housing in the form of bungalows near the Santa Anita racetrack. Ultimately, they were transported to Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming where they were interred from 1942-1945.

His family—mother, father, and five children—lived in a single unit. The approximate barrack size was 20' x 24' for a family of six or more. Medical care was given when Jun had to have his appendix removed. His father also received treatment for tuberculosis.

There was no discussion among family members about being forcefully uprooted from their previous lives. They minded their own business during their time in the camp and did not go to the edge of the fence.

Jun was the second oldest sibling, with an older brother, a younger sister, and two younger brothers. They attended a school that had been built on the premises to educate the children. He graduated from high school there in 1944.

The Heart Mountain Relocation Center was dispersed in 1945. Shortly thereafter in September, Jun was drafted into the United States Army. He was sent to Europe for 18 months. Due to his previous experience in the ice cream plant, he was assigned a job at a PX (Post Exchange) soda fountain in Rosenheim, Germany.

During his tour of duty, segregation was strictly observed. He was housed separately from white soldiers, with minorities, four to a room.

One day, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), and his entourage entered the PX where Jun was working. Approximately five to ten feet away from Jun, General Eisenhower made a small purchase before exiting the store.

Returning to the U.S. in 1947, Jun rejoined his family. His father had recovered from his bout with tuberculosis, but had a “broken spirit,” in Jun’s words, from his experiences during wartime relocation.

For the rest of their lives, Jun’s parents would never speak of what they had lived through. Jun pursued further education under the G.I. Bill, attending the Northrop Institute for two years. He worked at McDonnell Douglas which paid for him to attend UCLA. He later became an engineer at Northrop.

Jun is currently 96 years old. He holds no resentment against the United States government for the grave injustices against his and many other Japanese American families relocated during World War II.

Name: Lam Nguyen (mother of Vivian Vu)

Born: 1944

Birthplace: Hanoi, Vietnam

Name: Vivian Vu (daughter of Lam Nguyen)

Born: 1970

Birthplace: Saigon, Vietnam

Date Interviewed: September 28, 2021

When the United States evacuated its troops from South Vietnam in 1975, the lives of Lam and her ten-year-old daughter, Vivian, were shattered. The Communist regime of North Vietnam now ruled. The freedom they had known was gone.

Lam's husband, Muc Vu, had been an officer in the South Vietnamese army. He was imprisoned by the Communists for ten years. Vivian's uncle, thought to be in the CIA by the new regime, was sentenced to three years in prison. Those who worked for the South Vietnamese government were tracked down and punished.

Lam taught 4th and 5th grades as an elementary school teacher. She was forced to change her curriculum. She could only teach the revisionist history that focused on Ho Chi Minh. Lam and Vivian had to wear brown uniforms with red scarves at school. Lam earned about one-third of her former salary.

The Communists controlled all store sales of products. Portions of goods, such as powdered milk and bicycle tires, were rationed. Lam was forced to sell whatever assets they had to survive. Loyal Communists would report those who had more than others to the government.

After five years of life under Communist rule, Lam was fed up. She was willing to risk her and her daughter's welfare to seek freedom.

Lam's neighbor had a brother who was a fisherman. He owned a boat and offered to transport Lam, Vivian, and 12 others to the Philippines. The cost for this journey was the only money they had left in the world - two ounces of gold.

Lam and Vivian left in the middle of the night to meet at the agreed destination. The boat Lam saw was fifteen feet long. She thought this small boat would shuttle them to a larger ocean-going vessel. Unfortunately, she was mistaken. This was the boat meant for fourteen people to travel the open sea.

After two days, what little food and water they had was almost gone. By the third day, Lam questioned her decision to leave. Had she made the right choice? The motor had broken and was leaking oil. The boat was also leaking water. The men bailed it out regularly to stay afloat. Their compass proved of little use. What should have been a three- or four-hour trip had now become five miserable days of survival. All on board were delirious. They were lost somewhere in the Sea of Japan. Thai pirates roamed these waters, so they kept watch the best they could. Three large ships passed them but did nothing to help.

On the fifth night, the fisherman who owned the boat spotted a net float bobbing in the water. He recognized it as something commercial fishermen use to catch fish. He knew that if he held onto it, sooner or later, they would be pulled in along with the fishing net. It worked. However, as they approached the fishing boat, the delirium of those aboard the small boat made them think they were seeing Thai pirates. The fisherman had long beards and tan skin. These were pirate traits they had

been told to watch out for. Once they were alongside the commercial vessel, the men began to fight. This went on for several minutes. Only after Lam saw the Japanese flag did she yell for everyone to stop fighting.

The Japanese fishermen were prepared with food and clothing to welcome Lam, Vivian, and the others onboard. As soon as they had eaten and changed, a storm began to roll in. Lam and Vivian looked over the side at their wobbly craft. What remained of the boat cracked into pieces and sank.

Thanks to the caring nature of the Japanese fisherman, all 14 souls survived. Everyone was transported to Okinawa, Japan. News of their rescue was reported by the Japanese media. The Red Cross greeted them. Every person was clothed, given food, new clothing, and taught how to live in Japanese society.

For the next two years, they spent time in a military encampment adjusting to their new country. Vivian was trained as a makeup and skincare specialist. When they were prepared to live on their own, they were given the equivalent of several thousands of dollars. Lam and Vivian lived in Okinawa for two years. They moved to Tokyo and lived for another ten years. Not knowing what had become of her husband, Lam remarried and had two children. Vivian's father did survive and was released from prison. After reuniting, he helped Vivian relocate to the United States. Lam joined her in the U.S. 10 years later.

Vivian is now a hairstylist. My wife, Mary, and I often visit her salon. Lam is retired. Both Lam and Vivian are very happy with their new lives in the U.S.

Name: Milagro “Milly” Perez (mother of Wendy Schulien)

Born: 1954

Birthplace: San Salvador, El Salvador

Name: Wendy Schulien (daughter of Milly Perez)

Born: 1973

Birthplace: San Salvador, El Salvador

Date Interviewed: March 13, 2023

Milly Perez grew up in a low-income household in San Salvador, El Salvador. At nineteen years old, she married and became pregnant. One year later, she divorced her husband. Like many young women of her generation, she was not making much money. Opportunities for lucrative jobs were not readily available. She began to dream of leaving her home country and migrating to the United States.

When Milly was ready to leave her home country of El Salvador in 1976, she took a bus to Tijuana, Mexico. She decided it would be best if she left her three-year-old daughter, Wendy, with her grandmother. From Tijuana, Milly embarked on a perilous journey to walk across the border into the U.S.

Though her mother did not talk about it, Wendy recalls another reason for her mother wanting to leave El Salvador. As a young girl, Wendy’s experiences of the violence in San Salvador were firsthand. She remembers her devoutly Catholic grandmother taking her into the city to see Archbishop Oscar Romero’s funeral. Archbishop Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980, during a mass. The civil war raged from 1980 to 1992. The plaza was crowded with women protesting. They carried banners voicing their outrage at the senseless act of murder. Standing outside

of the church, far toward the back, an explosion occurred inside the church. People ran screaming in all directions. Wendy and her grandmother made their way toward a bus to go home. Along the way, her grandmother bought a small pinata to keep her granddaughter entertained. During the ride home, the bus was stopped by soldiers. All passengers were told to get off. They were lined up facing toward a fence. The soldiers separated the men from the women. The soldiers ordered the women to walk away. The vivid memories of burning cars, bullets flying overhead, and helicopters with armed men vividly live within Wendy's childhood memories. Yet even though her mother had decided to try for a better life, Wendy did not want to leave San Salvador to join her.

Milly had to work very hard in the U.S. cleaning houses, often 7 days a week. She lived in an apartment with close friends while earning \$70 a week from her job. She received no child support from her former husband. Being diligent and saving her own money, Milly decided it was time to bring her daughter to the United States.

Wendy did not want to leave her home in San Salvador. Despite continual violence in her country, she wanted to stay. Milly came for her, and they left together on a plane bound for Tijuana. Wendy said goodbye to her grandmother. She even had to leave her favorite stuffed animal, "Stuffy," behind.

In Tijuana, they met a "coyote man" who took money in exchange for clandestine travel into the U.S. Milly and Wendy were directed to get into a hidden compartment inside a truck. It smelled strongly of gasoline vapors. This made it difficult for everyone to breathe. During their long drive, Wendy recalls the truck being stopped at checkpoints. Voices and flashlights were strange and bright. The roar

of the motor signaled a new leg of their journey. After about eight hours, both arrived safely at Milly's apartment. Wendy's first meal in America was a bowl of Kellogg's Frosted Flakes.

Milly was working two jobs. She cleaned private residences as well as commercial offices. Getting Wendy enrolled in school was challenging. She entered first grade at a school that required a long bus ride. After three or four months, Milly approached a local Catholic school. The nuns allowed Wendy to attend.

Wendy always felt like an "outsider" due to the language barrier. Her best friend at elementary school was a Korean girl who also did not speak English. Soon, Wendy became obsessed with learning English. She started with books meant for babies. Her quest for knowledge continued. Eventually, she was awarded academic scholarships at her Catholic school. These allowed her to pursue her education through high school.

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. This new legislation granted amnesty to people who had immigrated illegally to the U.S. before 1982. For Milly and Wendy, this meant that they were now citizens of the United States. Now, more than ever, Milly believed their American dream could be fulfilled.

Milly was proud of her daughter. She was also protective and mindful of Wendy's education. Milly made sure that Wendy had uninterrupted time for her studies. When family or friends visited their home, Wendy studied in her room.

Wendy worked very hard and achieved much academically. However, she continued to be bullied by other students because of her accent. The nuns did not allow her to speak Spanish at all. Wendy persisted and earned placement in AP classes.

In the ninth grade, Wendy rode the bus regularly from Santa Monica to La Brea. She noticed the UCLA campus on her route. She visualized attending UCLA as a possibility throughout the rest of her high school career.

Her persistence and hard work once again paid off. She applied to and was accepted into UCLA. Wendy majored in Psychology and minored in Education. She received a full scholarship and graduated from UCLA. Wendy made her mother proud.

Wendy chose education as her profession. She has been an elementary school teacher for 20 years. She currently teaches the fifth grade. She is married and has one child. Milly is retired and lives with her daughter, son-in-law, and grandson in their home.

Milly worked very hard physically at her jobs to make a living. At 68 years old, she comes from a generation that believes in achieving goals through hard work alone. She perceives the U.S. as moving in a less positive direction due to an attitude of entitlement among the younger generation.

Wendy's vision of the American dream has been fulfilled. Since the election in 2016, however, her faith in fellow Americans has raised alarm. Wendy still believes in the U.S., but questions how many citizens wrongly view the plight of immigrants. She sees them, like herself, as people seeking a better life for themselves and their families. She also has faith that our democratic process can address injustice and create positive change. For that, she remains hopeful.

Name: Jacqueline “Jacque” Frances Sherrill-Nunez

Born: 1952

Birthplace: San Pedro, CA

Date Interviewed: April 7, 2023

Jacque Sherrill-Nunez is a ninth-generation *Rios*. She descends from the indigenous people of Southern California, the *Juanenos*. The name “*Rios*” was given to the *Ajachemen* in the 18th century by Spanish missionaries. Her ancestors assisted in the construction of the mission at San Juan Capistrano. Today, her people have established a different name – the *Juaneno* Band of Mission Indians/*Ajachemen* Nation (aw-ha-she-mon). *Ajachemen* is their indigenous name from thousands of years ago. Translated, it means “the people that sleep in a heap.” They cuddled up in their dwelling to stay warm and often ended up piled one on another like a brand new litter of puppy dogs or kittens!

Jacque is a historical storyteller who educates her audience about how the *Ajachemen* people lived in the Orange County region. They originally lived in villages that extended from the Santa Ana Mountains down to northern San Diego County.

Jacque also teaches to heal. She was raised by her parents in the *Rios* Adobe in San Juan Capistrano as a little girl, while they cared for her great-grandmother, Gertrude Rios. Their family later moved to San Pedro, California. Her father was of Irish descent. Her mother was from the *Ajachemen* Nation.

During the early 1900s the government gave monies to churches to create schools for Native Americans. They were placed in several areas of the United States. Jacque's mother, Frances, who was nicknamed "Mona," and her brother Danny were

taken away to St. Boniface around 1930. Although Mona was her nickname from the Spanish word doll, *muñeca*, she did not feel like a doll. She felt rejected that she and her brother were taken. Was it her dark skin? Was it because her mom didn't want her? Why? Why would that nun so stern and unloving and a priest take her from her life with her prayerful and loving grandmother?

Jacque's mother's stay was not one to feel boastful about, and she kept the facts of abuse and degradations to herself, until finally sharing it with Jacque when she was 17. Mona was the life of the gathering in Capistrano. Her personality was welcoming to all guests with food, her home, dancing, drinking, and having a fun time! But with her children, there was a dark side no one saw, that for many years Jacque and her siblings thought was normal. Her style of parenting must have mimicked the abusive way the nuns treated her. Her children received the wrath of her memories from her six years at St. Boniface. Her heavy hand and facial slaps were common and many whippings from the belt were warranted in Mona's eyes, but were they? They were no more than the harsh treatment she received from the staff at St. Boniface. Jacque's great-grandmother was gentle, kind, and very prayerful. From where did Mona learn such harsh parenting? The only answer in Jacque's mind is her mother's stay at St. Boniface. Long after her childhood and teenage years, Jacque forgave her mom, but the historical trauma of abuse from St. Boniface affected her and her siblings. No one will ever know the whole truth about the abuse that she suffered from the staff and community of Banning, California, but they were treated very much like the Black Americans in the South. They had to enter the back door to the movie show, never the front. There was only one day a month they could go—the last

Saturday of the month—and they could only sit on certain chairs that were then cleaned thoroughly before other non-Natives could sit on the chairs they sat on! What were those staff members afraid of? Why such demeaning actions? It affected the Native children to be treated as though their presence was filthy and their inner being was less than. And while walking to the show, Mona's tearful recollection was of white men spitting on the ground for their little feet to step on and shouting, "Dirty Indian, get out of here!"

When their family moved to San Pedro, Jacque found herself a minority among Anglo-Americans. At her junior high school, she noticed that she did not look like the other kids and was treated differently. Her mother gave Jacque's hair a perm to help her fit in. Ultimately, she felt that her Native American features kept her from being accepted by the other students. This injured her self-esteem, yet her optimistic spirit guided her through high school.

Jacque went on to higher education, attending USC for two years and graduating from Pacific Christian College. She married Ed Nunez and became the mother of three boys. They returned to San Juan Capistrano.

She was elated when her boys attended her childhood school, San Juan Elementary. Since Jacque was proud of her heritage, she let her boys' hair grow long and braided it in their ancestral style. But the other children at school thought their hair looked feminine and called them "girls." They taunted her sons with obnoxious finger gestures miming that their braids should be cut. This made her boys angry.

The incident made Jacque think. Coming from a positive perspective, she approached the principal of the school with an idea. She requested an opportunity to

talk with the students at a school assembly. This would allow her to speak directly about her family's indigenous heritage. The principal agreed.

At the assembly, she shared native artifacts, demonstrated traditional dances, and spoke about her ancestors who had once occupied the very land where she was speaking. Jacque's natural ability as a storyteller shined. Her native regalia is a willow skirt with a leather apron, rabbit fur wrap, and a woven hat. (Traditionally, her people were topless). The hat bore the symbol of a triangle within a square. This represented San Juan Capistrano.

The principal's reaction was very enthusiastic. An invitation was extended to an Education Title 6 Program representative to come and see Jacque's tribal presentation. From that day forward, her career would take a new path.

Jacque's presentation was authentic, historically accurate, and respectful to her ancestors. Her presentation grew and evolved into a play entitled *Journeys to the Past*. The play opens with a working mother who wishes she could experience a simpler time—that of her native ancestors. Jacque, in full regalia, narrates while an all-tribal cast recreates life in an early California Indian village. The audience learns about *Ajachemen* celebrations, cooking, basket weaving, games children played, and many other cultural splendors. Over the next 19 years, Jacque toured and performed for 1,500 educational institutions, ranging from preschools to universities. Over 100,000 students have benefitted from her mission of sharing. The play was even nominated to be performed at the Kennedy Center. Jacque will be retiring from education in June 2023 after 40 years. It is her sincerest hope that her children and grandchildren will carry on her work.