



2024

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

A Collection of the
Top Winning and Runner-up
Personal Narrative Essays



2024

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Writing Contest

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The Northern Marianas Humanities Council is a private, non-profit organization established in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in 1991. Its mission is to navigate and explore the human experiences of the indigenous and diverse peoples of the Commonwealth by enriching their lives through research, publications, dialogue, and programs.

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NORTHERN MARIANAS
HUMANITIES
COUNCIL

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Writing Contest

The My Marianas Writing Contest is a project conducted by the Northern Marianas Humanities Council to promote literacy and the diverse backgrounds and experiences of high school students.

The content of this publication features the winning essays and runner up contestant entries of the My Marianas Contest conducted in 2024. The Contest launched on March 1, 2024 with a submission deadline of April 15, 2024. All CNMI high school students were invited to participate in the Contest for a chance to win cash prizes and an opportunity to have their work published.

Theme: *Through Generations*

The Council received 29 personal narrative essays that addressed the theme: Through Generations. The theme urges writers to explore and reflect on the resilience of their cultural heritage and identity in the context of globalization, adaptations of new technology, and other influential factors.

Essay submission guidelines call for a double-spaced, 3-5 page personal narrative essay that demonstrates the skillful use of imagery in iterating the author's personal experience with a cultural value or practice that has withstood the test of time and persists through generations.

Acknowledgements

The Council wishes to acknowledge and thank all student contestants for making the effort to write an essay for this purpose and displaying the courage to share their personal experiences and stories. This would not have been possible without their teachers, friends, and family members who took the time to encourage and support their work. To ensure a disciplined approach to identifying the top essays, we enlisted the help of volunteer judges: Crystal Deleon Guerrero, Randee Jo Barcinas-Mangloña, Andrea Carr, Vinni Orsini, Elizabeth Furey, Jovannalyn Mafnas, and Lynette Villagomez. We are grateful for their participation and commitment to ensuring that all eligible essays were carefully read and scored at least twice.

1ST PLACE WINNER

From Firewood to Stove Top

by Jhaylin Cruz
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

Born and raised in La Union, Philippines, in the early 70s, my mother's childhood was marked by the rhythms of agrarian life on a rice farm. She toiled the fields planting cash crops such as tobacco, herded goats for milk, and, most importantly, learned how to cook. Growing up in the midst of poverty, her family struggled to make ends meet while cultivating their small farming property. Despite the financial hardships, my mother and grandmother cooked their family meals in a rustic clay pot over an open fire, fueled by firewood foraged from the surrounding jungle. This humble upbringing instilled in them a deep appreciation for Filipino cuisine, with flavorful aromas and mouth-watering recipes like Adobo, Tinola, Sinigang, and Pinakbet becoming staples of our family's table. These dishes, passed down through our family, serve as a testament to the enduring resilience of our culinary heritage. As my mother eventually built her own family on Saipan, she carried with her the recipes and traditions that have shaped our cultural identity.

The family and home that she built was immersed in the traditional flavors and aromas of the food she would create. Stir Fried Kangkong, Sinigang, Nilaga—these were not just dishes, but threads that wove together the fabric of our family's identity. The foundation of our home was centered around cooking and the food she made. Despite the richness of our culinary tradition, I found myself hesitant to embrace the kitchen. Cooking was never a subject I displayed any interest in. Don't get me wrong, I love to eat but growing up I saw cooking as an arduous and daunting task where my fingertips would be exposed to the sharp edge of a kitchen knife and the flames of a portable gas burner. One wrong move and these thin precisely sharpened pieces of metal could sever my fingers in half as if they were baby carrots. Being in a room with a knife riddled my body with anxiety. A maelstrom of hypothetical situations and "what ifs" would cloud my mind whenever a knife was within my vicinity. Furthermore, loading a new piece of "gas" as what my dad would say, felt like I was being forced to reload a browning machine gun in the middle of a war. Having to push down on the control button in order to enable the use of fuel was terrifying. All my attempts at operating a portable stove would come to an abrupt stop because of the hissing and clicking sounds that would dissuade any further contact with the gas burner. My ten year old self strongly believed that with one wrong move, the gas burner would explode and engulf my house in flames.

With the implications of having to deal with kitchen knives and portable gas burners, my mom would always foster some sort of encouragement for me to be involved in cooking. She would tell stories about how her mother would teach her how to cook and how the embers of the fire would sometimes fly towards her leaving blotches of ash on her arms and face. While she would always ask me and my siblings “what do you want for your ulam?” My ten year old self would always respond with a consistent yet straightforward answer of “I don't know.” To which she would reply with a delectable pot or plate of traditional Filipino food on the table with freshly cooked rice. The food she made always reminded me of the food I would ask for at Sabalu but never got because my mom could make it at home; that she could make it better.

However, this culinary era of home made meals would come to an abrupt halt with unforeseen challenges and hardships. My mother suffered a stroke in the summer of 2019. Coupled with the fact that her CW-1 visa had expired, the possibility of losing my mother threatened the foundation of my home and the meals that we cherished. Little did I know that this possibility would soon become reality. My mom was deported to the Philippines because of her immigration status and which was followed by our urgent and desperate need for cheaper healthcare. To top it all off I never got to say goodbye. There was no goodbye hug or get well soon because I was dropped off at daycare during her departure. I had never received the closure or reassurance that she would make a full recovery. With my mother's absence me and my older sister were thrust into the sphere of maturity where we were forced to take upon the responsibilities she once endured.

My older sister took upon the role as the caregiver in my family. Given our situation, I had no choice but to learn how to cook in order to alleviate the strain of our household duties. Then came Covid. Two weeks. Two weeks of quarantine turned into months of isolation where my mental and emotional well being deteriorated and was driven to the edge of an abyss. I clung onto the hope of one day being able to see my mom again and show her that I had gained the confidence to be able to operate a stove and use a kitchen knife in order to make the same meals she raised us on. As time passed, my culinary fears subsided from the constant practice of cooking food that is customary towards our Filipino taste buds. This perpetual cycle of cooking and contributing to my family has instilled a great sense of confidence in the culinary arts and has built resilience and independence in the face of uncertainty. The uncertainty that I would never see my mom again.

Yet, after three and a half years of her absence and not having a mother within the most crucial stages of life, my family was able to attain the necessary funds to finance her journey back to Saipan. What began as a necessity soon blossomed into a journey of self-discovery and empowerment, as I discovered the joy of creating meals that honored our cultural heritage which had ignited a newly found passion for the culinary arts—a catalyst that has been the drive and ambition to apply at a local Italian themed restaurant called The Angry Penne. I thought to myself “it wouldn't hurt to try.” Little did I know three weeks from then, I would be wearing all black with a white hat and an apron from Ace Hardware learning how to make pasta from scratch in the pastry room at the back of the restaurant. From

making pasta and pizza dough to preparing fresh ingredients used in the restaurant, I was immersed in the flavors and aromas that were made in the kitchen using industrial appliances and technology which was foreign compared to the minimal cooking equipment I grew up on. However, cooking and being exposed to the inner mechanisms of a high end restaurant has allowed me to dedicate my newly refined skills towards embracing the traditional recipes curated at home. The industrial sized machinery, grocery hauls with ingredients worth hundreds of dollars, and even working right next to a seven hundred and fifty degree oven is reflective of my journey from starting with just a portable gas burner and a dull eight inch kitchen knife.

My familiarity with Italian cuisine has strengthened my palette and enjoyment of traditional Filipino flavors and recipes, inspiring me to connect back with my roots—to connect back with the spoonfuls of Sinigang and Nilaga that have raised both me and my mom. Though far removed from the rustic clay pots and open fires of my mother’s childhood, the lessons learned in her kitchen proved invaluable as I navigated the fast-paced industry of professional cooking. The Filipino culture, heritage, and food that my mother and I cherish is not just shared among Filipinos, but it is also part of the unique recipes that make up the diverse array flavors enjoyed here in the Marianas. From humble beginnings on a rice farm in the Philippines to the bustling kitchens of Saipan, the flavors and aromas of Filipino food have remained a constant presence in my life and have bound me to my cultural heritage and shaped the person I have become. Food ignites our community’s passion for shared struggles, beliefs, values, and unifies us through a shared commonality. As I continue on my culinary journey, I am filled with gratitude for the traditions and values instilled in me by my mother and grandmother, and the enduring significance of Filipino food in our lives.

Milestones

by Isabella Yiftheq
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

"Here you can try it on, just this once." Mom smiles; carefully she places the tedious necklace around my neck, across my shoulders. I feel the warm beads pressing against my skin. Their vibrancy seemed to cast a spell, darkening the tone of my surroundings, as if it was the brightest thing in the room. The knotted string, resembling a fishing line, scratches lightly against the nape of my neck. Despite their delicate design, they're quite strong, yet I can't shake the feeling that the slightest misstep could release the beads from their border. "This is a lighatúttúr." She shared "It's a Refaluwasch necklace." I was maybe ten when I tried it on for the first time, I had seen it before but never got the answer to what it was. "I wish I had one." I thought.

Everyone in the Refaluwasch (Carolinian) community has a lighatúttúr, or at least they should. It's a cascade of beads, strung together to form a tapestry of pride and love. This necklace is delicately placed around your neck, draping its intricate vibrant trinkets along the shoulders and across your chest. They're worn at important events in your or someone else's life, like a birthday, a graduation, a wedding, and other memorable moments. It's not typically something you buy for yourself; it's something you give or you're given. To grant it to a Refalwusch is to show love or respect, to grant it to a non-Carolinian represents acceptance into our community. Even still as a teenager, I have never received one, or at least never remember receiving one. I was raised and born in the United States; there I found myself surrounded by faraway glimpses of my culture. Despite my closeness to the lighatúttúr, they remained distant, a tradition just out of reach, teasing me with their beauty and dignity. Regardless, seeing family and friends be granted with this necklace, is something that stayed with me my entire life.

Aunty Ann, Mom's youngest sister, had a lighatúttúr when she was getting married. I was so excited to see her and her soon-to-be husband; it had been maybe three years since we've seen each other. The fragrance of freshly cut flowers followed the breeze, weaving through the clashing of laughter and music. The white of the building and the bouquets were almost blinding, but not as much as the bride's radiant smile. I was nine; at the time, I was old enough to remember things but still young enough to experience something new. While they said their "I do's", there it was- the necklace draped along her and her now husband's chest, linking their hearts together. That was the first time I remember seeing one.

Ernesta, my sister, is the first to ever be given one out of my siblings and I. I still can recall when my aunty called me asking for my sister's graduation colors. "Red, teal and white" I told her. Then the day before Ernesta's graduation, there was Aunty Nei, pulling out a sparkling lighatúttúr, folded in a ziplock baggie, from her clearly overstuffed luggage. Its intense redness looks ablaze; I'm almost convinced that touching it would leave burns on my fingertips, yet the additional white beads among the fiery tone tames the overpowering hue. And then there are the tiny teal beads, resembling a turquoise stone, adding a touch of elegance to the artifact. I was so jealous that day that she had gotten one before me. The next day, I watched my sister get her highschool diploma in that same necklace. I was so impressed with Aunty Nei's skill, I begged her to let me learn too.

Aunty Nei is the one who makes almost all the lighatúttúr for our family, it's basically her job. "When making these, you have to have a certain setup," she stated, "it's seen as bad luck if it's not like this." Placed on the table was a thin scarf with a hibiscus pattern and tassels on each opposing side. I let out a chuckle at the pugua stain on the upper right side corner of the smooth fabric. "There's always a stain" I thought. On top of it was the needle, beads and string organized according to the steps of making a lighatúttúr. It's important to learn how to make one so you're prepared to make more for the next generation. That's how the tradition is passed on. "Who are we making this for?" I asked, "Your god sister, her baptism is this weekend." She replied, not taking her eyes away from the beads in her callused hands. Seeing it done had evoked a question. Had I gotten one from my baptism?

"Of course you had one at your baptism. What kind of question is that?" Mom rolled her eyes, not giving it a second thought, "it's in the hope chest; go check." I hurried down the creaking stairs as my feet smacked against the wooden boards. The hope chest was beneath the stairs, begging me to rummage through it. I kneeled down and placed my hand on the chipped sides. I struggled to lift the massive lid; the scent of aged wood smelled ancient as if I had opened an old book that had gone untouched for years. Stuffed within were newspapers, old concert tickets and dozens of the lighatúttúr, each carefully enclosed in its own ziplock bag. My fingers brushed against the smooth surface of one of the plastic bags tucked away in the corner. I pulled it out and examined its contents; there laid a lighatúttúr. My lighatúttúr. The ziplock bag bore the name "Bella" written in bold, permanent marker, and with the necklace were photos of the baptism. I reflected on photos I found of me in the church as I gripped onto my lighatúttúr. Looking into my life as it just began. Reflecting on what, as a child, could my heart and mind process.

Being cradled in the gentle embrace of water, feeling a sense of belonging wash over my infant body. The lights blinding my eyes, while an elderly man does the sign of the cross. A cool liquid trickled through my hair, running down my neck, sending an instant shiver down my spine. Above me, a warm glow of candles dancing, casting flickering shadows that somehow whisper praise and devotion. Amidst the soft murmur of prayers and songs, an unfamiliar sensation grazes against the nape of my neck and is heavy on my chest. A Refalwaulsch beaded necklace- a lighatúttúr. This was the first time I had ever received one. The first milestone as a Refaluwasch.

3RD PLACE WINNER

More than a Marianas

by Stephanie Diaz
Tinian Junior Senior High School, 11th Grade

In the Pacific Ocean, lies a group of neighboring islands called the Marianas. Among the fourteen islands, one of them is my home: the beautiful island of Tinian. The home of luscious beaches, where your toes dig into the sand, your ears are treated to the wonderful sounds of waves crashing, and your soul is immersed in the scorching, humid air. As I step onto the soft sands of Tachogña Beach, I hear the ocean air whisper the stories of many generations before. There, I see my Chamorro heritage which I ground myself in. I see the gift of traditions and values woven into the very foundation of who I am. And, I see this lovely picture where the beach has turned into my home away from home. Every day, I find myself reinforcing my Chamorro heritage by using the knowledge carried down through generations. Much like the sweet nectar of the island's flowers, I absorb the essence of my Chamorro culture and seek ways to gain more knowledge of my heritage. For instance, one practice that plays an important role in my Chamorro identity is the principle of inafa'maolek, or reciprocity. From the small homes to the large gatherings, the spirit of helping and giving back flows like an ancient stream. To me, it's more than a gesture; it's a way of existence, shaping not just my heritage but also the vibrant community on Tinian, where a timeless community blooms.

Here on my island home, neighbors are more than just passing acquaintances; they are family, bonded through island living. In the peaceful afternoons, we drive down narrow roads in our cars, exchanging waves similar to those seen on a Saturday afternoon. We admire the flavor of home-cooked meals flowing through open windows, calling us to enjoy the benefit of family kitchens nearby. During the fiestas, many traditional dishes are displayed, which brings neighbors and friends together to celebrate. And, in the corner of little grocery stores, advice, laughter, and news are shared amongst the people, strengthening the bonds in the community. Writing this fills me with an eternal appreciation for being able to grow up on the islands, where community relationships are built into the foundation of daily life. The Marianas represent the sense of relationships more than anywhere else, where traditions run deep into every family, connecting us to our roots and one another.

Within this community, ingrained in my culture are the values of helping and giving back. In my family, whether it's lending a hand to decorate at an event or borrowing items one might need, these actions aren't just simple gestures but deep connections within our family. They're ways of saying, "I got you, and I am here for you." In those moments, we're not just relatives; we're a tightly-knit clan, bound by shared experiences and unwavering support.

The sense of unity from islands across the seas is uplifting, and I saw this firsthand as my family navigated through the difficulties of our baby angel battling brain cancer. What we thought was just a passing flu or sickness quickly turned into a chronic struggle that changed our perception of time and the precious moments we shared. In just a year, our lives were forever changed.

During this difficult time, the spirit of inafa'maolek came through. Our family and community united around us, showing firm love and support. As we gathered around the dining table, the mood was full of sorrow and hope. Each meal symbolized not only nutrition but also our community's strength and perseverance. The clinking of silverware blended with meaningful chats and occasional giggles, creating a balance of support that rang through our home's walls. Amidst fear and anxiety, we found solace in the embrace of our family and neighbors. I still remember the times that had a lot of impacts, such as meaningful messages and visits from family near and far, meals made by aunties that nourished our minds and hearts, and prayers and well-wishes wrapped around us like a warm blanket. In these acts of goodwill, we sensed the genuine spirit of inafa'maolek, as each act of giving sent rays of perseverance through our hearts.

My niece's journey demonstrated the strength of love and unity, bringing our family closer together. The struggles I encountered with my family have left a lasting impression, like footprints printed on the sand. Those struggles taught me the importance of keeping our beloved traditions and practices, as they serve as the ties that connect us all as one whole. Every part of our cultural history still influences my values and actions to this day. It reminds me that our customs are more than simply historical treasures; they are ongoing legacies that help us navigate through modern life with resilience, unity, and unwavering strength. Even with everything changing so fast around us, the heart and spirit of inafa'maolek remain steadfast because of how it is preserved.

Our culture centers around narratives, which connect us throughout history. I think about my grandkids, and their children's children, who will grow up to tell stories about how inafa'maolek has been our family's guideline. I distinctly remember sitting on the edge of my grandma's bed, with the glow of the T.V. casting a shadow over her face, watching her paint pictures with words from past generations and their beliefs. Her tales taught lessons about goodwill, resiliency, and what it means to be a Chamorro. As a kid, I didn't take much thought into it, but now I think about the legacy I wish to leave. A legacy of carrying on the gift of our cultural heritage, wrapped in the warmth of storytelling.

I will correct myself in saying that the Marianas are neighboring islands in the vast Pacific Ocean because it's more than that. It's an expansive ocean packed with familia. We are descendants of the Chamorro and Carolinian ancestors who navigated the waters and lands long ago, and their wisdom flows through our veins like the currents that caress our shores. When I say it is, "More than a Marianas." I'm not referring to the geography of the islands but the connection to our heritage, our community, and the stories that keep us together, binding us as one familia, now and for the generations to come.

Through Generations

by Prapti Mondal
Marianas High School, 10th Grade

The thought of embracing my heritage never once came across my mind when I was a little child. Being a dark skin Bangladeshi girl with parents who can barely speak English, it was an embarrassing fact to digest growing up, you were always the odd one out in classrooms, parties, and even in the community at times. To receive constant belittling remarks, it starts to test our self-value, and that is what many individuals face in society. If we start believing what we are fed to believe, we will never discover our true value and personal beliefs. With my experience growing up, I have learned that there is nothing to be ashamed of, but to have pride and respect for my culture.

Being a little girl in elementary school who just wanted nothing more than to have a group of friends, I sacrificed my dignity to build friendships. Accepting racist comments was something I had to familiarize myself with and learned to endure. Being made fun of, skin color, body hair, food you bring in for lunch, and even making fun of your own religion. I was once asked, "Are cows your god or something?" while telling them I was a Hindu — I was devastated. To pray, we would attend what is called "mundeer," which is essentially a temple. We would go to a temple once a month. On the other hand, this was not as simple to explain when I was a kid. I would call it "church" so they can understand me, and would try to change my practices into their practices, so I can be seen as more acceptable and "ordinary." White-washing myself was what I always resorted to in an attempt to prevent petty remarks made against me, it was sad. As little kids, we often learn from our environment, and technology played a big role in encouraging these types of behaviors. I hold no resentment to the kids who blatantly showed me disrespect on a daily basis, but learned to forgive and forget. Kids are a walking and breathing truth machine, they show no filter in trying to be polite or respectful, because they have not learned how to develop that filter yet. But on the other hand, that unfiltered behavior can cause detriment effects to kids who are being affected by brutal "honesty." I was one of them, the one who was affected by these painful truths.

The CNMI has a diverse population, but racism still occurs on a daily basis. Once I entered middle school, that is when I realized that I have become severely insecure of my ethnicity and religion. Being a Hindu, one of our limitations is that we are not able to consume beef. I had no personal problems with that, but the kids my age did. I was peer pressured into consuming beef, "What's the worst that can happen? It's not like you're going to die." Those words haunted me every single day during lunchtime, but at that point, it was an unsurprising experience. Nevertheless, constant and endless humiliation goes unseen amongst the adults that witnessed my interactions with my classmates. "Is my

culture that embarrassing?" was the question I thought of all the time. Never once have I thought to myself that those kids were the problem, but the fact I was "uncommon." It was a constant battle of self-worth and embarrassment, when I noticed I was the only "brown" girl in my classroom, or the only Hindu one. Everyone else fit into a group naturally, I did not, however. I took my time to strategically plan out on how to not stand out, because I was afraid. I was afraid that I would have the spotlight to be made fun of. I never truly saw my culture as something to be proud of, but to be kept hidden deep in my heart, and unspoken around my peers or those who were different from me. I did not know how to handle the shame I had, so I hid.

Going home, wanting a way to comfort myself, I go on the internet but am met with nothing but more agony. My culture was a laughing stock, and the highlight of people's comedy and entertainment. Instagram, FaceBook, Youtube, all these popular social media platforms built a whole trend in making fun of people that are from Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh. But that is when I finally thought to myself, "Would I want other girls who share the same experience to feel the same insecurities?" If I am going through this, then I know many more around the world share similar experiences to mine. Accepting senseless and ignorant comments, boosts the ego of those who said it rather than those who perceived it. To make a change, I started volunteering in my local community by performing my cultural dance, in events like Taste of Marianas and the Flame Tree Festival. I took more leadership roles in my school clubs, to represent and demonstrate that we are all the same people with the same capabilities. At my school, we would have a cultural day festival, where we embrace the different cultures and heritage in our campus. Students would dress up in Korean, Japanese, Chamorro, Carolinian attires, but never have I once seen a student confidently dress in Desi attire. I took this as an opportunity to shine and did just that – to finally take pride in my heritage. I was finally able to learn that it was not me that was the problem, but the normalization on racist remarks. If we all learned that what is "normal" is harmful, we can make a big change in people's lives mentally and physically. But that is only if people take initiative to change. People fail to remember that culture and religion is something we are born into rather than choose to be into. Learning to embrace our heritage is a blessing.

At the end, we learn to hate and love aspects of ourselves, and each day is a test to challenge that. Coming in terms with what we are born into – heritage, religion, ethnicity, etc. – it is not going to happen immediately, it may be to some, but not all. It takes a lot of patience and realization to understand that we are not that different, we just have different practices and ways of doing things. We may look different, speak different, and act different, but we are all human beings. Individuals consume knowledge from technology, and the ever advancing technology will continue to showcase everything – including the undesired one's. It is our responsibility that we maintain an open mind, and utilize technology beneficially. Ridiculing one's culture at the expense of one's entertainment, fosters a negative environment and a selfish lifestyle. Everyone is still able to learn from their mistakes, and we can all start by accepting people for what they are and what they cannot control. We all fight to love ourselves, and it is not an easy challenge to many.

Pagkukwento (Storytelling)

by Eianne Miel Ladao

Dr. Rita Hocog Inos Junior Senior High School, 10th Grade

Stories are incredibly powerful. We tell stories every day, whether that be when we tell our parents about our day at school, write a song, film a storytime for social media, or write an essay about culture! I have always felt connected to stories and storytelling. I am an avid reader and even used to write stories about princesses and all sorts of things when I was younger. Through all my experiences in life, I've learned the true value of stories.

When I was a kid, I would always pester my parents by asking them to tell me tales. I would keep them up at night with my requests, and the only way they would get me to sleep was by telling me a story. I did this because I was entertained by it, but also because I wanted to feel more connected with my parent's lives in our homeland and our culture. Mga kwento at pagkukwento (in English, "stories and storytelling") was one of my limited connections to my culture and native home.

Storytelling is an aspect of many cultures, like Filipino culture, and especially immigrant culture. I'm sure that many other people like me, relied on stories to feel closer to their culture. Even the little things would help me feel more acquainted with the place that was my home away from the home I grew up in, like stories of my parents' daily lives in the Philippines. One of my favorite stories was that of my Dad getting separated and then reunited with his cousin at a train station, as morbid as that sounds. It was my favorite partly because of the adventure in it, but also because it had aspects that were stranger to me but not to my home. It gave me a sense of what my life might be if I was in the Philippines. This story also had themes of resilience and the unity of family, two things Filipinos are renowned for, and two things I've always strived to have.

When I got my hands on the internet, I learned to connect with my culture through online storytelling and stories. One thing my sister and I loved to do was watch Mikey Bustos, a Filipino YouTuber. Our favorite video of his was the "Filipino Mythical Creatures Rap". It was funny but it also spread knowledge on several creatures in Filipino myths. I really appreciate and admire mythology and fables of all sorts, and this video made me ecstatic! Mythology is an important aspect of Filipino culture, as many Filipinos are superstitious. This helped me to relate and feel more united with my culture. As I grew older, I started to use more stories and forms of storytelling to join myself with my heritage. I started listening to Tagalog (one of many Filipino languages/dialects) songs and watching Filipino television shows and movies with my family.

During the pandemic, when things got hectic, we watched less and less Filipino media. I felt disheartened because I thought that one of my connections to my culture got severed. However, I now know that culture is not just something one has. It flows through our blood and follows us wherever we may go. It can dictate how we dress, the food we eat, and how we behave throughout our existence. Culture is the tinted glasses that contribute to our differing views on life. Anyway, my family has once again started to watch Filipino TV and movies recently. Our main teleserye (TV show) is "The Voice Philippines", specifically The Voice Kids/Teens. Singing is another special aspect of Filipino mores. Many Filipinos are gifted with amazing and angelic voices. Me, not so much. I know that other people my age turn to singing as a way to connect with their culture, but I prefer to just sit and listen to the mellow tunes. Songs can carry stories of romance, friendship, unity, and so much more. To me, they serve as another bond between my homeland and me.

As mentioned before, I'm not much of a singer. I'm the same with dancing, I can't seem to move with any rhythm! Despite that, I've always admired dancing. "Tinikling" is a traditional Filipino folk dance. It involves four people, two people holding bamboo poles and two dancers. The two individuals with the sticks slap their poles together and on the ground. The dancers leap across the sticks to dodge them. The Tinikling dance tells the story of Filipino rice farmers and the Tikling bird. Filipino rice farmers are symbolized by the individuals wielding bamboo poles, who try to capture the Tikling and stop them from stealing rice from their fields. The Tikling birds are portrayed by dancers who hop across the poles. I remember when I first saw the Tinikling dance in person. I was at a fiesta, and I saw the Tinikling performed by teenagers. They might not have been professionals with years of experience, but they enchanted me nonetheless. While watching their performance, I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride for my culture and ethnicity. At this moment, I truly understood what it meant to be Filipino. To me, a big part of being Filipino is being proud of who you are and our culture. It is being proud of the resilience of our ancestors. It is striving to do your best for your family, people, and culture. Most importantly it is telling the rich stories of the Philippines.

In my life, all my knowledge about my culture was found through storytelling. Not only is it a connection to my heritage, but it is also an irreplaceable element of my culture. Practices survived through storytelling. Families survived with storytelling. People survived with storytelling. Those who didn't, survived in their stories. In this era, our cultures can sometimes be put on the back burner for technology and new inventions and innovations. However, I now know that these, sometimes considered "old-fashioned", cultures are what breathe life into us. The stories we carry with us throughout our lifetimes are our legacies and what breathes life into the next generations. I know that I will always tell the stories of my people and culture because no matter what, my culture will endure the test of time.

Balutan and Baon: Preserving Unity and Generosity, One Plate at a Time

by Jia Ross Nicdao
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

"Anak, what do you want to eat for tomorrow's lunch?" was a phrase that echoed through every gathering I attended. Amidst the lively karaoke tunes, the chatter of gossiping titas, and the playful screams of kids running around, the air was rich in the smell of freshly grilled barbecue and hints of beer. Tinfoil wraps and styrofoam plates were ready in my arms, waiting to be filled with my favorite dishes of the night that were destined to accompany me home. "Don't forget to pack some adobo and rice," my mom called out with warmth and affection. I nodded as tomorrow's lunch would be a taste of today's festivities, allowing the love and care that went into every dish to linger on for another day. Happening now was the tradition known as Baon or Balutan, a custom deeply ingrained in my family and mostly likely yours.

Despite the advancements in modern kitchen techniques, the practice of Baon and Balutan had grown beyond its original purpose. These words, one Filipino and the other Chamorro respectively, described the act of wrapping food to take home—typically in paper plates and tin foil. Originally, Balutan referred to wrapping food in banana leaves for cooking and serving, and while that is the case sometimes, it has transformed into a prevalent symbol of celebration and generosity across gatherings in the CNMI. Each party blessed with an abundance of food sparked the tradition of Baon and Balutan, extending the spirit of the gathering beyond the immediate moment itself. In Filipino culture, packing food for the next day wasn't just expected; it was a cherished custom—a way to preserve the flavors of the celebration and fill the fridge with tangible memories from special occasions. Each wrapped piece held significance—a piece of short ribs from a godbrother's christening, a drumstick from a neighbor's birthday feast—ready to transport us back to moments of joy and connection.

But as a child, my taste buds weren't always ready for leftovers. Taking home food felt shameful and out of place. Scooping up remnants from a party seemed odd; why should we be packing food when others were enjoying fresh, vibrant salads and sandwiches? My reheated pasta paled in comparison, and the embarrassment weighed heavily on me. Whenever possible, I'd pretend not to hear my mom's call when it was time to pack food. Then one day, a simple conversation between my parents shifted my perspective.

"We'll have the pasta leftovers for lunch and save the fried chicken for dinner since I won't be home until later."

At that moment, the styrofoam-wrapped delicacies took on new meaning. They weren't just leftovers; they were a practical solution for my parents to unwind, one meal at a time. Cooking for our family amidst their busy schedules was challenging, but with these leftovers, they could rest assured of future meals and redirect their energy to other family needs. Those seemingly ordinary leftovers became a symbol of love and sacrifice—a way for my parents to provide for us. The shame I once felt transformed into gratitude, and as I unwrapped those styrofoam packages at mealtime, I did so with a deep sense of respect for the unwavering commitment that filled each bite with meaning.

This feeling of pride and comfort extends beyond me, as the practice and spirit of Balutan and Baon continue to thrive within the CNMI community today. It is embedded in the heart of parties and gatherings. Smiles and laughter fill the food line, people eagerly wrapping and packing plates with the gift of food for the night ahead. This cherished tradition transcends generations and cultural boundaries, uniting Filipinos who use the word "Balutan" and Chamorros who use "baon" to describe the act of sharing. Across the islands, the gift of food and the opportunity to gather are celebrated with enthusiasm, much like the vibrant vegetables that adorn our meals. This tradition has not only endured but has also assimilated into the everyday fabric of our social interactions, embodying the intersectionality of our diverse cultures. I have an American friend my neighbor once brought to a gathering. He was initially unfamiliar with our Baon and Balutan customs, yet with each party and celebration he attended, he embraced the tradition with enthusiasm. Now, he's an "honorary Balutan king."

This practice has faced threats from the limited resources of our community. Even in our close knit community, families are becoming busier and more individualistic than when I was a child. Most especially when it comes to shifts in food accessibility and the continuous flow in overseas imports, prioritization for these gatherings are dying down. But despite this, the lessons learned from Baon and Balutan are invaluable, so much so that generations to come acknowledge them for what they represent. It is set to help us cherish the small gestures of kindness and make the most out of our circumstances. These gatherings, even if rare, are filled with resilience and resourcefulness from the community whether that be through hosts planting their food to be used in the mix or using the daily catch as the main dish: all these unique pieces coming together represent how every person ass this party comes together and celebrates.

As I navigate life's challenges, the enduring spirit of Baon and Balutan serves as a reminder of our collective strength and resilience. These traditions continue to inspire us to embrace the richness of our cultural heritage, fostering bonds that enrich our lives and empower us to face the future with optimism and unity. When I go to college, I hope to spread the spirit of Baon and Balutan there, to unite people together and shoo away that sense of shame I once had. Together, the gift of food and the enduring legacy of community connection can be fostered just through a simple act of gathering around a shared table. These values of both the Chamorro, Filipino, and collective CNMI communities are preserved, one plate at a time.

Love and Reunion

by Kelly Zheng
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

As Chinese New Year raised its popularity over the decades, more and more people started to celebrate it. Family and friends gathered in the pavilions. They eat and laugh together till midnight. Sorry to those who take their sweet sleep early, because no matter how many protective earplugs you wear, you will be woken up. Kaboom! Kaboom! Earthquake! Evacuate! Just kidding. It's just some, actually more than some, fireworks playing in the pitch-dark sky, so much so, that the entire sky is illuminated. The fireworks last for a couple of minutes and leave the night sky pitch dark again, signifying the end of this eventual celebration. If you think this is the legit celebration of Chinese New Year, you are putting pineapple on pizza, WRONG! This is an overly simplified version of the traditional Chinese New Year. To a decent Chinese like me, the true version of this celebration is like the Supreme Pizza from Pizza Hut. It has so many more components, favors, and layers.

I was born in 2006 on the island of Saipan. However, moved back to China when I was still a baby and lived there till middle school. I then moved back to my birth land, Saipan, and lived here for about five years now. Those years in China stored some of the most memorable experiences in my life, such as the annual celebration of Chinese New Year, which I still vividly remember its details to this day. Aside from the celebration part of it, Chinese New Year represents unity. It is one of the only times that I get to connect with my extended family. No matter how far the distance is, they will all come home and celebrate this time of reunion with the ones they loved and missed the most for the past year.

The traditional celebration of Chinese New Year is not just a holiday, it is a process combined with different stages and events. It is so sophisticated that it usually lasts around 15 days in total. The first stage of this wholesome event is the preparation stage. Although this is my least favorite part of the entire celebration, it is the most crucial part, just like the marinade in BBQ. It takes time and effort but it is what determines the flavor of the final product---the actual celebration part. During months before the actual New Year's Eve, my family would conduct a "360-degree COVID Clean-up." While maybe not the actual COVID disinfection process, it was a deep cleaning of the house in every corner and hole. As a kid, this was my "trauma." Probably because this was the only part I could help with in the entire preparation, my grandparents would always make me clean the house, from wiping furniture, sweeping stairs and floors, washing bedsheets, and everything else one can name.

Aside from the less-satisfying part, my grandparents would start loading the house with goods and food around this time. They will buy tons of snacks, nuts, fruits, drinks, candies, traditional pastries, firecrackers, etc, basically everything you would need throughout the entire celebration. I vividly remember that my grandma would lock all these yummys in her room. Why you may ask? Well, there are two craving rats in the house who would sneak into that room and snack on the food before the actual celebration. No, don't you even dare. The two rats are definitely not my sister and me.

As the stored goods get lesser and lesser every day, it's finally the big day---New Year's Eve, the day that my family and I had longed for the past year. On this day, nobody rests because the big hit is happening---the long-awaited New Year's Eve dinner, the first dinner the entire family gets to eat together. Because the dinner is going to be abundant, the lunch is usually really simple that day, mainly composed of leftovers. As soon as lunch is over, the entire family will work on the dinner immediately. The male in the house, typically my uncle, takes charge of the slaughtering and preparing of fresh livestock---such as home-raised ducks and chickens---that my grandma has carefully nurtured for the past year, chosen at their peak fattiness, and reserved for this dinner to serve when the entire family gathers together. While this is happening, the women, my auntie and grandma, prepare other ingredients in the kitchen. They will clean and cut vegetables, marinate meats, and start braising pork rib soups. Nobody in this house rests on this day. While the adults take over the major tasks, the kids, my brother, my sister, and I, will take turns burning the fire for the traditional stove, washing year-old plates for the returning family members, and carrying dishes or ingredients in and out of the kitchen. It might seem like a hectic process, but to me and my family, it is the most rewarding time as we get to work and spend time with our loved ones. Just like how my grandpa always says, "We are a family, and no matter what, we always love each other and want to spend time with one another."

I know dinner is about to be served when I can smell the sizzling fresh pork chunks stirred fried with soy sauce. Made best by my grandma, HongShaoRou is a typical cuisine in my household because I love eating it and my family loves me. Once HongShaoRou is served, there's one last step before the dinner--firecrackers. My uncle would always be the one to lid the firecracker as an official start of the celebration of New Year. He would lay the long red firecracker right out the door in front of the house. Kaboom! Ah! Kaboom! Ah! Kaboom! Ahhh! I would always be screaming the hardest, and as the best family that they are, they would always laugh at me. But anyway, now the dinner table is open. All my family sat together at one big table at the center of my grandma's spacious dining room, which was intentionally built in this way so everyone could eat together. On the dining table, various traditional Chinese cuisines, rib soup, steamed fish, braised duck and chicken, HongShaoRou, chicken wings, pork feet, shrimp, etc, filled its entirety. At the dinner, everyone started talking about their lives in the past year, well, only the good news. As part of Chinese culture, my family only shares good news to avoid worrying. The dinner would then take about four to five hours and end in laughter and joy.

By then, it would be around nine o'clock, since the dinner started early. Everyone would move to the living room and watch Chunwan, a New Year's TV Gala, that is specially produced for New Year. This show is filled with comedy performances centered on Chinese values and pop-culture music performances. Since New Year is during the winter, cuddling with my family under blankets while watching Chunwan was one of my best memories every year. When the show ended around midnight, my cousins and I would go play fireworks as we ended New Year's Eve. My favorite part of this celebration happens on the day of the New Year. On this day, everyone in the family will wear new clothes from top to bottom, signifying a new beginning. As a child that I was before, I would pull out my new clothes just to look at them and put them back days before New Year. And now, being able to wear it means the world to me. Aside from the new clothes, the first thing I do when I get up is to Bainian, wish Happy New Year to my family. And in return, ka-ching, I get red envelop money from all the adults in the house as a sign of fortune. After that, for the rest of the day and the rest of the entire 15-day celebration, I would follow my family to visit and reunite with all my relatives. We would eat feasts of delicious cuisines at their house, chat for the afternoon, and have another awesome dinner before leaving. I would always leave loaded with both food and more, ka-ching, red envelopes. I remember my cousins and I would always compete for the amount of money we got, and my sister would always be winning.

This sincere and decent celebration filled a large portion of my childhood memories. It is through this celebration, that I learned traditional Chinese culture and practices. But most importantly, I learned the value of uniting and what it means to be caring. It is through my family's value of love and care, that my mum, dad, brother, and I, still celebrate Chinese New Year in this same traditional way even when we are abroad. We would clean the house, this time not by myself but with everyone. I remember my mum would get the fresh pork from the Saturday Market just so she could make my grandpa's HongShaoRou for me on New Year's Eve. We would watch Chunwan on my laptop even though the screen might be blurred from time to time due to international streaming. Since we can't physically travel back to China and reunite with my family, we would still make it up by video calling them constantly. As a sign of sharing this fortune of the new year, my mum would bring me to friends's houses to hang out and reconnect. Times are everchanging, there will be circumstances where you have to shift from how you started, just like how my family had to move away from China and can't be able to celebrate Chinese New Year with our relatives. Even though, the memory of it stayed just like our love for unity. With this, we continue to trace the traditional celebration of New Year as we recall past memories and continue to foster this value of love and reunion. Change is inevitable, yet as long as the cherished values and memories stay within my heart, I am confident that I can find ways to preserve them, one way or another.

Weaving Identity

by Vinnie Juan Sablan
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

I love the color green. The vibrance that the palms of the tree of life radiate. Each leaf, every tranquil dance in the wind, and every fold and twist of the coconut frond tell a story of my ancestors. It is wisdom passed down through generations. For as long as I can remember, my mind and body have always been intertwined with my heritage; they have been weaved together.

Growing up, I had always been told stories about how the coconut tree provided every necessity to those before us. How it supplied housing, food, medicinal remedies, and clothing. It was like pieces of a masterpiece coming together. How could one simple thing end up being so complex? My barely developed mind couldn't help but wonder, and from there, my curiosity grew just as tall as the tree my people had centered their lives around.

I remember the first time I saw my Nāna Sofina weaving a coconut hat. Her hands seemed to flow with so much purpose. As I stared and observed as she wove each leaf into place, I felt a sense of wonder wash over me. I witnessed a dance of culture and creativity slowly turning into art. As the hat took form, I realized that this was a reflection and connection to our land. It was like her hands held the experiences and memories of our ancestors. I wanted to feel that.

As my grandmother and I ventured into the groves of coconut palms surrounding our beautiful village of Tanapag, I could not help but stare up into the trees and admire their towering presence as they swayed and whispered secrets of the past. Hypnotized, I was snapped back into reality, where Grandma had taught me to choose the perfect fronds—supple yet strong. She had always been a brave, wise, and independent woman who took much pride in her Chamorro and Carolinian heritage. Always creating unique traditional art pieces, she unknowingly highlights the importance of keeping traditions alive. She was my role model. Someone who I aspired to be at least a little bit like. At the time we had gone looking for the ideal frond, I remembered the earthy and rich smell of nature around us. The earth beneath our feet, alive. Each step felt like a testament to the bond between our people and land.

At the young age of ten, eager to learn the art of weaving, she led me through each step with so much patience. Although, at the time, my product wasn't the most organized or neat, I learned to appreciate the beauty of the things we are provided with from Mother Earth. With each misstep and uneven stitch, I gained a new, profound appreciation for our natural materials. I had, after all, still made

a wearable, vibrant, and complete coconut hat, which I wore with my head held up high. Through the tedious but therapeutic process, I now realize that perfection does not merely lie in flawless execution but in the spirit of creating while connecting.

In a world of constant technological advances, I find solace in art that reflects my being. Many fail to recognize that with just a click, swipe, and snap, our heritage and all that comes with it could be washed away by the currents surrounding us. It is a constant battle to preserve the essence of our identity as people living on what are described as small islands with a culture as grand as our oceans. While it may be true that modernization carries an allure of convenience and efficiency, I find that we need to idolize the value of practices that have been passed down, which cannot be overshadowed.

For me, as you probably know by now, the practice that embodies this perseverance is weaving with coconut leaves. Whether it's a hat, basket, or mat, the intricate patterns of each piece represent the complexity and uniqueness of the story my lineage carries. The hardships, the triumphs, and the spirit that has continued to guide me and those around me.

Fast forward six years from when I first learned from Grandma, and I still, now and then, ask if I could weave a coconut hat with her. While I'm just as rusty at making them as I was when I first started, the experience and time spent with her are something I could never take for granted. Each time I sit beside her, sorting through the supple fronds and carefully threading them together like pieces of a puzzle, I am transported back to young me, curious as ever. I reminisce about the earthy scent of the coconut palms surrounding us. In this experience I share with her, time seems to stand still, and I am reminded of the connection between the past, present, and future that can be woven together and connected.

In this world and life which often feels chaotic and uncertain, weaving with her offered ground for stability, certainty, and love. The bonds we have with our families and the traditions that connect us to our roots are timeless and unchanging. As I reflect on the significance of family and cultural traditions, I am prompted by the power that art carries. It is a tool used by many to share our uniqueness and express our identities. Through art, we can communicate our experiences and values in a way that transcends barriers as strong as our reefs. We are able to share our history with the world.

Green is not just my favorite color. It is life. It is a book of everlasting representation. It is a story of my people that shows and reminds me how resilient and resourceful they were. How I spiritually carry a piece of them within me. How I am them. Weaving is not just creating; it is me breathing life into the stories of those who came before me, ensuring their voices echo from generation to generation. It is my way of honoring the legacy of strength that runs through my veins. With each leaf I carefully put into place, I feel their presence guiding me, infusing every stitch with the enduring spirit that has always defined us. To ten-year-old me, making that hat was not merely a skill to acquire; it was a legacy to inherit and a tradition to preserve.

The Resilience of Chinese New Year Traditions

by ZongYao Huang
Marianas High School

In the modern era of globalization and technological advancement, the Chinese New Year celebration stands as a testament to the resilience of cultural heritage against ever-changing influences that's happening around the world. Rooted deeply in centuries-old traditions, this annual festival embodies the enduring spirits of the Chinese people, reflecting the essence of familial bonds, community cohesion, and cultural identity. Through the insightful perspective of "Through Generations," let's delve into how the traditions of Chinese New Year endure and transform, showcasing their remarkable resilience in the face of globalization and technological advancements.

The origins of Chinese New Year can be traced back over 4,000 years to ancient agrarian societies in China. Originally tied to the lunar calendar, this festival marked the end of winter and the beginning of spring, symbolizing the cycle of renewal and the promise of new beginnings. Over time, it evolved to incorporate elements of mythology, folklore, and religious beliefs, becoming one of the most important cultural celebrations in Chinese society. The festival's historical significance lies in its ability to unify communities, reinforce social bonds, and reaffirm cultural identity through shared rituals and traditions passed down from generation to generation. Yet, Chinese New Year's enduring appeal transcends its cultural significance; it's also a time for families to unite, mend disagreements, and reinforce family bonds, fostering a feeling of togetherness and unity that surpasses individual and societal divides.

One of the most cherished aspects of Chinese New Year is the emphasis on family reunion and filial piety. Filial piety, deeply ingrained in Chinese tradition, becomes particularly poignant during Chinese New Year, as families reunite to honor their elders, symbolizing a profound sense of respect and care amidst the celebratory atmosphere that is around them. Worldwide, millions of people embark on journeys to return home and gather with their families and loved ones, often traveling vast distances to honor this time-honored tradition. This annual pilgrimage underscores the enduring importance of family ties in Chinese culture, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity that withstands the pressures of modernity.

Central to the celebrations is the reunion dinner, known as "tuan yuan fan," where multiple generations come together to share a lavish meal and exchange well wishes for the approaching year. Amidst this heartfelt gathering marked by pride and joy, children typically receive "hong bao" or "red envelopes" containing varying amounts of money, symbolizing the closeness of their bond with the giver. This tradition not only strengthens family bonds but also serves as a reminder of the values of respect, gratitude, and harmony cherished in Chinese society, passed down through generations.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of modern life, the enduring spirit of Chinese New Year serves as a beacon of tradition, offering a moment of reflection and connection in an ever-changing world. Beyond its cultural and familial significance, Chinese New Year holds a deeper meaning as a time of spiritual renewal and communal solidarity. As families gather to celebrate, there is a palpable sense of harmony and goodwill that transcends individual differences and societal divisions. It is a time to set aside grievances, to forgive, and to embrace the shared values of respect, gratitude, and harmony. In this sense, Chinese New Year serves not only as a celebration of cultural heritage but also as a reminder of the fundamental human values that bind us together as a global community. As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, let us draw inspiration from the resilience of Chinese New Year traditions, finding strength and unity in our shared humanity.

Chinese New Year is steeped in rich symbolism and customs that have been passed down through generations. From the iconic red lanterns adorning the streets to the delicious and delightful foods served during the "tuan yuan fan" or "festive feasts", each tradition holds profound significance, reflecting ancient beliefs and values. The vibrant hue of red, representing good fortune and happiness, features prominently in decorations, clothing, and gifts exchanged during the celebration. Additionally, rituals like the symbolic cleansing of homes to dispel misfortune and the energetic dragon or tiger dances performed to ward off malevolent spirits serve as tangible links to the past, reinforcing the cultural identity of the Chinese people. These customs not only add vibrancy to the festivities but also serve as a means of transmitting cultural heritage and instilling a sense of pride in one's ancestry.

Moreover, the resilience of Chinese New Year traditions is evident in their adaptation to contemporary realities. While the essence of the celebration remains unchanged, modern innovations such as social media and digital platforms have facilitated new ways of connecting the people and sharing the festivities. Virtual reunions, online red envelope exchanges, and live streamed cultural performances have allowed individuals to participate in the festivities regardless of geographical issues, ensuring that the spirit of Chinese New Year transcends physical boundaries. Furthermore, the incorporation of new technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality has enhanced the immersive experience of traditional customs, appealing to younger generations while preserving the authenticity of the celebrations.

In the face of globalization and rapid societal changes, the preservation of Chinese New Year traditions takes on added significance as a means of safeguarding cultural identity. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, there is a growing need to preserve and celebrate the unique customs, values, and practices that define the Chinese cultural heritage. By maintaining and passing down these traditions through generations, Chinese communities around the world can ensure the continuity of their cultural legacy and foster a sense of belonging and pride among future generations.

In conclusion, the enduring legacy of Chinese New Year serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience of cultural heritage in the face of globalization and technological advancement. Through its timeless traditions, profound symbolism, and adaptability to change, this annual celebration continues to unite communities and reaffirm the importance of cultural identity. As we usher in each new lunar cycle, let us cherish the rich tapestry of customs and values that define the essence of Chinese New Year, ensuring that its legacy endures for our future generations to come!

A Pinoy's Pride is Family: How Family Keeps the Filipino Culture Strong

by Jedric Aniciete
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

In a cheerful 2016 gathering captured by bright lights, festive colors, loud laughs, and spontaneous karaoke performances, lies a large family bonded by heritage, celebrating together for the life milestone for one of its members. The stars in the night sky sparkled like my eyes, as I was ecstatic to spend time with my relatives and friends on this uncommon occasion. Upon arrival, I dashed towards the kids my age, passing my other relatives and elders. It is not every day I get to be with them, thoughts of the potential games, both active and digital, ran through my mind. "We could play with our tablets, or use the toys in their room, or we can have fun with hide and seek!" The possibilities felt endless to me. However, upon catching glimpses of a soon-to-be night of enjoyment, I was stopped by my mother. She urged me to greet my relatives and elders, but I want to get right into playtime. For the beginning of the gathering, enforced by my guardians, I navigated through crowds of people, filled with people I both knew and never seen before. Finding my elders, I paused and reached out to one of them, initiating an intimate Filipino greeting, characterized by its show of respect. I gently held their hand and bow slightly, pressing my forehead to their hand, as I whispered "Mano Po" to them. I repeat this dance of respect and love to all my older relatives and elders, unknowingly further securing our family ties. At the time, I did not think much of this practice, only participating in it to quickly engage in my own interest. Looking back at the various moments like this, where I rushed through such a respectful gesture, my heart is filled with regret as I would come to learn of its timeless meaning. "Mano Po," a Filipino practice that demonstrates one's respect and love for their elders. It is one of the many traditions that will remain in the hearts of myself and my culture, as it symbolizes our identity, and since its existence, it has and will withstand the test of time and change.

In the Filipino culture, family members are strongly bonded together, shown by their many customs that emphasized such value. Their heritage prompts for long celebrations of spiritual and emotional occasions such as Christmas, and other minimal practices to show the love and care they have for each other. At its core, family is an anchor of this connected group within the world. Family acts as the foundation for their many values, customs, traditions, and practices that have long existed with no sign of stopping. Family is the gas pedal that fuels

the jeep or tricycle through bumpy and busy roads. Family is the strong spirit held by 19th century Filipinos that allowed them to gain independence from the United States. Family is the mindset that allows many Pinoys to hold on to morals through their Catholic faith. Family is hard work that Filipinos in the Philippines endure to grow the rice beloved by the country, despite the prolonged floods they face. Family represents the resilience we hold, when facing hardships such as strong typhoons and sudden moments which brings us concern for our future. It is the strength the modern Filipinos hold, allowing them to navigate the current world, despite its fast pace change. Family is something every Filipino will forever have. And with family being pushing them forward in life, their customs, traditions, and practices that are attached to it, will continue to live on.

Time is a process and phenomenon that has existed forever, but still yet hardly understood in this world. It weaves a pathway of uncertainty and change, but although transformation continues, the values attached to my culture remain firm, like a standing pillar that holds the center of a church building. As centuries pass and times seemingly progressing faster than ever, Pinoys find themselves in a world of technological advancements. Manila, a central part of the Philippines, was once a simple area where Pinoys farm for their next meal. However, it is now a point where skyscrapers rise high, kissing the sky, with the internet being a necessity for the daily citizens, and social media becoming the norm. This large transition not only occurred in the Philippines, but all over the world. Countries such as the United States, Japan, Korea, and more, filled with people who hold strong cultural values, live in a world that is flipped from what it once was. With this modernization, it saw the disappearance of various traditions, values, and customs, as they were practiced less in daily lives. This is inevitable because of changing times, because as the world advances, the more "now" is forgotten. Now used to be the various traditions held by many cultures, but the present "now" is only a few practices that still remain on. Despite these changes, values held by Filipinos remain strong, forced of timeless aspects such as family. Family defines not just blood relation but the relationships held by people. Filipinos will continue to make new relationships and connections with each other, leading to bonds which define a family. This vast network of relationships is the primary essence of Filipino culture. In this sprawling web, neighbors become "Tito" and "Tita", friends transform into "Kuya" and "Ate", and strangers are welcomed with the same open arms and warm smiles as the most treasured of relatives. With family remaining within Filipinos, their values stay attached with it. It is because of family, the practice of "Mano Po" remains strong and common in my daily life. It is because of family, Filipinos are always excited, no matter the day, to celebrate a long Christmas occasion. And it is because of family, that Filipinos are willing to capture an uplifting mood everyday in parties through karaoke singing, on every occasion. The resilience of Filipino traditions in the face of modernization is not a mere stroke of luck. It is the product of conscious efforts by individuals and communities to nurture their cultural heritage.

This was the realization I had when I “Mano Po” my grandmother. I hardly see her due to her far distance in the Philippines, only seeing her during vacations. She will always be my family, not just because of our blood relation, but how she treated me as her grandson. She was always proud of what I achieved and I knew she would do anything for me. With my strong connection to her, I use “Mano Po” to show my high regards for her in my life, in my father’s life, and to those around her. As we move forward, it is crucial to cherish and sustain these connections, these customs that unite us. For in them lies not just the memory of a 2016 gathering under the stars but the essence of what it means to be Filipino: resilient, joyful, and eternally bound by the love of family, which time could never change.

Spring Festival

by Hong Xu
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

Sitting in my room, I'm enveloped by the clamorous sounds emanating from the kitchen, accompanied by the thunderous bursts of fireworks that signal the start of our most cherished festival. I leap out of bed with excitement, quickly changing into clothes adorned with the auspicious color red. The sun streams into my room, casting a warm glow as I contemplate the promise of prosperity that the new year may bring. Energized by anticipation, I make my way downstairs, greeted by the bustling activity in the crowded kitchen and living room. I exchange greetings with everyone, knowing that my New Year's money will soon be coming from them. There are a lot of decorations that need to be put up and a lot of important rules that need to be followed.

As I join my uncles in decorating the house, hanging lanterns and banners adorned with auspicious symbols, the sense of tradition and celebration fills the air. Meanwhile, the ladies are busy in the kitchen, crafting dumplings and preparing the seven lucky foods for the table, along with an array of other delicious dishes. Lunar New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, holds immense significance for Chinese people both in China and around the world. We partake in special events such as the wandering Gods procession, a centuries-old tradition in rural Fujian and Guangdong provinces, where villagers carry large deity sculptures through the streets in lively parades to pray for good fortune. Additionally, the dragon and lion dances captivate our attention, symbolizing strength, good luck, and prosperity.

Chinese New Year falls between January 21st and February 20th on the traditional Chinese calendar. It's a time for families to come together for reunion dinners, exchange red envelopes containing money for good luck, set off fireworks, and participate in cultural activities that strengthen our bonds and honor our heritage. Customs and traditions abound during this festive season, from the thorough cleaning of the house to remove any lingering bad luck, to the decoration with auspicious symbols that herald a fresh start. Symbolic foods like dumplings, fish, and glutinous rice cakes grace our tables, each carrying wishes for abundance, prosperity, and happiness in the year ahead. During Chinese New Year, temples are bustling with worshippers seeking blessings for a prosperous year, and vibrant parades fill the streets with dragon and lion dances, symbolizing strength, good fortune, and warding off evil spirits. The holiday culminates in the Lantern Festival, where lanterns of all shapes and sizes illuminate the night sky, marking the end of the festivities with hope and optimism for the year ahead.

Spring Festival is a time of celebration and good luck, with various customs observed to ensure a prosperous year ahead. Some of these include avoiding words associated with misfortune, refraining from breaking glass or porcelain items, and not scolding children. Parents are also advised not to discipline their children, as it could lead to misbehavior. A joyful disposition is encouraged, as prolonged sorrow could bring sadness throughout the year. Hair cutting is also avoided, as it is believed to bring misfortune to one's uncle. Finally, the avoidance of debt repayment is seen as a way to foster amicable relationships and preserve the festive spirit. These traditions aim to create an atmosphere of happiness and good fortune for all involved.

The Chinese calendar links each year to one of the 12 animals in the zodiac, creating a cyclical pattern every 12 years. These animals, such as the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig, hold significant cultural symbolism and personality traits. This tradition shapes various aspects of Chinese culture, influencing personal beliefs, customs, and celebrations. It's not just about marking time, it's a way to understand personality traits and navigate life events. The Chinese zodiac represents the year's characteristics, shaping personal beliefs, customs, and celebrations.

It's a significant holiday celebrated worldwide by Chinese communities. It marks the end of winter and the beginning of the lunar new year, typically falling between January 21 and February 20. The festival is rich in history and mythology, with the Nian, a mythical beast, symbolized by firecrackers and red decorations. Each year in the Chinese calendar is associated with one of the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac. The festivities, which last up to 16 days, are imbued with cultural symbolism and practices aimed at bringing luck, prosperity, and happiness. Preparations begin well before the new year, with families cleaning their homes to prepare for incoming luck. Red decorations, such as lanterns, couplets, and paper cuttings, decorate homes and streets. The Eve of the New Year is marked by a reunion dinner, where families feast on dishes like fish and dumplings. The festival also includes giving red envelopes, or 'hongbao,' to children and unmarried adults to transfer fortune and ward off evil spirits. The Lantern Festival concludes the celebrations with nighttime displays and lantern parades.

The Chinese Spring Festival is a vibrant celebration that brings families and communities together through traditions and fun activities. People decorate homes with special symbols, cook good luck foods, and enjoy dragon and lion dances to scare away bad luck. These customs preserve Chinese cultural traditions and strengthen community bonds. The Lantern Festival ends with beautiful lanterns symbolizing hope and a fresh start for the new year. The festival is not just about fun but also honoring family and cultural heritage.

RUNNER UP

Through Generations: Inafa'maolek and Time

by Emma Chong
Marianas High School, 12th Grade

To have, hold dear and close, whilst still in practice, culture is a part of humanity. It is one of the many aspects of life that allows us to do more than just survive, it allows us to live and love. And to not only love one another, but ourselves as well.

Growing up barefoot, sand between my toes, and always having a cousin whether distant or close to play with, I have never called anywhere but Saipan my home. Yet, I never really knew what box to attempt to fit. Born to a father of Chamorro descent and a mother hailing from the Philippines, as a child of two divorced parents there was more of one influence over another. With a childhood surrounded by my Chamorro heritage, it always seemed so out of reach. From early childhood, "white washed" was branded all over me and it was quite obvious: the lack of accent as I spoke "perfect" English, the nuances of jokes that flew right over my head, or my face plastered with confusion when spoken to in anything other than English. As time carried on, the yearning for something more amplified, to learn what it really means to be Chamorro and the wanting to validate my identity as a local girl. I found myself in spaces on social media where I was relating more to those in the diaspora who were raised away from our islands, resonating with their frustrations that our cultural practices and traditions were all but lost to the likes of colonization and the impacts of catholicism. There was this residual belief that because our ancient practices and traditions were gone, we had nothing left. Yet, as I grew older and began to feel more comfortable in my cultural identity and I realized that cultural traditions, values, and practices do not have to remain stagnant and that even though waves of globalization and tentacles of social media continue to rock our canoe, we must hold strong in who we are in our hearts and continue to sail on. What it means to be Chamorro today is defined differently by the individual, and though we may not be the Chamorros our ancestors were, practices like Inafa'maolek are a testament to the resilience at the heart of the person who still puts it into use today and proof of a continuous lesson passed down through generations.

Gi finu' Chamorro, Inafa'maolek. In English, interdependence and harmony. In a broader context, Inafa'maolek is a set of cultural values that define the act of making decisions not just for oneself, but holistically; for the betterment of the family and community. Though coined as traditionally to be a Chamorro practice, it is a shared practice across cultures within and outside of the CNMI. It is enacted out of both love and duty, seen from the very top of the familial hierarchy down the tree. We see it manifest in front of our eyes when families gather together, most especially in times of mourning. When my Tata passed away, the first order of business was to gather my father's siblings and my Nana to begin making funeral and other such arrangements. The grief made the air feel thick and even while simply moving about or taking a breath, you felt the weight in the air, the gravity of loss. And as the days of the lisayu begun, every one of those 18 days, family members whether immediate or distant showed face with the intentions to help in more ways than one and though the weight was not lifted, you could feel the guinaiya (love) flowing about because Inafa'maolek is more than just decision making, it is about community. It is truly about remembering that we are more than just ourselves, that we have the ability to help and make change for the better within our community and families. It is a reflection that cultural identity is made up of more than just what you do, it's about why you do it.

A couple years ago, when I was still searching for my own definition of what it meant to be Chamorro, I had decided that I was going to take up coconut leaf weaving. Though I claim to be self taught, I owe what I know to Mr. James Bamba, without his videos on Instagram I wouldn't have been able to create the various types of baskets and open and closed top hats that I now know how to make. In my pursuit to define my own cultural identity, my quest to become a weaver seemed almost selfish at first, it had become my party trick, "Look at me! I can make you a hat!", but as I made more and more hats and baskets I had realized that this wasn't just something "cool" I could do, it was a skill that hundreds of years ago was necessary to survival. It becomes more than something to just flaunt aimlessly, they become gifts that I saw to be products of love. More and more that I gave away I realized that that was Inafa'maolek, acts of love. And during my Tata's lisayu, the fans I had made from coconut leaves I picked from my uncle's land were used to fan him as we mourned our beloved. The baskets I made held the fruits at our serving table and were given away in gratitude towards the help and kindness we were receiving. This taught me that Inafa'maolek is reciprocal and not something unique to the Chamorro culture because it is just simply humanity showing itself. This realization would not have dawned on me if it were not ingrained in me that this was our way, it always seemed like it was innate to provide help to those in need when the need is recognized and to never forget anyone in just one and every decision. Sometimes, it is a harsh lesson, especially when you are told you can get McDonald's because everyone else at home has to get some too.

Inafa'maolek is proof that our islands did not bleed for all those years of war and colonization in vain, that as the times change and other influences take hold: customs, practices, and cultural identity can withstand and adapt along with the tests of time. It also serves as a point of unification, because the practice of Inafa'maolek is not just solely unique to the Chamorro culture but something we see throughout the CNMI as a community. Though we are all divided by the different cultures, upbringings, political ideations, religious beliefs, and every other box we try to fit into, we all collectively call the CNMI home with pride and admiration. And as our community has faced extensive hardships like getting ravaged by super typhoons, we always show up for one another and in times of struggle we always come together as one because we are Marianas Strong. Inafa'maolek calls us to set aside our differences and see each other as just people, and to open our hearts to one another as we have been doing from the past till this very day. To love one another is to love ourselves. To me, that is a part of what it means to be Chamorro and I owe that to the love that was passed down to me.

Palauan Pride

by Montrey Germance
Marianas High School, 9th Grade

My name is Montrey Germance, and I come from a mostly Palauan family. In my family, we prioritize our culture, and many of our traditional acts are still practiced to this day. Things can vary from singing to using ancestral structures, for example, Bai houses. They are used mostly by elders as a form of a meeting house. Due to the scarcity of Palau population, it can be considered unique, in lieu of that, not many people know of its existence. I had quite the conversation when it came to a cultural subject, the main reason is due to the fact people called me "weird" or what I say is "nonsense," and it really offends me. Not many people know this, but many popular songs originated from Palau; for example, the Marianas High School song tradition "Bom Soro" is a lyrical song that originates from Palau.

I would say Palau is one of the most unique cultures out there, from how the community was able to develop official states to how we have a white house with a president. It comes as a shock to many; even as I grew up, others never believed that an island such as Palau could be capable of something so unfeasible. There were many incidents where I had to explain to others how Palau is organized, and they wouldn't even take notice of any information I would put out. In my youth, I grew up around a very diverse group of people like Koreans, Filipinos, Pohnpeians, Americans, and many more, and after all I would say about Palau, the only information they would ponder and really think about is how our cultural beliefs and practices are still held to this day.

Palau consists of many cultural beliefs; for example, we have spirit animals. One of the most protected spirit animals in Palau are eagle rays. This is because they are believed to be our ancestors, or our protectors. Another spirit animal that is protected by palauans are sharks, and our belief in these animals is very strong. Any form of sacrilege against these animals can have unimaginable consequences, and situations like these are taken with such significance. I experienced it firsthand when I went to Palau around 2017, and with the trip came tragedy. We went on a boat ride, and my dad was guiding us through the rough waters, and that was when he ran over an eagle ray. I can't recall that much information, but based on what I was told by my parents, the situation we were in could be described as catastrophic. I was dropped off at my aunt Jennifer's house while my parents went to fix the problem we were having. I do not know all the details of that day, but I know that it really frightened my parents.

I've been asked many questions, but one really stuck out to me: "Why do you take your beliefs so seriously?" and all I can say is that it's been practiced regularly. It is basically a staple in almost any Palauan family; for example, an "Omengat," this particular event is very meaningful. It is organized only when a member of the family introduces a baby to the world; however, the celebration is merely the surface of what goes on behind the curtains. In an Omengat, it is said to heal the mother from her pregnancy. She sits above a pot of boiling water with yellow ginger, as she lets the steam cleanse her, and the mixture is splashed on her, and it is done to heal her. The celebration itself is beautiful; the mother is covered in a special oil, and she wears Palau's traditional clothing, and she is celebrated. Being able to view such a celebration is really a blessing, because it really shows how our culture lives as well as how much pride we have in it.

One of the most beautiful arts of Palau is our dancing and singing. Like I said, many popular island songs originate from Palau; however, one of the most known singers is Parker Yobei, Kimie, Lisa Sandei, and many more. Palau's beautiful traditions also include dancing. Palau consists of many dance groups, some of which I joined. I was a part of two dance groups, one official named "Tiul Belau" and a dance group at Marianas High School called "680 Dancers." Palauans are very compassionate about singing and dancing; it is one of the most practiced traditions in our culture, and it really shows the beauty of it all.

One of the most unique things in our culture is gender roles, because in a Palauan household, the woman is the head of the house. You may ask why, and this is because in Palau, we value women to a great extent, this is because they are the ones who bear the offspring and keep the culture alive. Women have traditional authority over land and are responsible for authorizing clan finances. I think that this is what makes Palauan culture so divergent compared to others. In other cultures, men are seen as the ones who are the decision-makers, or the highest, and with that being said, I'd say this is one of the major attributes that separates us from other cultures.

Another interesting aspect that differentiates from other cultures is how we learn our language. Since Palau is such a solitary island with such a small population, nobody really knows what it is, ergo we don't have a way to learn the language without being in Palau or learning it from someone who actually speaks it. I know this is a struggle across all the islands, but in my opinion, I'd say Palauan is especially a hard language to learn. It uses a different grammar rule, and the pronunciation of words can be very complex. If our elders didn't teach their children the traditional Palauan language, it probably would've died out by now. The Palauan language is very unique, it is full of tongue twisters, especially when it comes to talking to someone. We take pride because we are unique compared to other cultures, if we shared the same traditions as other cultures then we wouldn't stand out as much.

In conclusion, Palauan culture is a very beautiful and unique type of pride. Despite all that was said, I'd say that under all those "scary" traditions, there is an absolutely breath-taking experience. We are proud to be Palauans, and we show it off. Yes, we might have many constraints, but we make beauty with what limits us. We look at situations as "just because we can't do this doesn't mean we can't do something else just as fun." I guess what I'm trying to say is that most of the Palauans I've met look on the bright side, and they taught me so much. Some of them are no longer with us physically but their legacy lives on in our hearts. They taught me all I know about Palauan cuisine, traditions, games, dances, and so much more. We've gone through so much, especially with all the wars and all the destruction. It helped us realize that our culture doesn't lie around us; it lies within us. We are still living today, keeping our culture alive, because we never gave up on it.

Savoring Unity: The Shared Journey of Chuseok Cooking

by Gwanpil Son
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

I am taking an AP Statistics practice test in my room when I realize a mistake that I made on multiple-choice question #3. As I reach out with my left hand to grab my eraser, I freeze at the giant scar I have running across the side of my middle finger. Although it is ugly and beyond repair, I smile as I reminisce about the lovely memories my Darth Vader-worthy scar brings. For a split second, I completely forget about the practice exam and think about how I accidentally cut myself with my grandma's knife while cutting napa cabbage to help my grandmother make kimchi. The blood splattered straight into a bowl like a thousand little clones of Reds from Angry Birds were trying to destroy the fortress of fermented kimchi juice, resulting in an accidental "bloody Mary" that even vampires would cringe at. What was once a delicious mixture of chili powder, shrimp paste, garlic, spring onions, and carrots was now exactly that, with my blood added to it. I remember crying at the pain, about to complain about it to my grandma, but my tears crawled right back into my eyes as I saw my grandma's facial expression, which screamed out, "Should I slap him since he squirted blood into my lovely kimchi paste, or should I get the poor little boy a bandage?" As I silently tense up my face, getting ready for a soft slap, my aunt suddenly scolds my grandma for not doing anything about my wound. "Are you really just going to let the kid cry like that?" Keep in mind that I was a 7th grader at the time, so I was a bit too old to be crying about a tiny little cut but far too young to be fully responsible for all of my actions. This only added to the confusion as my entire family began arguing with each other. "What do you mean I'm doing nothing?! I was going to get him a bandage!" my grandma screams. The thing with having three aunts and my grandma in one room is that nobody will be the first to admit that they were wrong, so I could silently escape the scene and tend to my own wound while they were arguing with each other.

Yeah. Like I told you, lovely memories. Just kidding. Well, only sort of. To give you guys a better understanding of what is going on, let's first talk about the origins of Chuseok. Chuseok is a 3-day-long South Korean holiday that is celebrated on the 15th day of the 8th month of the year, according to the Lunar Calendar. Because of this, the exact dates of Chuseok change each year, but it is usually celebrated between September and October. It was originally a tradition for ancient South Koreans to give thanks to the gods and the ancestors

for a bountiful harvest and pray for continued success, but nowadays, it is a way for families to gather up, cook, eat, and give thanks. Even as South Korea has transformed from a third-world country that was annexed by Japan into a first-world country that boasts many accomplishments, Chuseok is a day in which all South Koreans remember their roots. Although all of the wonderful foods from Chuseok, ranging from the savory bulgogi (tender slices of marinated beef grilled to perfection) to the songpyeon (handcrafted rice cakes filled with sweet fillings like honey or sesame seeds) and, of course, kimchi (a fermented mix of cabbage and radishes infused with garlic and chili with no blood included at all), can all be store-bought or easily made through technology, Chuseok is the one day in which all South Koreans, old and young, ladies and gentlemen, rich and poor, make every single ingredient themselves, along with their family members.

Every single Korean has a favorite dish. For me, it's my aunt's galbi-jjim, which are tender marinated beef short ribs that are cooked with vegetables, resulting in a sweet and savory piece of meat that pulls right off the bone. For my grandma, it is chicken soup, or, as she calls it, her "infamous samgye-tang" (she takes self-love to a whole other level, but we all secretly love her more than how much she loves herself). Because of this, every single family eats different foods during Chuseok, but yet, every single one still eats kimchi, which is adjusted to be best fit for the palates of different people, but in my family, we create it like this:

1. Prepare the vegetables. The main vegetable used in kimchi is napa cabbage, which has to be cut into bite-sized pieces. If you are using radishes, make sure to cut them into small cubes. Also, try not to cut a finger while you are at it (oops!).
2. Brine the vegetables. Sprinkle salt between the cabbage leaves, and make sure it gets into every little nook and cranny since the result will be too watery if you don't do this step properly. If you accidentally cut a finger on step one, maybe have your brother do this step for you, just like I did.
3. Rinse and drain. After the brining period, have your dad thoroughly wash the vegetables to remove any excess salt, unless you want to receive criticism from your grandma ("If you eat too much salty food, you will die early!"). Then, watch and be amazed as he uses his dad's strength to squeeze out all of the excess water.
4. Prepare and mix the seasonings! This is the most technical part, since the seasoning is what gives the kimchi its flavor, so have your 70-year-old grandma with 70 years of kimchi-making experience complete this step (have been doing this since day one). She will include just the right amount of garlic, ginger, chili flakes, sugar, salt, and many other ingredients, depending on how she is feeling that day. Then, pray that she is not craving extra spice that day.

5. Coat the vegetables with the seasoning paste. You should wear plastic gloves for this step, gently massage the paste into the vegetables, and ensure that they are evenly coated. It will feel very weird at first, but as you go on, you will find yourself getting addicted to the texture of the sauce mixing into the vegetables through your gloves.
6. Let it ferment inside a tightly packed jar for a couple of days. This is the most exciting step since everything is complete, and all you have to do is wait. After it ferments, transfer the kimchi to the fridge to slow down the fermentation process.

After following all of these steps, all we had to follow was the super secret step seven. Enjoy! Now that all of our hard work was done, it was time to celebrate Chuseok properly with my family members! And enjoy what we did. It was just as if everyone suddenly forgot about how they were bickering about a tiny cut in the hand of a seventh grader just a couple hours ago. The adults were talking, congratulating each other on their biggest accomplishments over the last year, and the kids were doing the only thing that they could do since video games were banned at the Chuseok dinner table: talk about video games. What else did you expect from a group of middle schoolers who see each other once a year? Regardless of what the topic was—job opportunities, sports teams, politics, or even Clash Royale—everyone developed a strong sense of camaraderie with each other over the course of a couple days because of Chuseok.

To me, Chuseok is not just a holiday (in which I am supposed to skip school), but since I live in Saipan, I still have to attend. How sad). And although I stuff myself with as much food as I possibly can, it isn't meant for that either. Chuseok is a day on which all South Koreans remember their history and stay true to their roots. It is a reminder for us to stay humble and thankful for everything good that has happened to us while also being ready for the worst. To me, the spirit of Chuseok can be applied everywhere at any time. And this scar that I have on my middle finger on my left hand is a constant reminder of that.

