

WHAT THE YOUNG HISTORIANS PROJECT HAS MEANT TO ME

Shivani Yerigeri

2/17/2014

The Asian Indian Heritage Project (AIHP), a Smithsonian sponsored project organized together with the Western Reserve Historical Society, gives Indian (Asian) High School Students an opportunity to be a part of writing history on Asian Indian Heritage in the United States. History to me, is not simply memorizing dates, names, and wars, but instead, is about developing a greater appreciation for the present by gaining a deeper understanding of the past.

I learned about the AIHP Project from a newspaper advertisement, and immediately knew that I wanted to be a part of it. From the start, I recognized that this project did not compare to any other I had worked in the past. There was a selection process for which I began to pen down my thoughts on why I would like to be involved. Getting selected was both an honor and a wonderful opportunity. I knew it was going to be exciting, but not necessarily easy.

The AIHP project involved close interaction with several highly-distinguished first generation Indian Americans. It gave me an opportunity to be closely connected to history and witness it through their lens. Meeting these distinguished seniors, interviewing them and reflecting on their experiences gave me an experience that cannot be compared to any other. Prior to this, I could not expect or comprehend how this project would change the way I would look at history and historians. Every interviewee had the eagerness to share a lifetime of experiences; each had a unique and intriguing experience, but a unique style of his or her own. Very soon, I learned how to accommodate and tailor my interviews, know what topics to dive into greater detail, and how to ensure the interviewees were comfortable opening up to me and providing me with the most relevant information. Some challenges they faced as new immigrants around 5 decades ago could not easily be understood today. They did not have a pre-existing Indian social circle here, as I have today. It was important for me to learn to empathize and only then could I better understand why immigration to the United States “was” and “is” so valuable, despite the struggles, failures, success and joy. This helped me extrapolate my understanding to the overall birth and growth of the United States and developed a greater appreciation for this country and the people that make it great. History never felt so alive, relevant, and meaningful until this AIHP Project. This project put into perspective the amount of hard work and risk it took on the part of those who immigrated here first. It is the ability, perseverance and determination of these people that laid the path and foundation for me and million others who came after them to have a far more comfortable life here in the United States. They are now a part of the American history and each day that passes by leaves a mark of their successes. We owe it to them for giving us this wonderful gift. Not only have they adopted a new country, but, the new

country has wholeheartedly embraced them. The Indian immigrant experience has been a very positive influence for all, especially me.

In preparation for recording these interview sessions, students on this project were teamed into groups of two. Dr Grabowski explained the project to us and had complete confidence that we would execute it with utmost responsibility. I knew that if I were to fulfill their expectations, I would have to be sincere. However, the hard work never interfered in making the process fun and enjoyable. The idea of making a movie out of the information we obtained was very exciting! Each group was handed a brand new camcorder. Starting with learning to operate it and handle it with care, we quickly learned how to take quality recordings. Students on the team came from all over Cleveland and did not know each other previously. Yet, very swiftly we were taught to coordinate and execute the project well and soon, we became good friends, enjoyed the process, and kept looking forward to the next Sunday when we could meet to work together. The team comprised of highly motivated and driven students who complemented each other's skills at interviewing, recording, and even editing the films. Editing the films taught me to focus on the most important parts of the interview; it was challenging to edit information that was required to fit within the specified film time slot. I learned how to cut and clip scenes together, how to have the right level of lighting, and even how to have the right background. More importantly, it taught me to work together as a team with students who had very different schedules and activities. The relationships that I created and bonds that were made during this project will never be forgotten. We had several humorous incidents along the way, like getting lost in the Museum building, drawing pictures on a dry erase board, seeing who had the best handwriting, and more!

This was our project, so we the students were expected to lead it. Dr Grabowski, Mr Sreshta, Ms Jane, Ms Alyssa and several others at Western Reserve Historical Society were there to support us and provided us with any help needed either directly or indirectly. They constantly encouraged us to do our best and overcome challenging situations. The snacks and in particular, the samosas were definitely a treat that we all relished. I feel a great sense of accomplishment from the coordination and leadership skills this project drew out of me. This project gave me a new yet hefty responsibility, and the confidence placed in me and the other students was heartwarming and encouraging.

Smithsonian together with Western Reserve Historical Society through this project provides a wonderful opportunity to capture history through the experiences of the first generation of Indians (Asians) who immigrated to the United States. No one has done this before and if it were not for this timely project, we may never have had these stories captured and heard as is being done. The team at Western Reserve Historical Society taught me to be a historian with a

heart during my interactions, yet without losing sight of my responsibilities as one. Learning to edit and make a movie gave me the hands-on that I will be able to leverage in future. This project helps me put history into perspective with my own background, and that of my parents and grandparents who immigrated to the United States. I plan on continuing to help this project grow and also to stay in touch with my team. To me, successful completion of this project is only the beginning to enhancing my love for history and definitely not the end. I would like to thank Smithsonian, Western Reserve Historical Society, and Asian Indian Heritage Project for this opportunity that helped me improve my technical skills and learn and grow as a leader and as a young historian! To me it is no longer “his-story”, “her-story” or “their stories”, but “OUR STORIES” and I am grateful to have been a part of this History in the Making!