Sharing her heritage

We shared connections and shared culture, despite living in very different places all our lives. It was a pleasure to learn more about this young scholar and her ambitions for herself and Chamorro people everywhere.

The following as it appeared in the Guam PDN July 14, 2013

After more than 60 years of migration off of the islands, there are generations of our island brothers and sisters with a variety of upbringings and ways that they identify with their Chamorro heritage. My own case represents the many who grew up on Guam, but have spent most of their adult life off the island, raising children that they hope will appreciate their special connection to the islands. Other Chamorros were born and raised off-island, sometimes with a mixed heritage, sometimes not, and they too have to make an effort to identity with their Chamorro ancestry.

Having to work at claiming your identity has its struggles, but it also has its gifts. When you can’t take something for granted, you truly examine its uniqueness and its value.

A beautiful example of a Chamorro with this special appreciation is a young San Diego Chamorro woman by the name of Jesi Lujan Bennett. Although her father is Caucasian, and her mother did not grow up on Guam, she describes her upbringing as “surrounded by strong Chamorro women”. Her Grandmother, Guadalupe Blas Lujan, included Jesi and family in the Sons and Daughters of Guam Club events all of her life. She was raised “village-style” in Jesi’s words, in Chula Vista where Grandma and an uncle lived in houses across the park, and another aunt lived down the street. Later she became involved in the Pacific Islander Festival’s annual PIFA event
in San Diego. She also served on the board of the Chamorro CHE’LU organization.

Jesi’s fascination with her culture led her to pursue a degree in Ethnic Studies at UC San Diego. It was there, she said, that she acquired the language to articulate what she saw happening with her culture and her fellow Chamorros. This year, Jesi begins working on her PhD at the University of Hawaii in Manoa. It is no surprise that her work will examine the experience of Chamorros living off of the islands, a group referred to as the Chamorro diaspora. Her thesis is entitled, “Apmam Tiempo Ti Uli’e Hit (Long Time No See): Chamorro Diaspora and the Transpacific Home. We discussed her influence by Chamorro scholars and advocates including, Dr. Miguet Bevacqua, Dr. Craig Santos Perez and Dr. Faye Untalan.

Through her journey, Jesi, who says she’s been mistaken for everything from Asian to Mexican, has become a well-informed and passionate envoy for the stateside Chamorro community.

Besides her genealogical ties, she has acquired knowledge of the history of the islands, its current challenges, and has even learned the language, although she’s quick to admit that she is not fluent yet. Says Jesi of her academic work, “I think there is something very valuable in looking at the diasporic experiences that Chamorros abroad are having. Today there are more Chamorros living away from their home islands than on them. I hope my project shows that the islanders abroad add to the rich story of Chamorro history”.

Currently, Jesi is the president of the Marianas Club at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. The club is currently working to better connect the various Chamorro university and community organizations throughout Hawai‘i. They offer various cultural and political events throughout the year at UH Mānoa, and also provide free weekly language classes. This fall they will be using grant money to help Chamorro high school students in Hawai‘i pay for SAT registration costs and college applications. You can connect with Jesi Lujan Bennett about
Embracing her heritage

Woman’s work will examine experience of Chamorros abroad

By Sandy Flores Ustindie

For Pacific Daily News

A recent newspaper article shares the story of a Chamorro woman, Brenda Bennett, and her experiences in examining her Chamorro heritage. Bennett, working on her Ph.D. at the University of Hawaii in Manoa, has been exploring the experience of Chamorros living abroad. Her work is pushing the boundaries of the University’s Department of Anthropology.

Bennett, who is originally from Guam, has been interested in her Chamorro heritage since childhood. She was raised in a household with grandparents who immigrated to Hawaii after World War II. Her grandparents, who had lived in Guam during the American occupation, shared stories of their upbringing and the customs of their native island.

Bennett’s research focuses on the experiences of Chamorros living in Hawaii and how they maintain their cultural identity. She has conducted interviews with Chamorros across the state, including those who moved to Hawaii at a young age as children of immigrants.

One of Bennett’s research methods involves conducting genealogical research to trace the lineage of Chamorros living in Hawaii. This has allowed her to uncover historical records and family stories that provide insight into the cultural and social dynamics of the Chamorro community.

Bennett’s work has underscored the importance of language preservation and cultural identity in the Chamorro community. She has found that language is a crucial tool for maintaining cultural connections, and she has advocated for the preservation of Chamorro language and culture in education and community programs.

Bennett’s work has been recognized with several awards and grants, and she has presented her research at conferences and academic gatherings. Her research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the Chamorro experience in Hawaii and has highlighted the importance of preserving Chamorro heritage for future generations.

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