



Telling Our Stories

For my college application essays, I avoided the gloomy topics of immigration and living in a low-income family. Each of the college admissions books I read and internalized had an underlying theme: college essays ought to focus on the positive aspects of one's life, with humor injected in between the sentences. I simply couldn't do this with stories about immigration; my memories were too depressing. How could I inject humor into nights filled with anxiety when I overheard my parents arguing whether or not we should give up and go back to Korea, phone calls with my landlord to fight for the deposit she refused give back, or moments of panic whenever I thought about paying for college? I asked my counselor if I should write my college essays on these experiences. "Ten thousand other immigrant students probably wrote about overcoming adversity much greater than yours," she replied. So I concluded that stories about immigration are all too similar, all too pervasive, and all too serious as a topic to be handled by a teenager. In the end, I wrote about how I played piano for the Alzheimer's patients at the local hospital, how I won a motor-building contest during the summer technology program at MIT, and how I am the only service-learning teen-ambassador in all of Orange County. And all the essays I wrote came out detached and cliché, as if I was hoping my readers could fully grasp who I was just by looking at my shadow.

I wonder how many immigrant students feel as if we ought to bury our painful memories and underscore the humorous and hopeful moments of our lives. It is easy to write about wonders of a new land, the nice neighbor who taught you English, and the teacher who changed your life. But there is nothing harder than sharing your experiences of extreme anxiety as you sleep in fear of deportation, or the feelings of guilt and bitterness at making your parents pay so much tuition when they already work ten hours a day just to put food on the table. With happy events, words pour out like honey and milk. There is no need to worry that you might sound self-pitying, no need to recall unpleasant events that will drain you emotionally. But by focusing on the happy and hopeful events of our lives, by pretending we are the same as stable and happy middle-class American families, we unconsciously erase the sacrifices our families have made to get us to where we are today. We erase ourselves. Writing about past experiences, whether pleasant or unpleasant, forces us to reflect and re-evaluate the past and the present, as well as what we truly want to achieve in the future. So let us rely on words and their ability to capture even the most fleeting emotions, no matter how sad or depressing they are. Let us preserve our memories before they slip away into oblivion. Let us preserve ourselves.

About the Author

Grace is one of E4FC's 2010 Scholars. She is a junior studying electrical engineering and computer science at UC Berkeley. Grace plans to become a CG animator and entertain and inspire millions and millions of people. She emigrated from South Korea with her family when she was twelve years old.

Educators for Fair Consideration helps immigrant students realize the American dream of college and citizenship. We support immigrant students who have grown up in the United States but face challenges due to financial need and immigration status. For more information, please visit us online at www.e4fc.org.