

WHAT DOES AAPI MONTH MEAN TO YOU?



Lia Medrano

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month and to celebrate, we asked for your stories. Today we kick off our celebration with the first story from Lia Medrano, director of communications.

"Like many others, I loathe stereotypes. I can also fold an origami crane in under a minute.

When people think of Japan, their thoughts tend to go to either otaku pop culture (anime, boy bands, Pokemon), samurais, ninjas and geishas, or nuclear-related humanitarian crises both recent and historical.

I enjoy sharing the lesser-known traditions that makes my culture unique. Like the cranes. I folded 1,000 for my wedding to ensure thousands of years of happiness and prosperity (which my uncle reinforced during the banzai toast at the reception). Or putting out the carp flags and samurai dolls on Boys Day (May 5). Or pounding mochi for New Year's.

I'm proud of my Japanese American heritage. To me, sharing things outside of what's well-known can create opportunities to discover similarities between different cultures, and thus break down assumptions that lead to stereotypes."



Marisa Wallace

"Because we are a military family, we have had the pleasure of living in Seoul, South Korea, and Honolulu, Hawaii. My oldest daughter, Breaanah, is part Asian American and Pacific Islander (Hawaiian, Portuguese, Filipino, and Chinese).

While in Hawaii, Breaanah was able to learn about her heritage and various forms of Pacific Islander dancing, including Hulu, Tahitian, Tauluga, and Haka. She even performed nightly on the Star of Honolulu, a dinner cruise ship stationed in Waikiki.

While stationed in Korea, my youngest daughter, Mi'yah, fell in love with Asian culture. She learned Taekwondo and to speak Korean, but her biggest pleasure was learning Chinese Lion Dancing, and eating the amazing food. Needless to say, she is an Asian Lion Dancer now. She began dancing with a team in Hawaii when she was just 6 years old. After moving to Florida, she continued dancing with a team based out of Tampa and has now linked up with a Vietnamese team, Dynamics, based in Orlando.

I love that my children have the opportunity to engage with various cultures and that these cultures are so welcoming and open.

Both heritages believe in ohana or 가족 (gajog): Those who are family, and those you choose to call your family. Ohana or gajog is a human circle of complete aloha (love, peace, and compassion)."



Dr. Dzung Dang

Dr. Dzung Dang was 16 when the North Vietnamese took over Saigon, which ended the Vietnam War April 30, 1975.

Because of his father's work as an intelligence officer with the South Vietnam government, it was vitally important the family leave the country before the North Vietnamese took over. If caught in Saigon, his father faced execution and the rest of the family would be put in a "reeducation" camp.

Dr. Dang clearly remembers the events of the day the North Vietnamese reached Saigon.

"Our family ran to the Saigon shipyard. It was me, my father, mother, two sisters and a young niece and two nephews. The ship yard was chaos. Everybody tried to get onto any ships or boats that were available. My father fought with another man to make room for me to crawl over a bridge made up of two pieces of lumber that connected the docking ledge to the merchant ship, which was slowly moving away from the dock. I had almost reached the ship's ledge when the wooden bridge fell. I told myself that I was going to die because I didn't know how to swim, but someone on the ship caught my hands and pulled me up. Safe onboard, I looked back and saw my family crying. No one knew where the ship was headed. It was the first time I'd been separated from my family and I thought it might be the last time I saw them."

Enduring repeated attacks by the North Vietnamese, the ship, the Truong Xuan, later well known for transporting 4,000 refugees away from Vietnam that day, finally reached international waters.

Their relief was short-lived.

“Our ship broke down and floated without direction for almost a month. With more than 4,000 people on board, including children, pregnant women, and small babies, people began dying of starvation and lack of water.”

Dr. Dang was close to starvation when the Truong Xuan was spotted in the South China Sea by a merchant ship from Denmark. The ship brought everyone on board and gave them food and water before taking them to a refugee camp in Hong Kong, where they stayed for eight months. Though safe, Dr. Dang was desolate.

“I cried every night; I thought that the Communists had executed my father, and I thought I was by myself with no future.”

Dr. Dang registered his name with the International Red Cross, hoping to find other families with the same rare last name. A few months later he received a list, and his family was on it.

“They had escaped by boat later the same day I left, and were picked up by a United States aircraft carrier. After a stop in Philippines and Guam, they were transported to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, where Vietnam refugees were processed. I was flown out a week later to reunite with my family. My family, especially my father, was overjoyed when I arrived. They never believed we’d be reunited.”

Dr. Dang and his family eventually settled in Oak Park, Illinois, but moved to Houston, Texas a few years later.

He was inspired to study medicine by his grandmother, who was a doctor.

“My father always told me I have to study hard and follow the tradition of our ancestors, who were physicians of the royal court,” he says. “Before the war, my family was respected and lived very well.”

The first doctor in his immediate family, Dr. Dang helped support his older siblings as they went to medical school and dental school.

“Now their children are also doctors and dentists,” he says. “And my future son-in-law and my son are in medical school.”



Peter Tollner

"I am proud to be an Asian American and to work for WellMed. I am proud of my heritage and culture, and I am proud to be a part of a company that values diversity and inclusion.

I was born and raised in Long Island, New York. My mom is originally from Thailand and met my father when he was overseas during the Vietnam War. My father did three tours in Vietnam as an Air Force pilot, flying on C-130 aircraft. After the war, my father bought my mom a ticket to come to the United States, unsure if she would or if he would ever see her again. Sure enough, she did come, and they drove from San Francisco to New York, where my dad was born, in a little '70s Volkswagen Beetle.

My dad worked two or three jobs most of my life and my mom stayed home to raise me and my two younger siblings. She always made sure that I learned about my Thai heritage. I love learning about Thai food, music and culture. I am also proud of the values that my mom instilled in me, such as hard work, respect, and family. I was one of the only Asian kids in my school. I faced discrimination and prejudice at times, but I also learned a lot about resilience and strength and the value of true friendship.

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I am proud to work for WellMed because it is a company that values diversity and inclusion. I am surrounded by people from all walks of life, and I feel like I can be my authentic self at work. I am also proud of the work that WellMed does to provide quality healthcare to our patients.

I am grateful for the opportunities that I have been given, and I am excited to continue to contribute to the company and to the community. I have worked for UnitedHealth Group for more than 18 years in what I first thought would be a pit stop in my career.

I transitioned to operations training manager for the CPR Department at WellMed in March 2023.

I strive to always find the best ways to serve our customers, whether it's a person visiting our clinics, our tenured staff, or a new employee on the first day of their career at WellMed.

I continuously look for ways to optimize experiences and to position our staff so they can do their best for our patients.

I believe it is important to have a workforce that reflects the diversity of our patients and our communities. When we have a diverse workforce, we can better understand and serve the needs of our patients.

I am excited to continue to learn and grow in my career and I am committed to making a difference in the world. I believe that my unique perspective as an Asian American from New York will help me to do this."
