

# Time puts the bloom on hometown multiculturalism

By Karen TeLleen-Lawton

AST week, San Marino elected its first Asian American, Dr. Matthew Lin to the City Council. As a longtime resident, I've seen many changes to my hometown.

I left San Marino in 1974 to attend college. My hometown was an upper-middle-class suburb whose true treasures were its conservative, small-town traditions. But with its professional men and at-home moms, green lawns taunting the semi-arid climate, and skin tones differentiated only between skiers and sunbathers, it was hardly the real world.

More than two decades later, a job change brought my husband and our family to our new home in my old hometown. I discovered a community whose wealth had multiplied many fold, in unpredictable ways. San Marino had triumphed in retaining its outward beauty while prospering in cultural diversity. But the lurching path, sometimes hidden gracefully behind smiles and bows, reveals the raw emotions unearthed in learning to be a multicultural society.

I was away at college when my grandmother first expressed her indignation that Asian children were entering San Marino schools. Their education-conscious parents came for the schools' reputations and raised the achievement bar for everyone. "They're taking away all our scholarships," she bemoaned.

I shrugged off her intolerant attitude because of her age, but was disheartened when, over

the years, I continued to hear such sentiments from others whenever I visited.

I heard that "they" didn't volunteer in the schools or attend PTA meetings, and consequently the town's showcase event, the high school Grad Night, was on the verge of collapse. All Asians apparently were prone to pouring concrete over half their landscape and crowning the remaining lawn with gaudy lion statues.

When I returned to live I was apprehensive about finding a town divided. Instead I encountered a transformation. About 40 percent of the high school PTA members, including the president, were Asian, and another 10 percent were Hispanic, black, Indian, and other non-white ethnicities. This didn't precisely mirror the student body, which was approximately 70 percent Asian, but the diversity among the parent leadership was unmistakable. Laws had stayed green, the schools prospered educationally, and traditions were maintained and augmented.

Grad Night was still the pride of the community. Though the volunteer force had dwindled over the years, I suspected the more likely cause to be the trans-cultural phenomenon of two-career families and frenetic lives.

I was gratified that San Marino had survived and thrived in the transition from monoculture. So relieved, perhaps, that it took awhile for me to recognize, or perhaps to admit, that a disheartening undercurrent still raced just beneath the surface of citywide solidarity. The PTA often discussed how to involve more of the

Asian moms on committees, in part because they were needed to make phone calls in Mandarin and Cantonese. Behind the enthusiastic suggestions was a lingering attitude that they still weren't doing their share.

The Grad Night work force lost several loyal Chinese parents who grew weary of overhearing complaints about lack of participation among Asians.

Despite a two-decade trend bringing San Marino's Asian constituency from near zero to around half, no Asian-American had won a seat on the City Council.

I, too, overheard conversations. Whenever I approached a group speaking Mandarin, they switched politely to English, whether fluent or halting. But once in awhile I sensed my own defensiveness, feeling like a stranger in my own hometown. A particularly memorable conversation with an Asian neighbor gave me an insight into my own attitude about cultural differences.

I was weeding my front garden when he came over for a friendly chat. Gesturing to the azaleas wilting under my pitiful whindow, I asked if he had any advice on their care. "I don't know anything about plants," he replied. Then he added in what I hoped was a joking manner, "If I had my way I'd concrete my whole yard."

Suddenly I understood the fear that accompanies change. It was a fear of losing something cherished, and exchanging it for something not chosen and unfamiliar.

At tennis one spring morning, when the absence of one of

our regulars left us with an all-Caucasian group, an older player exulted at the student body elections just reported in the local weekly newspaper. "We got all the positions for the first time in years!" she crowed. I fumed silently at the bald racism.

Some time later, the community paper published an article about an honor my son had won. A friend of my mother's called to say how wonderful it was to see an award by "a name that wasn't Chan or Chen."

At first, these two remarks elicited only my unspoken anger. But having shed my Pollyanna veneer for a deeper awareness of the real struggle to live in community, I reconsidered them. What they feared, I concluded, were the losses of connections that are the hallmarks of small-town living.

The older the residents, the less likely they were to recognize a "Sy" or a "Leung" or a "Yan-aguchi" as a neighbor or friend. Of course, they are. Anyone watching the launch of the inaugural high school girls' water polo team would have witnessed that. My daughter's water polo coach guided them through their first season of hard learning, exciting games, and shared camaraderie.

During one practice though, he became exasperated at a series of missed catches. "Open your eyes!" he finally yelled. "Coach, they are open, you just can't see them 'cuz we're Chinese," one of the girls quipped. My son Tim was a new comer and minority when he won election to junior class office on self-deprecating humor delivered partly in memorized Mandarin phrases. Clearly, it wasn't his

stellar pronunciation and grammar that swayed the audience. But perhaps his classmates recognized a desire to share experiences and learn together: a desire to represent a whole student body in its diversity.

This year he began studying Mandarin as well as serving on the student body council. One day just a month into the school year, he was phoning a list of students to ask them to bring canned goods for a school food drive. I overheard one call in which he reached the non-English speaking mother of a student. "Lucy." After trying to speak louder and more slowly, he gave up on English and tried some broken phrases in Mandarin. When he hung up, I congratulated him. "Your first real conversation in Chinese!"

It was a disaster, he moaned. "But it sounded like you gave your phone number. What did they say?" I asked. Tim shook his head. "I have no idea."

As much as the former majority feels forced to adjust, the burden of understanding a new culture falls disproportionately on the newcomers. For many years the Chinese Club of San Marino has shouldered this mission.

The Club performs an additional crucial function in acclimating new families to local American traditions such as volunteering time and money, and attending school events. Their approach of carefully matching levels of social standing before making a contact is one key to understanding why Caucasian requests for Asian participation can fail.

When a Caucasian leader approaches a Chinese about taking on a position that should

rightly be offered to another Chinese of higher standing, the request might be refused or ignored. This is still a little-discussed area of frustration.

When an annual campout for the school's cross-country team was on the verge of collapse due to a coaching change and a lack of experienced campers, I received a call from Ken. His child was also on the team. "I help not much," he lamented, "my English not good."

"But you'll get lots of practice, and we'd enjoy meeting you," I encouraged him. He did come, and I could see his delight at experiencing American-style camping and sharing conversation with other parents around the campfire after dinner.

He told us how hard it was to understand the customs, let alone the bewildering pace of informal banter.

Communication improves with our openness, our honesty and our willingness to bridge the communication gap. It improves with each campout, each afternoon spent painting Grad Night together, and each slowly deciphered message. It will undoubtedly improve with representation on the town's governing body, as Matthew Lin will do his best to show.

The phone rang an hour or so after Tim's attempt to leave his phone number with Lucy's mom. It was Lucy. "Hey, she intoned in perfect California teen-speak, did somebody there like, call me?"

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