

STOCKTONSpeaks!

DEBBIE CHAN NOZUKA

In October 1915, a brave man left his home country of China for America in search of something better in "Gum San," the land of the "Gold Mountain." He came alone to pave the way for his wife and child, who would eventually follow. He went to great distances, both physically and mentally, in hopes of making a better future for his family. After seven years of hard work, in 1922 he was able to bring his wife and only child to join him in California. The couple subsequently was blessed with four more children, and nine years after the couple was reunited, their sixth offspring, a son, Charlie, was born.

About the same time as Charlie's birth in 1932, another Chinese man, with the same intentions of creating a future in the United States and moving his family here, made his second voyage to America. A new husband and soon-to-be father, he was unable to bring his pregnant wife with him. Thus, as during his first trip to America, he was alone. It took thirteen years before his wife and daughter, Violet, whom he had never seen, were able to immigrate to the United States. Mother and daughter arrived after a grueling twelve-day voyage in the steerage of a large ocean liner. The three were finally together in California.

Stories of journeys like these were quite common at the time. More and more people sought refuge in the seemingly endless possibilities that awaited them in the open arms of America. These two men and their families settled down in America to begin new lives. In time, the two children, Charlie and Violet, met, fell in love, and married. Violet gave birth first to a son and a few years later, to a daughter, whom they named Debbie.

This is Debbie's story.

Debbie Chan was born in 1960 at Dameron Hospital in the city of Stockton, California. Both her parents, Violet and Charlie, came from humble

backgrounds with little in the way of material advantages. As she was growing up, her father worked two jobs. He wanted to provide a better life for his children than the one he had experienced, growing up in an impoverished area of downtown Stockton. He worked full-time for the post office; on Sundays he worked in a grocery store. Years later, when Debbie and her brother were old enough to be left home alone, their mother went to work as a secretary for the local school district. Eventually, Debbie attended the same high school where her mother worked.

. The close-knit family regularly attended the United Methodist Church, where her mother ensured that Debbie's religious education was well grounded by enrolling her in Sunday School classes. It was a fun time for Debbie. More importantly, attending church with friends as well as family reinforced her religious faith. Debbie drew strength from her church and her faith. When she encountered troubles during her life, she would reflect on lessons she learned and experiences she'd had in church.

Holidays were joyous occasions for Debbie and her family. When those special days came around, the whole extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins came together to celebrate. These holidays were special times that were cherished by each of them. Infrequent get-togethers like these, visiting with her cousins and other family members, left indelible but pleasant impressions on her. There would always be wonderful food to eat and plenty of happy chatter in both English—usually with cousins-- and Chinese—primarily among the elders.

"As a family, people share a unique bond that stands out from all others", Debbie explains. "Even though I cannot communicate well with my great-grandmother, grandmother, and other older relatives because of our language barrier, I cherish and value the time I spend with them."

Debbie misses the simple pleasures and the sense of safety she felt throughout her childhood. She fondly remembers going to a family friend's house every Friday night, falling asleep to the likes of music from the 50s that her

parents relished. She remembers idyllic pleasure in the innocence of childhood, basking in the freedom of venturing around the neighborhood and beyond on her bike, and the joy of day trips with her family to San Francisco.

Debbie has many fond memories of her youth, but she also had an unexpected confrontation with sad reality. While she was away at college, taking winter semester final examinations, the father of a close childhood friend passed away. Although she had been told the father suffered from a bout with pneumonia, she was unaware of his demise. Returning home during the semester break, Debbie asked her friend about the father's health. She was stunned to learn he had not survived his illness. It was a traumatic moment and she practically went into shock, feeling not only surprised by the news of his death but also a sense of betrayal that her parents had kept this information from her. In retrospect, Debbie now believes her parents were trying to protect her from the negative impact the knowledge of his death might have had on her academic performance.

Debbie felt it was her "job" to keep attending and doing well in school while growing up. She was quite responsible throughout her education, which in Stockton began at Jack and Jill Parent Cooperative Nursery School, on through Franklin High School, from which she received her high school diploma. After two years at San Joaquin Delta College, Debbie attended California State University Sacramento, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration, with a minor in Economics.

Debbie believes "education equals a good job." Her parents stressed the importance of education and academic performance, because they wanted their daughter's life to be better and easier than theirs. Despite her own years of formal schooling, Debbie's definition of education is more expansive. She states, "Not only do we learn from books and classes but sometimes more from our parents and the people who surround us as well."

Growing up and becoming an adult was a gradual process. While there may have been signs from her family that she was an adult, Debbie believes

that recognition finally came upon her marriage to Robert Nozuka in 1988. As proof, when all the relatives gathered together, she no longer had to sit at the kiddie table during meals!

All that she has encountered and learned throughout her life has taught Debbie that lives vary from person to person. "You need to remember to remain true to yourself and your history," advises Debbie.

Debbie has some special advice for two daughters, Lindsay and Kelsey, although they may yet be too young to appreciate her words of wisdom: "Learn to love yourself, be honest and hardworking, never forget humor and family. Find your passion in life and hopefully, choose a career you will enjoy, where you can make enough money to take advantage of the freedom and riches afforded by being an American."

Interviewer: Janelle Fleming
Author: Riley Buck
Ethnic Group: Chinese American
Generation: Youth