

## STOCKTONSpeaks!

### **KATHLEEN NOMURA**

Although she's now well past the age of majority, Kathleen Nomura thinks that her elders in her large extended family don't see her as an adult. She replies to the question, "When did your family start treating you like an adult" with a good-natured laugh and says, "They *still* don't."

Yet there were milestones along the way that indicated to her she was becoming an adult—being able to drive, moving away from home, and having to be responsible for her own bills, for instance. It was a long process which has not reached a culmination in their minds, although she considers herself independent and grown-up.

Kathleen is an only child of a Filipino-American mother and a Japanese-American father. As a child, she and her parents lived in the same house with her maternal grandparents, Camila and Leo Carido. Mr. and Mrs. Carido were parents of a large family group which included not only their own children but also two of Mrs. Carido's half-siblings. Kathleen's mother, who was born in that house, was the next youngest of five Carido children. Growing up, Kathleen thus had numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins spanning four generations. Some of the cousins were the offspring of her parents' siblings and some were descendants of her grandmother's siblings. Some cousins were not related by blood. Kathleen explains, "In the Filipino culture, everyone is your aunt or uncle, which means that you have a lot of cousins." Having so many elders, kin or not, accounted for lots of guidance and advice to Kathleen not only as she was growing up, but, as she says, "even now."

She no longer lives with her mother. Kathleen moved out when she was 21 and has been on her own ever since. She pays her own bills—trying hard to remember to pay them on time, she says—and buys her own groceries.

Kathleen feels that this shows that she has grown up, that she is responsible adult able to take care of herself.

But whether they realize it or not, various elders, including her grandmother, watch out for her as if she were still a teenager. Kathleen knows she will never starve, for they stay in close contact and telephone her regularly, often asking if she's eaten. Occasionally, they'll ask her a question, then answer it for her. Or try to make decisions for her. Overhearing conversations of the elders at family gatherings would lead a person to believe that Kathleen is a child or youth rather than an independent, employed, responsible young woman on her own.

Yet there were times her maturity was apparent to her elders. At age 10, a young Kathleen sometimes babysat younger cousins for short periods when their parents were otherwise occupied. It was a responsibility that would not have been placed on her if she were not capable. Ultimately, as a typical American teenager, Kathleen learned to drive. And as with teenagers everywhere, Kathleen used her newly found freedom to be out with friends. To her pleasant surprise, she was trusted to be out. Her mother and grandmother often did not even question where she was headed or who her companions were. Implicit in their attitude toward her driving was that she knew what to do. Kathleen now speaks with pride that her elders also allowed her to drive with her younger charges out to places like the local shopping malls, McDonald's, and other places where kids hang out.

At one point, when her mother became ill, it fell to Kathleen to care for both her and her grandmother, who was then in her late 80s. For a period, showing that she was capable of taking care of the two ailing women diminished the usual steady stream of advice directed toward her. Kathleen was aware that her aunts and uncles understood that they needn't worry about their mother or sister in her care. At times, however, they would fall back into old habits, imparting "wisdom" to their still unmarried niece, even if she didn't seem to need it or want it.

Yet even within this large, close-knit extended clan, where advice is lovingly and freely dispensed, Kathleen's upbringing within her nuclear family was different from that of her cousins. Her grandparents strongly valued and imparted to their children the importance of education. Kathleen's mother internalized their value system and loved school, eventually attending college and becoming a schoolteacher. Kathleen's father, on the other hand, never enjoyed school and was happy in his career as a mechanic. Neither parent ever pushed her to go on to college, supporting whatever decision she would make for herself about post-secondary education. Her parents told her that "being happy was an accomplishment."

"I'm like my dad", she says. "I didn't really like school." She attended college for only a few months before opting out for work and the opportunity to earn money, which to her was more important. Some of her friends' parents and her own elders still talk to her about career or academic goals she should have set for herself. "You could have...." and "why didn't you...." are phrases she often hears.

Probably one of the strongest influences in Kathleen's life to date has been her beloved "Grandma," who recently passed away at the age of 93. Mrs. Carido set the standard of behavior for her children and her grandchildren, but she was always backed by her husband. "Behave or Grandpa will come visit you," is a mantra that Mrs. Carido would use. The sense of "family" was an underlying theme of everyday behavior. Elders are to be respected. Meals are taken together. No one leaves until everyone was finished eating. Children serve the adults first. Kathleen enjoys the rewards of being an older member of the clan because now she can ask her younger relatives to bring her things like a soda, for instance, and they comply without question.

Kathleen knows how different things were when her grandmother was young. Mrs. Carido came to the United States as a teenager to help her father raise two children. They lived in farm labor camps. It was during the Great Depression, and money was very scarce. The economic deprivations of that

period made Mrs. Carido extremely frugal. Decades afterwards, Kathleen's grandmother would wash Styrofoam cups for subsequent use instead of discarding them. Mrs. Carido considered today's throwaway society "wasteful."

"People are all spoiled now," she would say.

Early in Kathleen's life, her Catholic mother and Buddhist father decided to raise their child as a Catholic but to expose her to Buddhism as well. Although she attended St. George's Catholic Church regularly, they would take her to events and funerals at the Buddhist temple so she could stay in touch with her father's religious and ethnic roots. Their intent was to allow Kathleen to choose her own religious preference when she grew up. She was free to become a Buddhist, like her father, if she wanted. But the experience of being educated in parochial schools, living with a grandmother, who was a leader in the church parish, and being surrounded by a large extended family of Catholic aunts and uncles not surprisingly moved Kathleen inexorably toward choosing to stay a practicing Catholic.

Kathleen was exposed to multiple languages as a child, although they spoke English within the home. Her grandparents knew both English and Tagalog. Kathleen was always curious about their native tongue, Tagalog, if only to wonder if they were talking about her in their conversations. Grandma also spoke Spanish and so could be considered tri-lingual. Her mother could understand but never learned to speak Tagalog; her father was bilingual, speaking both Japanese and English. But Kathleen herself is fluent only in English. As in many immigrant families, the grandparents' native language has not been transferred to the youngest generation.

Some of Mrs. Carido's lessons to Kathleen are a reflection of the elder woman's background and the era of her own maturation. Kathleen, who is engaged to be married, has been instructed by her grandmother to "take care of" her fiancée. Kathleen translates that to be "make sure his dinner meal is on the table when he comes home from work, and keep a clean house."

Kathleen doesn't know if she'll ever be ready to have children. When she was young, her mother, who taught sex education in a local high school, showed her a film about childbirth. It definitely looked painful! Now, she's the oldest of the cousins of her generation who is still childless.

Yet, she has learned well the lessons of her grandmother, especially the importance of family. "Without your family, you are nowhere," said her grandmother. Though Kathleen's fiancée at first was overwhelmed by all her many "cousins," he now considers them his relatives and takes her to visit their "aunts" and "uncles," even if they are not blood relations.

Kathleen wonders if all her family will treat her differently—like an adult—once she is married. Or if their conception of adulthood requires parenthood. Or if their attitude toward her will *ever* undergo much change. Whether or not her status changes in their eyes, she's happy to be part of her large multi-generational clan of blood relatives and shirt-tail kin.

Proud of her grandmother and the accomplishments of her own family, Kathleen would tell others to get to know all about their own families. Family has been a driving force, a source of comfort and strength as she was growing up, and she expects it to be an important part of her life forever.

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Generation: Youth