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CONNECTING WITH HIS CULTURE

RAY NAKADA LEADS EFFORT TO ELEVATE ASIAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

By Christina Dong '17

Ray Nakada '17 spent his early years in New Jersey, then moved to Tokyo with his Japanese parents when he was 9. When he returned to the United States to attend a private high school near Boston, he said he immersed himself in “whatever it means to be an American.”

“I left out a lot of my heritage, my parents’ culture,” Nakada said. “At Colby, I realized I wouldn’t be able to do that anymore. I knew that something had to change.”

It did—and not only for Nakada.

Nakada is spearheading an effort to start an Asian-American studies program at Colby. The effort began when Nakada discovered the Asian Student Association (ASA) and immediately felt welcomed. Iris Kim '14, the club’s president at the time, and other ASA members “let me acknowledge what it meant to be an Asian American as opposed to just an American,” he said.

Then two members of the Class of 2015, Karen Chen and Mina Kobayashi, suggested the idea of an Asian-American studies course to Nakada, and later pitched the idea to President David A. Greene. When the two graduated, Nakada, then vice president of the ASA, took on the initiative.

While taking a full course load for his biology major, Nakada met frequently last fall with Greene,

American Studies Program Director and Associate Professor Laura Saltz, and former Senior Associate Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Programs Tashia Bradley to arrange a Jan Plan course, a first step toward implementing Asian-American studies at Colby.

When there was an unexpected opening for an additional Jan Plan course in 2016, Nakada was ready. Saltz put him in touch with Jan Plan instructor Maki Smith, who holds a Ph.D. in American history with a concentration in Asian-American studies. Smith got behind the idea and designed the course, *Tracing the Asian-American Experience*, an introduction to Asian-American history as well as the field of Asian-American studies.

The Jan Plan class filled quickly and, according to Smith, included thoughtful discussions about immigration, race, and citizenship among Asian and non-Asian students. It was, Saltz said, “a promising beginning.”

While Smith created the course content, “Ray’s work really was a matter of setting wheels in motion, and a lot of people aren’t willing to do that,” Saltz said. “His willingness to put himself out there [and] willingness to do the homework was really inspiring. The report [to Greene] is ... an extraordinary document.”

What's the Word? cont. from page 39.

The “color line,” he said, hinders democracy, slows economic justice, and makes “real human contact” impossible.

In her writing and teaching, Gilkes resolves to create that human contact and understanding of the African-American experience. She grew up in a household overflowing with African-American history and current events. Several black newspapers were delivered to the home and she was taken to NAACP meetings from an early age. “I tell students this,” she said. “The philosophy of African-American culture in the United States is this: you have to learn who black people are. We have all these theories about race, but if you don’t know who the people are? Hello!”

Gilkes informs students in her course African-American Culture in the United States that “you will be exposed to things.” An ordained Baptist minister, she declares, “When you leave this class, you will know what a spiritual is.” In addition to reading Du Bois, students in her course on race and ethnicity are asked to immerse themselves in at least one ethnic group, which sends many off to interview their immigrant grandparents. In her course on the African-American religious experience, “One of the questions on the final is to make believe they can talk to Dr. Du Bois and suggest revisions, given all that has happened since he wrote [*The Souls of Black Folk*] in 1903,” she said.

Du Bois would be appalled at the ways social media creates instant issues, she said, but would take to Twitter to disseminate his views. He would bring up short those who dismiss the contributions of people of color. And Du Bois would see, Gilkes said, the continuing importance of building up black America’s self-esteem, and that his analysis still holds for the 21st century and in far more complicated and not easily accessible ways.

“It’s not the problem of black folk,” Gilkes said. “It’s the problem of centuries. It’s the problem of the world. We understand that we’re all a consequence of the problem.”

Ultimately Du Bois would reject the label of original Black Lives Matter leader. “What he does say is he does it because he loves black people and, given the amount of hate that can be generated, that in itself is a revolutionary position,” Gilkes said, leaning closer, her voice falling to a hushed whisper. “My words fail me when it comes to talking about how important he is because there’s so much. *There’s so much.*”

To establish Asian-American studies as an ASA initiative, Nakada repositioned the club as not just a festival organizer but a place for members of the Colby community who are seeking a more active, just world.

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—Ray Nakada ’17

Now Nakada is advocating for a semester-length course, preparing another report for the administration. The move would require more funding and likely another faculty hire, but Nakada said he believes the course is a crucial addition to Colby’s curriculum. If Asian-Americans are not adequately included in the discussion, it’s “detrimental to the education of the overall community, plus the Asian community,” Nakada said.

“We don’t know where we are,” he said, “unless we know where we came from.”