

LOOKING EASTWARD *to Look Inward*



"I really wanted more to understand who I was. I thought going abroad would help me do that."

—Geraldine Dang, study abroad alum

If food plays a valuable role in our ability to appreciate and connect with our cultural heritage, it's no surprise that traveling to one of the top food capitals of the world would usher Geraldine Dang along her delicious path to self-discovery, eating her way through Singapore's world-class restaurants with friends and joining co-workers for lunch at one of the city's vast hubs of stalls hawking aromatic noodles and savory skewered snacks.

Asian cuisine had always been Geraldine's closest connection to her heritage. "When I was young, I lacked much connection to my Asian culture, pride and identity. I only got intrigued by Asian food."

Growing up in Texas with Vietnamese parents who immigrated from England, Geraldine and her family lived in a community with very few other Asian residents. Although her parents both speak Vietnamese, her family made a decision not to teach Geraldine Vietnamese, wanting her to focus on a strong English and sign language base, which they believed would set her up for success in college.

Geraldine is Deaf but did not grow up with ASL. As a kid in school, she was taught to use a form of sign language designed to follow the structure of spoken English. This is distinct from American Sign Language, which has its own unique grammar structure and is widely used among members of the Deaf community. As the only deaf person in a hearing family, Geraldine taught her younger sister to sign, and her parents learned a bit as well, but by and large, Geraldine had just as many connections to the Deaf community as she did to an Asian community (which is to say, none whatsoever).

Name:

Geraldine Dang

Home Institution:

Rochester Institute of Technology - National Technical Institute for the Deaf

Major:

3D Digital Design

Programs:

RIT Global; Gilman Scholarship Program

Destination:

Tokyo, Japan; Singapore

That all changed when she arrived at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York. With RIT's diverse student body, Geraldine met students with origins or ancestry from Cambodia, Vietnam, and other countries throughout Asia. Geraldine found in RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf a gateway to explore her Deaf identity as well, and for the first time, she began to learn ASL. "When I sign, it's like my hands start speaking."

It wasn't long before Geraldine found ways to explore both of these identities together. She joined RIT's Asian Deaf Club and jumped at the chance to participate in RIT's Deaf-led study abroad program in Japan designed for Deaf students, signing hearing students, sign language interpreters, and faculty. "I really wanted more to understand who I was. I thought going abroad would help me do that."

Geraldine remembers the shock of arriving at the airport in Japan. "I was so excited to finally be there. Looking around the airport, it was the first time I'd ever seen so many Asian people all in one place. I was not used to it! It finally hit me that there is a whole country full of people who look like me, and it took me a few days to adjust to that realization."

"Looking the part" was a double-edged sword for Geraldine. Despite the exhilaration of this new experience, she felt some disappointment that perhaps she blended in too well to her Japanese hosts, who were more curious and excited to meet other members of the diverse group of Americans, which included Asian, Black, Latino, White and LGBT travelers. "There was a lot of interest towards the other students, which I understand, but they didn't really see me as something 'new.' They saw me as the same as them."


Despite this, Geraldine kept an open mind and embraced as much as she could. She began taking in what she was seeing and made new friends, ate their food, traveled on their transportation, and saw people use Japanese Sign Language.

"Japan really opened up my world," says Geraldine, whose group relished opportunities to meet Japan's Deaf community, including students, professionals, and even Geraldine's longtime pen pal! "When we were finally able to meet in person, it was so powerful. The Deaf Japanese welcomed the Americans with open arms, and it felt like we had an amazing sense of community. It made me want to learn more and travel throughout Asia further."

She'd later have her chance during her search for an internship placement. It hadn't initially occurred to Geraldine to intern abroad. "I was actually looking for an internship in the United States, but it was hard to find one. To my surprise, my family suggested I go work in Singapore! I thought, 'why not try?'"

In traveling to Singapore, Geraldine would be following in the footsteps of her paternal grandfather, who worked as a





diplomat and traveled to several countries throughout his career. "When my parents told me that he had been to Singapore, I had no idea! I asked them to share some stories and pictures with me about what he had seen, where he had been, so that I could experience what he had."

Geraldine applied for and received a U.S. Department of State-sponsored Benjamin A. Gilman International scholarship to fund her internship abroad for a full summer. She knew it would be challenging to travel alone to work in another country she didn't know much about, but she resolved to do as much traveling while abroad. "I used to travel with my family and friends for many years. Stepping out of my comfort zone was the biggest challenge for me, but it's where I thrived!"

While Singapore is a multicultural country made up of Chinese, Malay, Indian and various other ethnicities, Geraldine once again felt a sense of awe, being around so many Asian people who looked like her. "I should've been used to it after having been to Japan!"

Geraldine's 8-week internship took place at a consulting firm specializing in UX (user experience) design. She gained a new skill redesigning websites, but she also got a crash course in studying Southeast Asian business relations. "It's very different from American business in terms of competition and how you manage relationships."

There's so much to learn about a culture through the workplace, and Geraldine found lunchtime to be an educational daily ritual. At their small office, everyone would go out to lunch together to eat as a group, boss included. This usually took place at the hawker center where Geraldine's office mates would quickly choose their meal from rows of food stalls and meet back with the group. "It was expected that we wouldn't start eating until the senior staff arrived, so it felt very hierarchical. And each time there was also always a bit of back-and-forth about who was going to pay the bill."

Almost all of Geraldine's coworkers were Asians from Singapore or Malaysia, but she was the


only Deaf employee. At Geraldine's request, RIT had arranged for two sign language interpreters to travel from the United States to Singapore. The interpreters helped facilitate communication between Geraldine and her internship supervisor, who was understanding and open to the learning experience of hosting the company's first Deaf intern. "I didn't feel like there were many barriers, other than the fact that my American interpreters sometimes had a hard time understanding the British accent of my coworkers, and vice versa." Outside of work, when Geraldine and the interpreting team went their separate ways, Geraldine relied on her hearing aids and phone to communicate back and forth with hearing people, which she reports worked well.

Geraldine sought out opportunities to meet Deaf people in Singapore too, making initial connections through friends who had traveled there. "Once I got there, it was very easy to meet deaf Singaporeans quite quickly, and they were willing to introduce me to others"

In Singapore, Geraldine observed that the sign language has a strict English language order as well as some Chinese and Asian influences. Still, she remained unfazed and relished gaining exposure to Japanese Sign Language, Singapore Sign Language, International Sign Language, and British Sign Language during her time abroad.

Whatever challenges in communication may have taken place were always overshadowed by the warmth and hospitality of Geraldine's new friends. They'd meet at cafes after work or go exploring on weekends. Geraldine has some especially delicious memories of venturing out to some of Singapore's world-class restaurants and food stalls with Deaf friends visiting from neighboring Malaysia. "I felt really touched to have had a chance to meet them. It felt like we had developed a really strong bond by the end of the program."

Geraldine also developed a stronger connection to her family history. Her family arrived in Singapore for a few days and Geraldine enjoyed showing them around. Together they visited areas and buildings where her grandfather had worked or taken photos. "Now that I have the memories of traveling to the places in Singapore



where my grandfather had been, the stories about him have become more real.”

Geraldine reflected on growing up living far from family spread all over the world. Most of her father’s family and mother’s family lived in Europe, while a few lived in Asia, others in Canada and the United States. Most of her family spoke English, a few spoke Vietnamese and French, and Geraldine of course is a signer of American Sign Language. Growing up, this sense of family spread made her feel distanced from her heritage, but now, having traveled to so many places in the world herself, she feels as though she is upholding a proud family tradition.

“Yes, my family was spread out, but that actually gave me more inspiration to travel myself, because they have done that. I had a diplomat grandfather who traveled all over the place, so traveling is like my family heritage. I believe that my grandfather’s spirit is in the next generation with me and with future generations as we travel the world like him.”

Since graduating from RIT with a bachelor’s degree in 3D Digital Design, Geraldine transitioned to graduate studies at University of California Santa Cruz Silicon Valley Extension where she’s applying her suite of skills - graphic design, video editing, and 3D design - to a number of projects, including an animation project for a school and a story-telling video for foodies. While working towards her certification in UX/UI web design, no doubt building off the skills she gained during her overseas internship, she is especially mindful as a disabled person, as a deaf person, how accessibility is at the root of good design. She’s creating a phone app for deaf-blind people to navigate spaces - influenced by her RIT friends who have Usher Syndrome - and the virtual courses she’s taking have enhanced her understanding of communication skills among people with disabilities in virtual environments.

And although she doesn’t yet know where she will travel next (and what foods she will eat during those travels!), she continues to explore and find confidence and self-acceptance in her Asian identity.

“I am still learning about my Asian identity. I am an Asian-American, with a disability and a British connection. The term ‘Asian-American’ felt like

such a general concept until I traveled to new countries and learned to accept who and what I am through my own eyes. The process was difficult, and I still don’t know everything. I am still growing, but I think that learning about my identities helped me feel more confident in myself.” ■

