

I sat on the concrete outside our apartment with the Santa Ana winds burning on my face. It was the middle of summer, when the heat was at its zenith. I was seven years-old. My mother was inside, making lemonade, when my dad pulled up onto the driveway. I could smell the alcohol in the wind as he stepped out of the car, fists clenched. I bolted inside and told my mom he was coming. Panicking, she pulled me into our room. "Stay here," she said, "don't open the door unless I tell you, okay?" I saw the anguish in her eyes, dark brown bruises staring back into mine. Pressing my face against the door, I heard her screaming, begging my dad to stop.

That summer, my dad left. The beatings stopped. My mom and I packed our lives into two cardboard boxes and moved into a tiny one-bedroom apartment in City Heights, a neighborhood known for its gangs, prostitutes, and taco shops. My world caved in as I watched my mom struggle to support me and our family in Vietnam with the meager income she made as a seamstress.

Growing up, I was forced to give up my childhood, my sense of wonder, so that I could support my family. At a young age, I knew that, in order to break my family's cycle of poverty and hurt, I had to take control of my education and exhaust all of the resources available to me. But doing this was not easy. At school, I was scrutinized by other kids because I was poor, because I came from a single-parent family where no one had gone to college, because I was gay. My classmates called me a "faggot" and made fun of how I dressed and the way I carried myself beneath the weight of the humiliation I faced, the weight of the prejudice I endured. Because of them, I quickly recognized what kind of world I lived in: a world of de facto segregation, where hate and intolerance preyed on diversity and personal value; a world that I have had to overcome in order to protect who I am and what I believed in.

Despite all the challenges I faced because of my socioeconomic status and my sexual orientation, what kept me alive was my family and their stories. Everyday, after school, I sat beside my mom as she worked, watching her hem pants and design evening gowns. The power of her hands and their ability to fix things, to make something out of nothing, nurtured my sense of wonder, my own ability to create. As she worked, my mother told me stories of growing up in a poor village where she sold noodles on the side of the street to raise her four brothers and sisters, of burying her dreams of becoming a writer in order to come to America to support her family. "We are the children of dragons," she said, "we were the ones who defeated the Mongols and freed ourselves from slavery."

Her stories instilled a fierce courage within me, taught me to be proud of who I was and where I came from, and gave me the strength to overcome the hardships we faced. Ultimately, my dream is to expose the stories of people who have been silenced my community – stories of sacrifice, of self-discovery, of triumph over adversity. I want the youth in my community to learn, as I have learned, that we are blessed because of our adversity, that our struggles constitute the core of our strength, and that we, alone, have the power to decide who we are and who we will one day become.

My experiences of growing up in City Heights ignited my dream to start an organization called **The Common Thread**. The Common Thread will be dedicated to exposing the stories of youth who have been persecuted because of their race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual

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orientation, and religious beliefs in hopes of challenging the discrimination and prejudice that is so disgustingly rooted in my community; that prevents kids like me from achieving greater ends, from actualizing our aspirations.

My dream through The Common Thread is to host a 3-day leadership conference, called the **Cracks in the Glass Conference**, for 50 high school juniors throughout San Diego County at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). The goal of this conference is to expose the students to (1) lectures and seminars with leaders in the San Diego community who have overcome discrimination and their personal challenges in order to bring about social change, (2) meaningful group activities and workshops where students will gain insight and build on their leadership abilities, and (3) service projects in inner-city areas of San Diego that champions the importance of social responsibility.

Through the Conference, I want to engage students in presentations with local leaders such as Cecil Lytle, former Provost of Thurgood Marshall College at UCSD, who defeated the stereotypes our community attached to African Americans by pursuing a higher education and becoming a voice for the African American community. Provost Lytle led the founding of the Preuss School UCSD, a groundbreaking 6-12 grade charter school for low-income, first-generation university-bound students – the school I current attend. I want students to listen to the stories of local unsung heroes like Dr. Lisa Madden, a local research scientist who started an organization called Foster Carriers which supports foster youth coming in and out of the foster care system. Dr Madden founded Foster Carriers because of her own experiences of growing up as a foster youth with disabilities. I want students to hear their stories of determination and be motivated to look inside themselves for the strength to overcome their own obstacles, for the reason to push themselves to do better, to achieve more, even in face of a society that demeans such ambitions.

Additionally, I want to engage students in service-learning projects that foster awareness of the importance of social responsibility. Coming from a family of immigrants and having seen the struggles that my mother endured in coming to America, one of my dreams is to host a project at the California-Mexico Border. There, the students would participate in a clean-up project where they would pick up the trash, the used condoms, the items of clothing left behind from people who risked their lives in order to come to America, in order to pursue their own dreams for themselves and their families. Through this project, I want to show students why it is so important that they recognize their responsibilities as Americans, why it is so important for them to value the American Dream, to appreciate the constant evolution of *their* American Dream, and to understand the lengths that others would go to achieve it.

And while my dreams of The Common Thread and the Cracks in the Glass Conference seem lofty, especially in light of my only being a seventeen year-old, I am already taking steps towards accomplishing them. Currently, I am partnering with UCSD, local businesses, and grassroots organizations to make my dreams come true.

With the help of the UCSD Department of Development and DoSomething.org, a national organization dedicated to supporting youth service, I am working towards fundraising the \$10,000 needed in order to secure the housing and meals for the 3-day Cracks in the Glass

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Conference. Additionally, that minimum goal of \$10,000 would cover all of the marketing, supplies, and operation expenses needed to carry out the Conference.

Also, I am working with the UCSD Extensions Office and the Preuss School Administration to secure speakers for the seminars and to organize my dream of hosting a service project at the California-Mexico Border. In fact, in a discussion with Dr. Edward Abeyta, UCSD Staff Advisor to the Regents, I was told that the Extensions Office could help me bring a local high school in Tijuana to the border to meet our students – to show that, in reality, we are only separated from each other by a fence, by a wall, and that in breaking down these walls in our minds, we are able to connect with each other as human beings, to celebrate our strengths and struggles as human beings.

Finally, I am partnering with the I Live Here Foundation, an organization dedicated to telling the stories of unheard and silenced people around the world through a series of books and media projects, to develop the curriculum for the Conference. Using their Ambassador Program Curriculum as an education model, I am working with local teachers and administrators to construct a meaningful and insightful leadership curriculum that would not only allow students at the Conference to expand on their leadership abilities, but to recognize how each and every one of them can make a difference in our community by sharing their story, by championing for greater opportunities for kids like us.

Though we are only in the beginning stages, I cannot even begin describing the excitement I feel when nationally recognized leaders, like Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor or UCSD Chancellor Marye Anne Fox, express their support for the mission of The Common Thread. I was in shock when Dr. Madden agreed to speak at the Conference and when the I Live here Foundation's founder, Mia Kirshner, actress (*The L Word*, *The Black Dahlia*) and author of "I Live Here," an anthology of stories from people living in marginalized communities around the world, sent me an email – thanking me for reaching out to the I Live Here Foundation and commending my efforts to bring change to the lives of kids like me.

While The Common Thread remains to be a huge dream of mine, I am overwhelmed at seeing it become more and more real everyday. To me, The Common Thread is such a paramount endeavor because it not only confronts my community in the wake of its persecution of kids like me, but it forces my community to recognize the potential and the power of youth voice, of the impact that youth can have in our society, because every aspect of The Common Thread and the Cracks in the Glass Conference will be planned exclusively by students with the support and guidance of adult mentors. By giving students the opportunity to maximize their leadership, I hope to create a sustainable model in which the projects pursued by The Common Thread and the Cracks in the Glass Conference can be replicated and expanded upon year after year.

Looking back, I wonder what my life would have been like if my dad had stayed, if my mom never found the strength to overcome the violence we faced. I kept myself alive by locking my pain away, by burying my anger inside my bones like scars. But rather than being consumed, these scars helped me overcome the loneliness I felt, the self-loathing that precipitated as a result of being abused, of not feeling good enough. I realized that there was so much beauty in my world, that there was something greater to be had in this life.

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That is the same message I hope to communicate to students through The Common Thread and the Cracks in the Glass Conference.

Going forward, I will always remember the heat of the summer when my dad left, the ferocity of the Santa Ana winds as they blew down from the north, carrying the promise of wildfires. Having emerged from nothing, I will continue to sacrifice all that I can to protect my dreams and the dreams of my family. I will share the stories of my mother, of my world, with the family I will one day have, the children I will raise, and with my community in hopes that they will also learn to stand up for what they believe in, to recognize the fragility of the human condition, and to celebrate the strength of the human spirit.

And, in doing that, I hope to inspire other students like me to share their stories in an effort to challenge the de facto discrimination in our society and to recognize that, regardless of who we are and where we come from, we are all connected by our humanity.