

Eugene Kwon

Award Recipient in the Category of Bravery



Dear Father,

I hope you are still living in Korea, father. It's surprising that it has been 7 years since you disappeared from us again all of a sudden from home, and I still don't know the complete reason behind your disappearance, nor your previous disappearance for 4 years, but whatever situation you may be in right now, live long until we can see each other again.

If you can ever receive this letter, then the following are the details about us after you left: Your absence in our lives had erased our family's past and we lived only for the future without a past. Your disappearance had flung me to the worst moments of my life in the form of unintended isolation, lifeless moments, emotional scars, and righteous wrath; it was only when my mom and I came to this country, we broke out of that endless mirror of despair, and for the first time since 4 years we found hope in our lives.



At present, we are now living in the US, waiting for the right time to rise. We are living in a simple 2-room house with happiness and sadness in our lives. Those 4 years of nothingness had deeply affected me, but those experiences became a valuable lesson for me and I changed positively as a result. In a way, I must thank you for giving me this experience, father, but I still despise you for leaving us, because if it wasn't for my mom and your wife, I would have been dead years ago.

My savior, my protector, and my mother, she is my means of redemption from those 4 years that the 2 of us has incalculably suffered. She risked her past, our environment, and her

safety to raise me, and I cannot describe how thankful, happy, and satisfied I am with her. She tried everything to feed me and now is facing the greatest challenge of her life for me.

Life is beautiful, which is why the fact that I am your son cannot change and I want you to at least be proud of me as your revolutionary son.

Everyday, she always works so hard, in and out, and still has the physical and mental health to feed the 2 of us. I wish to help, but she refuses all the time. Seeing her do her best every day was truly a form of determination and I adopted her views when I began going back to school in this country. To truly pay off all the work she has done for me, the only way to compensate her is to become the "perfect" dream child that she had always wanted to have and I will do anything to achieve that dream.

I failed my role as a son once by committing the sin of not studying for 4 years (albeit it was because of the circumstances in Korean education), and thus, I want to repay her, I want to avenge her, and I want to succeed her as her true son that will seek not for chaos and wrath, but for kindness and love. I will do what I can to achieve my goals and finally make her dream a reality—and I am now close to achieving that goal by my works, personality, activities, habits, and determination. While I am close, there is an obstacle that is in my way, which is my darkest nightmare that has a slight glint of light, and that obstacle is you, my biological father.

I resent you, and for obvious reasons. You abandoned both of us and left us to despair. However, I want to see your face again so I can accept my fate as the child of you and my mom. If I disown you, which I most likely will if you see me decades later, then I could never possibly reconcile with my other half of my existence.

Writing this letter fills me with conflicting emotions, especially now, but it must be said. I want to avoid the worst case scenario that could happen to us, so what we could do to avoid it, is to message each other. At least communicate a little with me. Give yourself and myself a chance to save what

little remains of our parent-child relationship. I have no means of communication with you right now, but you know how, so stop hiding in that dark corner and come out to us; you won't find anything if you stay in one place forever.

I want to accept you as my father, but our mental scars prevent me from remembering you as a father. I alone cannot mend that reciprocal scars of ours, so I require your assistance to do that. If you could ever read this letter in Korea, then find a way to communicate with me. After all, we are not the only members of the family who are suffering; you are, too, and I know that. To end that suffering, let us open our eyes.

Regardless, my mom and I are living just fine right now and we are slowly creating the envisioned future that we had made since we snapped out of that misery. I am growing up, fixing my negative habits and upgrading my positive nature. Life is truly strange, but having a life is definitely a fact that I cherish. Without a life, I would have been a nothingness in soul, body, and mind, but I do. Life is beautiful, which is why the fact that I am your son cannot change and I want you to at least be proud of me as your revolutionary son.

Once again, I ask you to send me a letter; even if you live far away from us, please support us so we can support you. A family could never stand straight if a family is spread out like this. Despite your fear and our hatred, let us reconcile and restore that love once again, please. Let us change for a better future.

Your son,
Eugene Kwon



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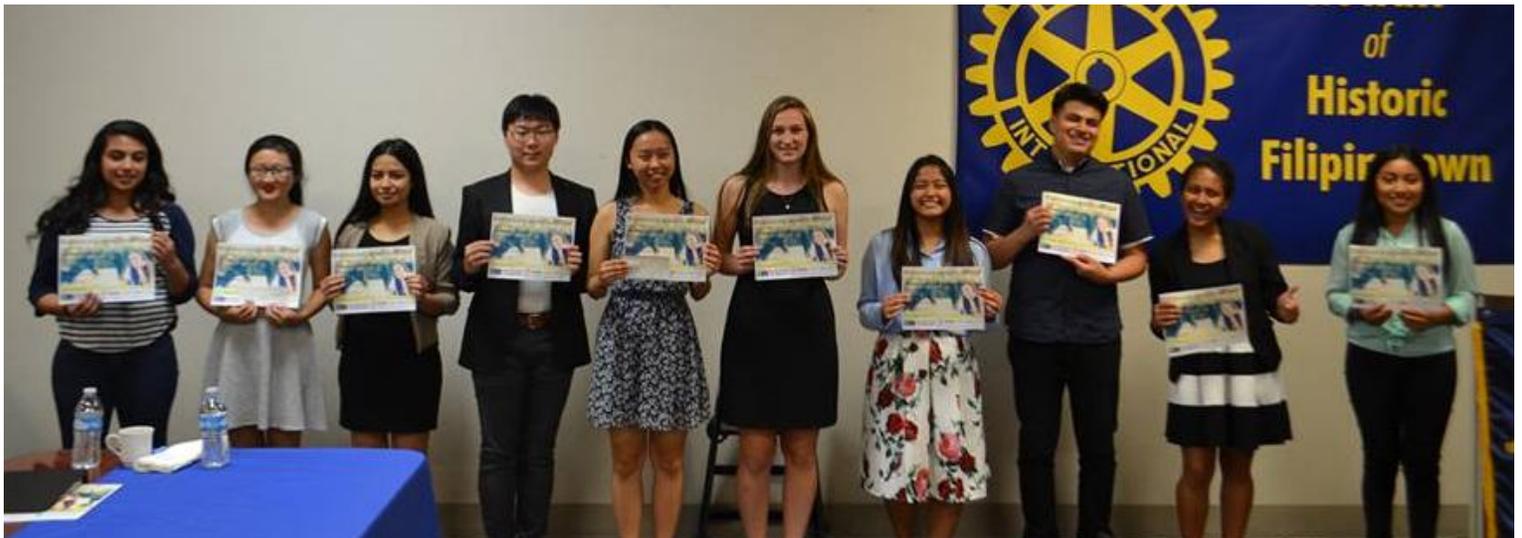
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Zi Jun “Nancy” Pan

Award Recipient in the Category of Reflection



Dear mom,

Starting off, I just want to say how weird it is for me to address you in English. Most of the time at home we speak in Mandarin and I try to communicate my feelings to you in my choppy copy of your dialect. You don't understand English well so I don't think you will understand my letter but despite that barrier between us, I still wanted to convey my feelings.

We are two different people living in two different cultures and that disconnect shows up a lot when we argue. You would say, “I want you to do your best in school” but instead of straight A's, my definition of that is doing my best without harming my mental health. You would think that any “bad feelings” should just be shaken off but in my mind, mental injuries take just as long to heal as physical ones. We don't always understand each other, whether because of our opinions on the subject matter or because we just can't communicate them well. But at the end of the day, we have our own way to communicate.



I understand your love in the small ways that you convey it. On some days when I'm working late on homework, you would brew me a cup of coffee because you don't want me to be tired the next day. On others, you bring me a plate of oranges or apples because you care about what I put in my body. I also hear your love in your hesitation to let me go to a party or hang out friends, because even though you might not want me to go out of concern for my well-being, you let me

anyways. And although it can be faint when you're arguing with me about my grades and doing homework, I still hear your affection. I recognize these gestures even when they're driven by desperate anger because I understand that it's not easy telling me in words.

I hope you recognize my gestures of love when I buy you flowers for your birthday, even though I gave them to you on the wrong birthday according to the lunar calendar

I have never really told you “I love you” because it feels so foreign to me and I understand it might be the same for you. Maybe it's because of the conservative nature of our Chinese culture or maybe it's because we have both built this secret wall between us that we never realized we did. But I want to slowly pull down this wall with our own ways of expression.

I hope you recognize my gestures of love when I buy you flowers for your birthday, even though I gave them to you on the wrong birthday according to the lunar calendar. I hope you recognize the weird faces that I make when you give me coffee at night are not of disgust but of my bashful affection. I hope you understand that it's not that I don't want to express my gratitude but that I'm bad at doing it. But I hope you know that you are important to me. And that I love you.

Your daughter, Nancy

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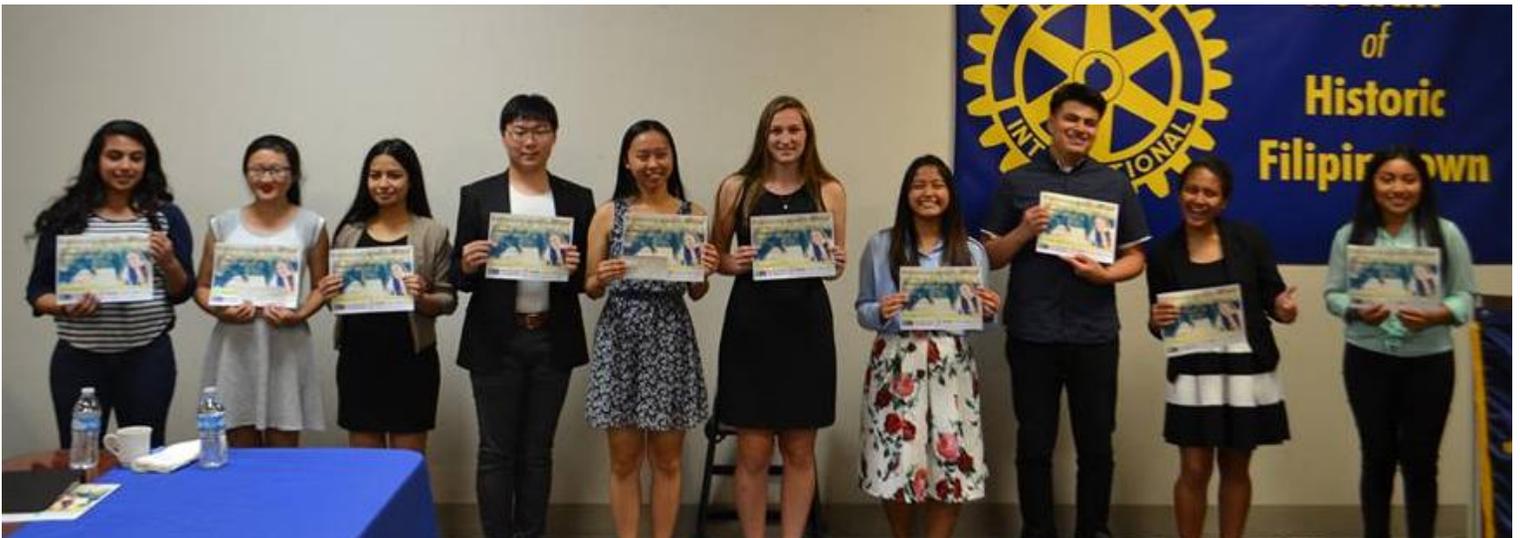
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Maria Isabel Decolongon

Award Recipient in the Category of Proposal



Dear Nanay (Mom) Ruby,

Nanay, you mean the world to me. As a single mother, you became both my mother and father, meaning you had to provide twice as much. It didn't help that we were living in a third world country, and your income wasn't enough to cover all our needs. For this reason, I found myself in the backseat of my cousin's car driving you to the airport. I didn't completely understand what was happening because I was only five, but I was told that you were going to a faraway place for my sake.



You faced uncertainty upon arrival in the United States. You didn't know where this path would lead, but you persevered. You are courageous, strong and resilient; three qualities I've always admired about you. You worked a variety of jobs, ranging from bookkeeping to care-giving. You were sending us money and *balikbayan* boxes so I thought you were probably living in a huge apartment and wearing branded clothing.

As an innocent child, I never really considered your true condition while working overseas. It didn't come to mind that there were times you cried yourself to sleep because you were homesick. I didn't realize that behind those material things you sent us were days when you worked hard until your arms and back hurt. I didn't think about the times when you were sick, lost your job and didn't know where your next meal would come from.

My aunt, who raised me on your behalf, reminded me about your sacrifices. I appreciated you even more, and became

aware of the fact that you endured a lot of obstacles, and hardships to provide me everything I needed. For 10 years, you toiled and looked for ways to bring me here. The approval of my petition was probably the happiest day of both our lives because we were finally reunited after a long and painful decade. I was very excited to be with you and to live in a country where they said all your dreams come true.

But most of all, I need you to trust me. I need you to have faith that I will make good decisions in my life because that's what you taught me, that's how my aunt raised me.

But when I got here, I realized that it wasn't all rainbows and butterflies. You had to leave your job as a caregiver to look after me while school hadn't began, but at the same time we had a lot of expenses. You landed a job as a sales person in the Jewelry District but the pay is only enough to get us through the day. Some nights, I hear your phone calls with your friends and you tell them how badly you need a higher paying job. I hear you tell them that you want to give me both my wants and needs but you can't because there's not enough money. I hear you tell them how fortunate you are to have me because I don't ask for anything but you're wrong because I'm the one who's fortunate to have a mother like you, a mother who would give everything and anything even if it will leave you with nothing

However, the struggle of living in another country isn't just financial, but it has also challenged our relationship with each other. I think the huge difference between our ages and the years we spent apart created a gap between us. You grew up in a conservative era, while I grew up in a modern and more liberal society. I sometimes feel uncomfortable opening up to you because I'm scared that you won't truly listen to me. For example, I am hesitant to talk to you about my crush because you and my aunts told me since I was little that I shouldn't have a boyfriend during high school. I'm afraid that you will tell me to stop liking him. Additionally, I'm afraid to share my political views and opinions because we have different beliefs and I don't want to start a debate that will divide us

further. You may think that African-Americans are dangerous just because their blacks but I don't.

You also have expectations that are difficult to keep up with. It was hard to adjust to the educational system of another country as it is. It's even harder to maintain straight As in order to meet your expectations. The disappointed on your face when you see a B on my report card hurts me because I feel like I failed you. I want to make you proud because it's my way of giving back; to make all your sacrifices worth it. I know you only want what's good for me but you have to understand that I am giving it my all.

I think that to bridge the gap between us, we need to find whatever little time we have in your six day work week to connect and listen to each other's feelings and thoughts without judgment. I have a lot to learn from your wisdom and I think you also have a lot to learn from my ability to see past the labels, and see the good in people who look different from us. But most of all, I need you to trust me. I need you to have faith that I will make good decisions in my life because that's what you taught me, that's how my aunt raised me. Your courage to leave behind what was comfortable made me experience and learn things that living in a homogenous country of the Philippines wouldn't have allowed me. We have a lot to learn from each other.

I can't wait to finish high school and college to provide you all the things that you deserve, until it's my time to give you the world. I can't wait to have my own job so you can go back to the Philippines to retire. You are my inspiration, Mom. You motivate me to strive hard and do better. I can't thank you enough for all of your sacrifices for me. I love you so much, Mom.

Your anak (daughter),
Isabel



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