My Roots, My Heritage
(Nine Remarkable Stories)
Conceived and compiled by
Dr. Rohini B. Ramanathan

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Where Are You From: My Roots, My Heritage

Preface

Bring together a collection of talented story-tellers who lead interesting lives, each one with a unique background, hand them your topic—in this case, “My Roots, My Heritage”—along with a few guidelines that inspire them to spin their yarn any which way they want, and what you get is an anthology like this. This has been an eight-month project, as I try not to rush things. Things pickled are tastier.

The idea for this anthology had been germinating in my mind for a long time, but only when I got the opportunity to apply for a grant to the Huntington Arts Council on Long Island, a re-granting arm of the New York State Arts Council, did the idea take root. This project was one of the two selected from Nassau County where I live, in the “highly-competitive and highly-selective” Individual Creative Artist Category. It is with much gratitude and humility that I approached this assignment, as the other side of the coin was willing and enthusiastic contributors who would accept my invitation.

The writers here include, Terri Ann Seeba, Eleanor Feldman Barbera, Bernard Hirschhorn, Khullat N. Alladin, Sarajean Grainson, Dhruva Sulibhavi, Wendy Walker Jackson, Daryel Groom and Rohini B. Ramanathan. The author bios along with their photos (except in one case) appear beneath their work.

The diversity of voices and experiences here is truly impressive. Terri’s genealogy traces its roots back to the early settlers of this land, and Daryel’s to a grandfather who founded the famous grocery chain King Kullen. Wendy’s exuberant poetry exudes a raw energy that touches one’s soul and mind. The family that Eleanor created for herself is a multicultural feast, while Bernie’s European influence is on full display in all its regalia. The neurologist Dr. Dhruva Sulibhavi’s “rearview mirror” reflects the life of a more recent immigrant’s challenges along with a fulfilling career. Khullat is yet another non native-born American whose life on this soil began as a child with a melting ice cream cone. Native-born Sarajean’s meandering life could give the reader whiplash and a permanently dropped jaw. Even my own story as an immigrant has been comparatively straight.

Well, reader, you are in for a treat. I am hoping to create more such anthologies, as sharing our stories through art and literature brings about the greatest harmony and joy in the world.

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Rohini B. Ramanathan
Conceiver, Creator and Compiler
“Where Are You From: My Roots, My Heritage”
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A Time When the USA Did Not Exist
Terri Ann Seeba
Manorville, NY

My journey to trace my family back to Europe was both fascinating and frustrating. Researching and documenting each ancestor from my mother going back many generations took up a tremendous amount of time. The work in researching the archives was tedious and at times ended in a wall or total confusion.

Oral family history is often misleading and filled with untruths and misinformation. Family records can become blurred and be incomplete and inaccurate. However, in the end, with help from other family members, I pieced together the journey that my mother's family took from England and France to the shores of a new land in the 1600’s. Delving into my family's migration to the New World, to the United States, not really a united entity yet but a collection of a handful of British colonies, took me on a path of wondrous discovery.

Members of my family had fought in every war waged on this land and abroad. They were patriots who had made many sacrifices in the service of this country.

After landing in Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritan side of the family moved to upstate New York and the Quaker side that came from France went straight to Pennsylvania to join the other Quakers there. The Welsh/English sailed toward the New World for more land, the French side for a new life and the German/Scandinavian to find a better work environment and better opportunities.

My search began with my mother's wish to join the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), knowing that our family on her father's side came to the New World way before the American Revolution and had participated in the Revolution when it happened.

In 1628, my forebears crossed the Atlantic Ocean over several months and landed in the territory that the British had staked out as theirs. They came here seeking land and religious freedom. At that point, they were from England and Wales and from France. Back then, religious tolerance was not strong in their native lands. My Quaker family members were not much tolerated in the Old World. So they sailed off into the future to an unknown land with hope and faith for their guideposts where they could practice their religion in peace.

In 1681, England's King Charles II granted William Penn, a Quaker, a charter for the area that was to become Pennsylvania. Penn guaranteed the settlers of his colony freedom of religion. He advertised the policy across Europe so that Quakers and other religious dissidents would know that they could live there safely. This was when my own family members settled in this British Colony. The other part of my family ended up in New York, which, until 1664 was called New Amsterdam.

It seems that at least one member of the New York branch of the family had fought in every war on this land starting with the French and Indian Wars to the Vietnam War. We even have a direct
line to a member whose home is listed on the Underground Railroad, the network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-1800s, and used by African-American slaves to escape into free states, Canada and Nova Scotia with the aid of abolitionists and allies who were sympathetic to their cause. Not only did this man provide a service to the African-Americans, but this Quaker believed that educating African-American children was also a worthwhile endeavor. He also educated Native American children as well as women. Almost unheard of at the time, his daughter was encouraged to go to college.

The search on my father's side started out in a very different way. At the school where my children were enrolled, there was a 4th grade project which asked the students to research their family's background. Where did they come from? Who were their ancestors? As the children had already interviewed my mother and knew something about her side of the family, they turned to their Opa to ask about his origins. It turned out that in the late 1800’s, my father's ancestors emigrated from Germany on his father's side and England and France on his mother's side.

The stories that my father uncovered were interesting and fascinating. His great-grandfather, who came here before Ellis Island was built, was a farm worker. He worked for a man who ended up stealing his money. Eventually, however, this ancestor got married and then he and his wife opened a sweets shop in Brooklyn.

My paternal grandmother's family emigrated from England and France and it seems that her parents met on a boat coming here, got married and had my grandmother. This great-grandfather worked in the Pierre Hotel. His daughter, my grandmother, was a concert pianist, who performed at Carnegie Hall. My children were a catalyst in my learning more than I ever dreamed, and in turn my father, too, learned more about his family than he ever knew before. This was a discovery for him as well as for his grandchildren.

Many family names of my ancestors from the 1600's appear in books written by related family members on at least four of them. Unfortunately, some of the information there was incorrect and made the family tree hard to follow. At that time, there were many family members with the same name, with children named after the fathers. It was common for women, when their husbands died, to marry the brother of the husband. This ensured that the property stayed within the family. Women were not allowed to own property, or even their own jewelry. Fortunately, the Daughters of the American Revolution has gone digital, has gathered millions of records and made my hunt for my family history much easier.

The most telling discovery that came of the search for my father's ancestors was when he was going through papers that he had not had a chance to review after his mother died. He found several cemetery plots listed under a family name that he had not heard before. The cemetery is in Brooklyn, and it is a Lutheran Cemetery. It seems that his family that moved here from Germany followed the Martin Luther Reformation. My father had never known this before. So he went to the cemetery and found not just one, but half a dozen members of his family. After returning from the cemetery with information from the archives there, he continued to examine his late mother's papers. He found antique Christmas, Valentine and various other postcards from family members in Germany to their American relatives. He was thrilled. Among those papers were the naturalization documents for his grandparents from his father's side. He allowed his
grandchildren to take these documents into their class to show others. Going back in time to trace my folk’s footsteps was a journey unto itself.

Terri Ann Seeba

I was born on March 23rd, 1952. My childhood was a happy one. I grew up with my dad’s parents around the corner. My mom’s father was a lifer in the army, so we did not see him much until he retired, bought a 250 acre place upstate where I spent happy summers in my childhood. My parents showed their love in many ways. Dad showed us how to garden and fix almost everything. Mom tried to teach me to be a good homemaker. I have a degree in Respiratory Therapy. I was an EMT-CC and a Class-A Firefighter. I went on to get a degree in Sociology. I have three children and a granddaughter. I am currently working in a school as a Teaching Assistant with special needs children. I love horses, dogs, nature, art, singing, kayaking, spending time with friends, traveling
I’m a New Yorker of Russian/Polish/Ukrainian Jewish descent, second generation born in the United States on my father’s side and third generation on my mother’s. I spent my first six years in Flushing, NY before we moved to Long Island where I grew up.

The students in my elementary school were overwhelmingly Irish, Italian, Jewish or African-American. My best friend was German. Kids were either Jewish or Catholic. My world was rocked in second grade when a girl named Candy said she was Protestant. I had no idea there were any other religions other than Judaism and I had the distinct and uncomfortable feeling that there was a lot I didn’t know about the world. I had a similar sensation a few years later when I found out about negative numbers.

We didn’t practice Judaism in my nuclear family, but it seeped in through osmosis. My maternal great aunt kept a kosher home, so we were schooled in what dishes and silverware to use with which foods. We went to her house for Passover and had amazing Seders where we’d hear about the extended family. My great aunt and uncle kept a box of yarmulkes from past functions for the occasion. As we pulled them out we’d read the inscription on the inside and we’d learn that the bar mitzvah boy was now a doctor who didn’t call his mother or that the wedding ended in divorce after the wife ran off with the gynecologist who delivered her twins, one of whom is now herself the parent of twins and living in California.

My father’s mother cooked baked chicken and served rye bread with black caraway seeds on it, along with melon and homemade butter cookies shaped like breast cancer awareness ribbons, though there were no such things at the time. They lived in a small apartment in the Bronx and Grandpa Lou would always ask us how things were “in the country.” “We don’t live in the country, Grandpa!” we’d protest. In retrospect, with our suburban lawns and trees and our cars and our Long Island beaches, we kind of did.

As a child I spent a lot of time climbing those trees, sitting in the branches reading books that described other types of families. I wanted to be a writer and to have a shrink to talk to about my worries. Instead, I became a shrink and I write about my work.

I’ve been a psychologist in nursing homes for over twenty years, part of an interracial interdisciplinary team caring for a diverse group of older adults. Every day I speak to people from different backgrounds and learn about their views and experiences. In my role I can ask questions of elders that would be terribly rude under other circumstances. It gives me a fascinating window into their lives and customs. In the staff dining room we discuss the lunches we bring from home. I recently introduced a young East Indian rehab therapist to the joys of arugula.

As a result of a combination of extended education, navel-gazing and frog-kissing, it took me a long time to get married. I was 40 and my husband, Peter, was 47 years old and it was the first marriage for both of us. Peter was adopted at birth by his mother, a German immigrant, and she raised him with her third and last husband, a first-generation Italian man in the Air Force. After
three years of badgering him about his biological family, Peter allowed me to search for them. We discovered that he’s half Puerto Rican and the other half is a mix of Irish and British-Canadian. We keep in touch with the Irish/Canadian side of the family; the Puerto Rican side was less welcoming.

Peter recently took a DNA test. It turns out he has an Uncle Jaime in Colombia, so perhaps he’s less Puerto Rican than we thought.

Being late to marry, we became parents through the miracle of adoption. We flew to China to meet our daughter when she was one year and two weeks old. She’s now twelve, a talented artist and an excellent student who plays guitar in a kids’ classic rock band. Though her DNA was mailed off to the testing company from the same mailbox at the same time as her father’s, we’re still waiting on the results.

She’s from rural China and since the DNA companies tend not to have a lot of information from that region, it’s unlikely that she’ll find any close relatives. She’ll probably learn that she’s of Han descent like most people from China. But there’s a possibility she has a sibling who was adopted into a family that was interested in and could afford genetic testing, or maybe she too has an unexpected uncle in their records.

We know how important it was for Peter to have found his birth family and how clear it was that, while his biological mother’s relatives are nice people, biology isn’t the basis for family. We haven’t yet reached out to Uncle Jaime in Colombia nor he to us, but if we find a member of our daughter’s family, we’ll attempt to make contact when she’s ready for it. Even if we as her parents aren’t quite ready to share her.

Given our varied heritage, our main cultural identity is as an interracial family. We’ve chosen to live in one of the most diverse communities in the world, Jackson Heights in Queens, NY, which has incredible and inexpensive food and where we’re noticeable but not unusual.

When we first moved here from Manhattan, we were obsessed with a Chinese dumpling and noodle place where we ate every Friday night for years; now we’re into momos and thenthuk, the Himalayan version of the same. It’s a bonus that, in addition to the food being delicious, we’re in settings where my husband and I are the ones who look “different” rather than our daughter, which is more the norm for us. We are sensitive to the fact that our daughter, who has a mostly white family and goes to public school with predominantly Latino children, is frequently in the position of being the only Asian person in the room. We seek out other interracial families and situations to balance this, including a monthly group for children adopted from China.

Food is the most important aspect of our family celebrations, especially because we don’t practice any religion. New Year’s Day is potluck with friends from Fire Island, Lunar New Year is Chinese food with other Asian adoptees and their families, Passover is a Seder with my family on the first night and the second evening is a long-standing Seder with some friends I met in grad school in the 1980s. Thanksgiving is spent with my husband’s biological family in NJ and Christmas Day is observed with a sleepover and bagels with half-Christian, half-Jewish old friends.

We also make it a point to celebrate diversity of all kinds by attending the annual Jackson Heights’ Gay Pride parade, where we, along with a crowd including women in hijab headscarves and provocatively dressed Hispanic ladies, cheer on homosexuals from all over the world.
Eleanor Feldman Barbera is a psychologist, speaker, writer and nationally known expert on mental health and aging. She’s the author of The Savvy Resident’s Guide and pens an award-winning column, “The World According to Dr. El,” in McKnight’s Long-Term Care News. She lives in Queens, New York with her multicultural family.
My name is Bernie Hirschhorn. I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1946. I mention New York because there are nine other states that have towns or cities named Brooklyn as in Brooklyn, Iowa and Brooklyn, Mississippi for instance. But alas, for better or for "woise", I'm from the original and world famous Brooklyn, the one in New York (some of us New Yorkers pronounce it, "Nu Yawk!")

I grew up in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, the second son of Jewish immigrant parents. I've lived my entire life in the United States and I feel as American as apple pie. However, there were dishes other than apple pie that my family ate often and these dishes were far from traditional American cuisine. Here are just two of them--Russian borscht (red beet soup) with sour cream added and Wiener schnitzel (Viennese breaded veal cutlets). These two dishes, one Russian and the other Viennese-Austrian, and many other European dishes that appeared on our kitchen table, reflected my parents' European background.

Both my parents came to the United States from Europe but they came separately, from two different places and at two different times. My mother, Riva, was born in 1907 in Czarist Russia in the city of Kreminchuk, near Kiev, in Ukraine. Some years after the 1917 Russian Revolution, my mother, age 15, and her family came to the United States from the Soviet Union, speaking only Russian and Yiddish.

My father, Moritz or Morris, was born in 1905 in a Polish city with two names, Lvov and Lembeck. However, because of extreme poverty and a father who had abandoned the family, my grandmother sent my father as a little boy to live with relatives in Vienna, Austria. Morris grew up in Vienna, poor but speaking fluent German and immersed in Viennese and German culture. An ambitious, and energetic young man, my father worked at three different jobs and eventually saved enough money to come to the United States-- more precisely to New York City--somewhere around 1926 at the age of 21.

New York City, at that time (not unlike even today) was renowned for its incredible diversity and for bringing together people from all over the world. As fate would have it, my parents met and married and settled down in the Bronx. After many years, they decided to relocate to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn where I was born and raised. Like me, all of my friends and classmates in Brighton came from European immigrant backgrounds but in almost every case it was their grandparents who came from Europe and not their parents. Their parents were American-born. I was actually raised by European parents and that caused me to be one generation closer to the European experience than my friends were.

Is it fair to say that that experience endowed me with more of a European sensibility not necessarily present in my fellow Americans also with European ancestry? There are many strands that shape us into who we are as individuals and it is impossible to fully disentangle those strands and point to this or that strand and say it made me who I am. But looking at my
friends as I grew up I became keenly aware of a number of things that set me apart from them and that seemed to be derived from what I call my parents' European sensibility.

From early childhood on I had a love of reading and literature, not at all like my neighborhood friends. My Russian mother Riva loved to read and loved to talk about the many novels she had read. She often brought me to the local public library to experience the world of books and literature that she so obviously enjoyed. My mother was uneducated and rather unsophisticated so where did her love of reading and literature come from? Is it possible that somehow she and her family, with their Russian and Jewish roots, picked up this love of literature from the country that produced Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Pushkin? . . . and passed it on to me? Perhaps!

My Viennese-raised father, Morris, was also uneducated and unsophisticated in many ways but he had a love of European classical music. The Vienna of his youth was the center of European classical music and the Viennese experience and classical music were intimately connected with each other at that time. Because of my father's Viennese background, the radio in our home was always tuned to the New York classical music station, WQXR. The sounds of Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, Wagner, and Johann Strauss filled my ears even if I was not paying close attention to those musical sounds. It took a while for the seeds from my father's love of European classical music to take root and begin to shape my musical taste. Like most American teenagers my first musical love was rock and roll. However, somewhere around the age of 16, I began to lose interest in the mindless and repetitive sound of top-40 radio rock and roll and then, the semi-conscious experience of years and years of hearing my father's classical music in the background became more assertive and I evolved into a true lover of classical music. This was far from the norm in my working class Brighton Beach community. Whether or not it was my father's intention, with his Viennese musical taste he passed something on to me that became an ever-present companion, a lifelong passion, and one of the great loves of my life, the love of classical music.

In addition to the love of books and literature and classical music, there were more mundane ways where my parents' European backgrounds appeared, especially on our family's kitchen table. I grew up eating Russian dishes like borscht, potato pancakes, and blintzes. At the same time we frequently had wiener schnitzel and that classic Viennese dish was clearly my father's favorite. I also enjoyed eating Liptauer cheese, a central European dip or dish made with different kinds of cheese and infused with paprika. There were numerous other Viennese dishes with long German names that I can easily recall eating and enjoying but the actual names and descriptions of those dishes disappeared from my memory long ago. Every now and then my father would take a trip to Yorktown, in Manhattan, once the center of the German community in New York City, to buy chocolate covered marzipan logs at the Elk Candy Store. My father would consume the marzipan log in ever so dainty slices along with cups of hot tea. Beer was non-existent in our home but there were bottles of Tokay, a Hungarian dinner wine which my father would serve on special occasions. I enjoyed all of these.

There were other ways that my family followed European norms but these norms were also fairly typical of American society at that time. As an example, my father was the working member of my family with an outside job who ruled our home when he returned from work at night and on
weekends, my mother stayed at home devoting herself to raising her two sons and shopping, cooking, and cleaning our tiny one bedroom rented apartment.

My parents passed away many years ago and so did all of the European born members of both of my parents' two families. One could view their passing as the end of the direct immigrant experience in my life, but was it? Actually, not quite! Forty years ago I met, dated, and eventually married Janette Dabu, a Philippine woman born and raised in Pampanga Province in the Philippines. She came to New York City as a young adult after finishing college in the Philippines. When Janette entered my life, she and her family and their Philippine culture and customs and cuisine became a new immigrant experience in my life, similar in some ways to my parents' immigrant experience while so very different in so many other ways. But that Philippine-American experience is another story for another time.

Bernard Hirschhorn

I was born in 1946, the first year of the Baby Boomer generation. To a large extent, the history of that generation is also my own what with experiencing growing up in the 1950's and 1960's in New York, the civil rights movement, Vietnam and the peace movement, pot and the counter-culture, Woodstock, and years of left wing political activism. Also, a proud Brooklyn-born, raised, and educated (Brooklyn College, Class of ’67) Brooklynite, and a son of Jewish immigrant parents. While enjoying and appreciating my handed-down identity, I also yearned for something more, something different and more exciting than my Brooklyn Jewish roots. This desire discovered and expanded through reading and literature in high school and college, later drew me to other people and cultures---West Indian and Asian to be more specific. I became multi-cultural decades before it became trendy. Professionally, I taught junior high school English for seven years and then worked in pharmaceutical sales for many more; married a fantastic Filipina that led to two terrific kids--adults now--and two grandsons. Now, I'm happily retired and living on Long Island. My life has been long, interesting, and sometimes exciting but I'm not so eager to wrap things up just yet. So much more to see and do and learn (I hope!).
I arrived at America’s shores in 1949. We landed at Idlewild Airport, presently known as John F. Kenney or JFK Airport.

As a young child, I spoke not a word of English and had never left the Indian subcontinent. Thus, for me, it was a surreal experience.

Till then, never had I travelled on an airplane either and that too, a propeller plane. To this day, I remember clearly my frequent usage of the airline-provided airsickness bags during my flight.

With two stops in between, the travel lasted a good full week. The first stop was in Damascus, Syria, followed by London, England, then finally, our destination, New York, NY. Eventually, we took up residency in Chicago, Illinois, where my father awaited us. He had emigrated in 1946 and was serving as a Muslim Missionary sent by the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, headquartered then in Qadian, India. We stayed in Chicago for under a year, living at Sadiq Mosque on Wabash Avenue.

Within the first few weeks of our arrival, my father was eager to get my mother and I set in the customs and daily routines of American life. The first task assigned to me in this process of assimilation was to go to the corner drugstore to buy an ice cream cone.

I walked to the corner and lest I forget the requested item, till I reached the store I repeated the words, “vanilla ice cream cone.” Merrily, after paying the requested amount of a nickel by the friendly vendor in the store, I headed back home to our mosque, ice cream cone in hand. However, on the way back, instead of turning the corner, I crossed the street and kept walking. By now, the ice cream began to melt and drip down my arm toward my elbow. Lost and scared, I began to cry. Little did I know that one of the earliest miracles of my life was about to transpire.

My father, wisely, soon after our arrival to America, had me memorize the phone number of our Mosque. Now, as the ice cream melted, between sobs, I tried to get the attention of the passersby and repeated the phone number to anyone who noticed me. One lady—my lifesaver—came close to me and assessing the situation took me to the nearest drugstore, dialed the number and soon enough my father came and retrieved me. He thanked the lady profusely.

About a year later, my parents and I moved to Washington D.C., which had become the permanent headquarters of our religious community. Our mosque was located in an area known as Embassy Row. My father enrolled me in the nearest elementary school named after President John Quincy Adams. As I entered school, I was placed in the second grade. I knew not a word of English. However, due to my young age I picked up the new language within two months. All of my schooling through high school was completed in Washington D.C. Then my parents and I moved to Syosset, Long Island, New York. I gained admission at CW Post College as an undergraduate, majoring in biology. My father, retired from formal missionary work in 1960, was now a professor of history and political science here, having obtained a doctorate in this subject from American University in Washington, D.C. in the 1950’s.
I completed my B.S. and M.S. at CW Post College. Subsequently, I taught Social Studies at South Woods Junior High School in Syosset for under two years. One highlight during this period was when I unexpectedly met President-elect John F. Kennedy at the hospital where his son, John Jr., was born. The president mistook me for a nurse. I was at the hospital to see my newborn cousin who was born on the same day as John Jr.

At age 27, I got married and moved to the West Coast, where my husband worked as a pharmacist. By my third wedding anniversary, my first son was born followed by my second, then my third child, a daughter. Now that first son is a Pain Management doctor. My other son is a consultant in leadership development. By God’s grace, I am blessed with 10 grandchildren, ranging in ages from 20 years to seven.

My family and I belong to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and are closely connected to our mosque, which is located in Amityville, NY, and to its members and activities. We believe that Islam is the culmination of all previous religions. For us, Jesus was a human being who lived and died a natural death, completing his mission of finding the Lost Sheep of Israel, who had migrated as far as Srinagar, Kashmir, due to religious persecution. He completed his mission and died in India; his tomb is visited by thousands each year. Unlike the other Muslim sects, Ahmadi Muslims are not waiting for a second coming of Jesus in person. We believe Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, India, to be the reformer of the latter days—sent to unite all religions. He is the metaphorical second coming of the messiah to which we ascribe.

Muslims celebrate two major holidays: one is Eid-ul-Fitr, which occurs right after Ramadhan, the month of fasting from dawn to sunset (this was the month in which the Holy Quran was revealed); the other is Eid-ul-Adhia, which commemorates the sacrifices of Prophets Abraham and his son Ishmael. Muslims are also supposed to perform the Hajj which is the pilgrimage they make at least once in their lifetime to Makkah—the holy city where Prophet Muhammad the founder of Islam was born. I was blessed to perform the Hajj in 2002.

In the end, I am proud to be part of a tight-knit family, where we have embraced the best of both heritages. For instance, I wear both Indian and modest Western clothes and enjoy both Western and Indian cuisines. I am also blessed to be happily occupied with my mosque activities and surrounded by my loving, supportive family.

Khullat N. Alladin

Khullat Alladin was born in Hyderabad, Deccan. She moved to the US in 1949 as the daughter of an Imam who later became a college professor of history and political science. She received all her education starting with elementary school in the United States and ending with a Master of Science degree from C.W. College, Long Island University. Following this, she taught Social Studies at Southwoods Junior High School in Syosset for close to two years. Then, she got married and moved to California with her pharmacist-husband. But within the very first year, the couple moved back permanently to New York where they have lived ever since. Khullat is very involved with her mosque activities and community work not to mention her three adult children, their spouses and her ten grandchildren.
The Story of My Life, the Short Version
Sarajean Grains
Rockville Center, NY

I am a third generation Italian American born in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. My grandfather “jumped ship.” That ship was an Italian navy vessel. Yes, he came into America illegally. He was escaping Fascism and fleeing a government that he did not believe in. He spent his first year in hiding working in his cousin's home in secret. He worked hard, saved money and became a US citizen a few years later. He was one of the most patriotic people I have ever known. He loved this country.

Coming to America was all he dreamed of as a child and into adulthood. His family in Italy was very poor, living in a shack, with multiple siblings and extended family members. There were no opportunities for employment let alone financial stability. He fled Italy for a life in America where he could find work, and political freedom. Family was at the core of his being. He and my grandmother instilled this in all of us.

My grandfather owned a horse-cart selling vegetables. He worked his way up to a vegetable store. It was called “Tony's Fruits and Vegetables.” I loved helping out in the store.

Christmas was my favorite time of the year. For me it was not about the presents but more about selling the Christmas trees. I can honestly say that selling the trees with him was one of the greatest joys of my childhood. He treated all his customers to a beautiful tree regardless of their economic status. This lesson in generosity stayed with me forever.

He was a man of compassion. Grandpa promised his family, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles in Italy that he would send for them. He kept his promise. He brought over many of them. He set them up with work and a place to live. Many of them were builders, seamstresses, barbers and masonry workers. One of my uncles was a welder on the Verrazano Bridge.

Many of their descendants are also Chemical Engineers, Social workers, Speech Therapists, Aero Space Engineers, and other professionals, including a CEO of a network of multiple hospitals--all contributing their talents to our country. We all have a very strong work ethic built into us.

Being Italian was more than my ethnicity. It was how we lived our lives. We were told to never go to someone's house “mani pase” meaning empty-handed. Generosity and sharing were instilled in us. I grew up with 13 cousins. We shared whatever we had. If a treat could not be split in 13 pieces, don't dare even think of taking a bite for yourself.

We lived a life of abundance. This did not mean we were financially rich. What it meant was we lived life to its fullest. That included lots of eating, dancing and singing.

I will begin with eating. We ate three hot meals a day. My grandmother would cook a hot meal for the fruit store delivery boys and all of us grandchildren. No school lunches for us! We came home to a hero of peppers and eggs. When business was good, we had sausage and peppers.

Our mainstay foods were Pasta Fazzule, Pasta Lentic, Luva Zuppa, all rich and hearty. We rarely had meat. That was saved for Sundays.
Sunday cooking started very early in the morning. In this long process, the large pot would be the first object to be accessed. The gravy preparation would begin at 7 a.m. as it had to simmer all day so the meat in it was tender and the flavors were infused.

It was like a ritual. The meat was browned in garlic, oil and lots of onions. Then crushed tomatoes were added. Everyone took turns as, from time-to-time, Mom yelled out “stir the gravy.” You see, it was not just tomato sauce. It was gravy because of the meat. We knew it was Sunday because you smelled the gravy. We knew the days of the week just by this one dish. Food was how we communicated LOVE as well.

The table was where all of our family conversations were held. Through our food, we breathed life into our relationships. Food was the center of our life of “abbondanza.” We sold it, we cooked it, we shared it. We did not have a lot, but we always gave, so that others would have even if we had less. Giving did not come from our excess.

Our neighbors shared with us as well. The neighborhood was mostly Italian but we had friends that were Irish, Asian, and Hispanic. I loved that I had friends from different ethnic backgrounds. I actually preferred having friends that were of different cultures. It made and still makes life more interesting and flavorful. Having friends from different cultures has enriched my life and opened my eyes to how much we all have in common. We are not all so different.

As kids, when my friends and I walked home from school, we would play the smell game. The aromas of the different kitchens would cascade down on us and encircle our senses. We would close our eyes, breath in and guess what the dish was that was cooking in the apartment buildings as we walked by. When we got together the next day, we would compare our findings to see if our smelling guesses matched.

Music and dance have always been part of my life. We always danced, oh how we danced! We constantly danced. We all learned the “Tarantella,” the dance of the tarantulas. It was the dance we did and still do at all Italian weddings. We danced just to dance. We didn't need a reason; we would move the furniture to the walls just to dance. My uncle loved to swing dance and so did I. We all learned all of the Italian songs “from the other side.” That is how my family referred to Italy: the other side. However my grandfather's favorite song was totally American. He loved it most when it was sung by Kate Smith. He shined with pride when he heard her singing “God Bless America." I can still see him waving the Flag.

He loved this country and had deep faith in God. When he jumped ship, he put all of his trust in God's will. I like to think that is how I too live my life. I am constantly reinventing myself. Not because I am a restless soul but more because, I have a soul that is adventurous. I, as did my grandfather, put all my trust in God. I begin each new chapter in my life with prayer and thoughts like "if it is God's will, things will fall into place." And they usually do!

I have been blessed with six children, the last three at age 51 and 53 with the grace of God and In vitro Fertilization, the twins being the last two. Most women's offspring don't have my children's age span. Mine are ages 41, 37, 32, 12, and the twins, aged 10. As you can see, I was brought up with a “CAN DO” spirit.

I also have had different careers because I perceive self-growth with each new challenge. First as a Licensed Hair Stylist, then as Youth Group Coordinator/Retreat Facilitator, Case Manager in a
Crisis Center during 911, and Advocate /Case Manager for people with mental Illness. One job seems to lead to another. I go wherever God leads me. A year ago, on April 14th, I became a Synodical deacon and am known as a deacon at the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church of Rockville Center. I feel like, the entire body of my life's work so far has led me to this vocation.

Little did my Grandfather know how many lives were connected to his one leap of faith into the unknown waters of America.

Sarajean Grainson

Sarajean is a mother to six children. She has four sons, two daughters and two grandsons. She is a Rostered Synodical Deacon for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She worked for FEGS as a case manager/advocate for clients diagnosed with mental illness, for many years, Crisis case manager with Family and Children Association during 911, for two years and Life Teen Coordinator for youth ministry. Sarajean lives in Rockville Centre NY with her husband David and their three young sons. David is the Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, where she is called as their Deacon.
Life's Rearview Mirror
Dhruva G. Sulibhavi
Syosset, NY

Recently, as I was leaving the post office in my town, I ran into an old colleague from work. We saw each other after many months as we both are retired. After an exchange of pleasantries and casual enquiries, as we parted company, my colleague, in his native southeastern European accent, enquired about the religious sandalwood mark on my forehead, which he had not seen during my working years. A traditional Brahmin from a place where such explanations were superfluous because such marks are ubiquitous, surprising myself, in a familiar, unabashed way I explained the mark in terminology, most likely, foreign-sounding to my friend. In the USA, to avoid creating a distraction, for years I rarely ever sported any religious insignia.

We do not look in the rearview mirror of life as often as we do while backing up our automobiles. My above-mentioned encounter at the post office got me doing just this. My own recently completed, not-yet-published book about my journey from Hyderabad, a large city in south India where I completed my medical studies to USA nearly 48 years ago provided the answers to my questions such as what is the anatomy of my evolution (being a physician could not help this metaphor)? How did I come to be the way I am? and took me back to my roots.

Going back in time, my remote, known ancestor Sage Agastya is a prehistoric figure. My recent ancestors, as behooved their caste, were priests, scholars and land owners. As times changed, future generations sought secular employment. As quite typical of the Brahmin community which places a high value on education, everyone in the family is college educated. Ours was a conservative, religious family. The ritualistic side was stronger on my mother’s side while my father, a well-educated, well-read, community-oriented Chartered Accountant by profession, was more spiritual but respected tradition.

My decision to pursue my medical specialization in America brought my wife and me (the first ones in our respective families) to this land of immigrants. An Indian as in East Indian as opposed to America’s “Indians” though their label was a misnomer thanks to Mr. Christopher Columbus, I cherished this confusing but amusing commonality with the new country I entered.

Youngstown, Ohio, a beat-up steel town was my first home in the U.S. As a pure vegetarian (no meat, fish or fowl, or even eggs) “fitting in” was a challenge. But soon enough, we met plenty of fellow east Indians who pointed us to grocers selling Indian ingredients and even helped us out with transportation.

My wife is one of nine children and I one of 12. In Ohio, even as we took comfort in each other’s company—as newlyweds, strangers as we might have been to each other—we accepted culture shock (a new term for us) as our new norm. We missed our families but the exciting and adventurous part of our new life compensated for this. Eventually, we even got used to seeing the neighborhood street mostly empty, a far cry from our experience in India. Things like shopping carts, helping ourselves to items from overflowing shelves, the concept of sales and coupons mesmerized us. Over the years, so did the gargantuan malls and stores stacked to the ceiling with stuff. The snow was magical but during harsh winter days, we almost yearned for India’s hot weather.
After about a year in Ohio, Brooklyn, NY was our next stop. New York City’s public transportation was a welcome change, including, in their own strange way, the crowds and the noise. Manhattan’s little India on Lexington Avenue was our refuge for Indian groceries. Eventually, cheese, bread, Pizza, pasta and all else vegetarian, including Chinese, Thai, Greek and Mexican, too, made their way onto our plates.

In New York, we met a lot more people of Indian descent. No community organizations were present yet. Religion was practiced at home at a spiritual level. In the absence of Hindu priests, we had not yet quite figured out how to practice our distinct religious rituals and ceremonies. The first Hindu Temple opened in the early 1970’s in the borough of Queens. Then on, we celebrated Thanksgiving Day—the quintessentially American Holiday—at the temple.

Over the years, as the Indian population in the region grew, more neighborhood places of worship representing the various Indian religions were built. Gradually, community organizations began to take shape and started arranging cultural activities and religious functions. Over the long haul, more of our family members moved to the USA. My family’s own regular trips to India kept our connections to India itself open.

Once we had children, our interest in preserving our cultural identity grew because of the fear of losing it in a land where we were a minority. People from other countries also did this with their respective cultures and languages.

After finishing my residency and fellowship, I joined a group practice on Long Island. In time, we bought a house in the suburbs, started making friends with the neighbors and those at work. Some were recent immigrants like us and others had roots going back generations.

My work was rewarding. On top of professional satisfaction it allowed me to be a good provider. My late father used to paraphrase Dr. Primrose from *The Vicar of Wakefield*: one way to serve society is to raise a good family. America facilitated this for me amply. My patients and my colleagues only cared that I did my job well. Not how I looked or where I came from. “Do your job selflessly, and have faith that the reward will follow” was the driving force behind all my efforts.

My assimilation into American life was gradual. Participating in my children’s school activities, singing the American national anthem, socializing with the neighbors, my children’s friends and their parents, sharing rides were all part of the learning curve. Being a physician, meeting people entrusting their life in my hands, was the greatest learning platform in a way that made me aware of people as people, not what they were. Color or creed, religion or gender made no difference.

Going beyond my own ethnic roots, my all-American grandchildren’s mother, that is, my daughter-in-law is part Irish, part Greek, part French-Canadian. I realized that like me and the group I mix with, members of other groups also have their own sphere of comfort and security.

For all my assimilation, I still may not pass for an American in the common parlance as I don’t look like this country’s founders. What is worse, I still cannot make out the lyrics to pop songs. I
still like Indian music the most, cannot shake off the typically Indian head-shaking that indicates appreciation for a music performance, or figuring out how to pronounce tamato: is it ‘Tomaato? or ‘Tometo?

The journey might be uneven, but the beauty of America is, here there is room for every hard working person because we are protected by our living Constitution that allows every legal resident to be more than a hyphenated American. America’s diversity is unprecedented and this is the secret sauce behind the success of this experimentation called the USA. Each one of us, in our own individual way, can become part of the fabric of this country, respecting and caring for each other. I believe it is the Constitution, what it stands for and the system that make us as one, safe and independent.

After having the privilege of practicing medicine for nearly four decades I retired with a great sense of satisfaction. I contributed to my adopted country in my own way as best as I could and in time made it my country when I became its, yet another naturalized citizen.

Dhruva G. Sulibhavi

A physician by trade, Dr. Dhruva G. Sulibhavi has always had an avid interest in literature. Raised in India, he would jump at the opportunity to read distinguished Indian authors, as well as renowned international authors. His dream of studying literature never materialized, but he was left with the “reading bug.” While his professional life led him to the practice of medicine in New York, he was never quite cured of the “reading bug.” Since retirement, Dr. Sulibhavi has been penning short stories and essays. His first published book of short stories and essays was titled, “Appa’s Short Stories.” “Broken Truck and Other Stories,” is his second publication. “Thoughts and recollections” is awaiting publication. Dr. Sulibhavi lives on Long Island in New York where he and his wife raised their family.
Poems
Wendy Walker Jackson
Freeport, NY

1. “RESPEK YUH ELDERS!”

Family values
Flowing thru the Veins of my Village
Generational Words of Wisdom
Expectations of Obedience
Our Culture, our Civility, our Colloquialisms

Guyanese doan beg, we doan stoop to nobaddy
   Beggars kyan be choosuhs

Mek yuh bed hard, jus suh yuh lie in it
   Life ain' no bed o’ roses

Walk wit’ pride, hold yuh head high
   Look me in de eye when I talkin’ to yuh

Give an doan expect nuttin in return
   Wan gud tun deserve anodda

Learn plenty and you gon be smart
   Jac’ o’ all trades issa masta o’ non’

Chirren shud be seen an not ’erd
   Speak up, mek peepul hear yuh

Silence is gold’n
   Yuh kyan get nuttin if yuh stay suh quiet

Absence mek de ’art grow fonda
   Outta site, outta mine

Hard wuk neva kill a sole
   All wuk and no play mek Jack a dull boi

Speak when yuh spoken to, ansah wen yuh called
   Doan gimme no bak chat!

Look befoh yuh leap
   Yuh neva no if yuh doan try
Two ’rang doan mek a rite
   Two head betta dan wan
God doan gi yuh mo’ dan yuh kud bear
Lef yuh worries at de foot o’ de cross

We lived
We learned
We heard: “RESPEK YUH ELDERS!”
We heeded

2. Never An Option

Education was never an option

We may have lacked motivation
Cared little about participation
Teachers struggled to provide and instruct
Advancement was an expectation

Education wasn't an option

Day and night, school was in session
For fourteen years, I endured the tension
We dare not render Mom’s efforts futile
Rising above ignorance was the infinite mission

Education still isn't an option

Seek new information
Add meaning to Life,
Earn respect
Provide direction
Banish insecurities
Overcome failures
Face challenges
Develop ambition

No Education = No Opportunity for Elevation

Education is the foundation that Builds a Nation

Never will Education be an Option
3. I’m Thankful For…

The life I was blessed with on the 26th day
A Mom & Dad who rarely saw things the same way
The guidance & protection that were constantly there
The encouragement & expectations that showed that they cared

A patient mother who selflessly gave up on a dream,
An impatient father who sometimes created a scene.
Laughter, tears, good reports and bad
Family, few friends, happy times and sad

Strong, proud parents whose love always showed through
Supportive words, outstretched hands, and tons of gifts, too
My past, with memories too poignant to name
My present, with experiences that are never the same.

Diligence, ambition, high hopes, self-esteem
Motivation, perseverance and the Jackson 5 team
What I am and whom I am yet to be
Your presence, purpose and passion, Mom & Dad – Your Legacy!

4. GT to De Bone!

Memories of a not-too-distant past
Tense, true and tough, forever will last
Flood my mind and rip at my heart
Perspective is key, but where do I start?

As the eldest, growing up wasn’t easy
In Guyana, it was Father knows best
Even when Mom became the breadwinner
It was he who put my nerves to the test

Cane View was the street that we lived on
By day, it was hot, sometimes damp
We raised chickens, geese, sheep, dogs, and turkeys
At night, we studied - by kerosene lamp

The sweetest times were of bountiful trees
‘Specially the wait for a mango to fall
Had to grab that gem ‘fore my brothers
So I dashed out - at rooster’s call

My smarts got me to Bishops - the best school
They preached perseverance, integrity, pride
My country’s pledge instilled loyalty, labor, love
Now I share skills that are tested and tried

Holidays in my native land were priceless
Easter - kite flying, no-one too grown
Christmas - Mother Sally, sorrel and black cake
Mashramani festivities, joy and jubilation set the tone

Once British, Guyana means “Land of Many Waters”
Rooted in South America, English is spoken by all
Creolese and native dialects highlight a rich culture
The Golden Arrowhead flies high and stands tall

Now...I’m an immigrant, America is my home
Change of scene
Won’t change my theme
Cuz I’m GT to De Bone!

5. Daddy’s Pride and Joy

The Triumph
Small, sleek with a black drop top
Shiny blue sides, lacquered panels pop
Speeding on weekends, we had no cares
Soliciting smiles and infrequent stares
Daddy’s proudly steering

PZ 8746
Bold print adorning the license plate
Wheels spinning, but often running late
To school, drive-in movie, family visit, store
Getting five ready was mom's everyday chore
Daddy’s loudly seething

Convertible
Glory days gradually coming to a halt
Tempers, tensions, tears - Triumph at fault?
Harsh words, violence, literal growing pains
Moments of moderate comfort no longer remain
Daddy's singing the blues

6. Beneath The Smile
I wear a smile
My lips remember the bitter they've tasted
I strut with style
My legs know the ache of a journey that’s been wasted
I dare to rest
My shoulders feel the strain of each victory and season
I’ve done my best
My psyche can't fathom the victor’s rhyme or reason
I lost the gall
My arms long to embrace horizons without hindrance
I stand up tall
My back fraught with knots from time and distance
I yearned to fight
My village imparted more book sense than street smarts
I'll be the light
My heritage demands a vision built on blood, sweat, tears, heart
I smile to hide
My mind cluttered with trials present and past
I walk with pride
My focus unwavering on a legacy destined to last

Wendy Walker Jackson

Wendy Walker Jackson is a prolific poet, enthusiastic storyteller, inspiring mentor, and creative educator. In 1994, she migrated to the United States from Guyana, where her passion for music, reading, board games and culinary arts is deeply rooted. As a lifelong learner, her credentials include a Bachelor's degree from Medgar Evers College, and Master's degrees, from Hofstra University and The College of New Rochelle, respectively. Many of Ms. Jackson's works are influenced by the social intricacies of our communities, and the need for empowerment of the underserved. A tireless volunteer, her passion for advocacy is evident in her role as Chairperson of the Advisory Board of Roosevelt-Freeport Economic Opportunity Commission. She also serves as Vice President of The Black Educators Committee, Inc., and a board member of the Northeast Freeport Civic Association. Wendy lives with her talented family in Freeport, New York. She believes that living your best life requires sacrifice, humility, kindness, perseverance, and prayer.
Along with his first wife Margaret and sons Peter and Patrick, my great, great grandfather Michael Cullen, a 26-year-old tanner emigrated from Ireland roughly between 1846-1852 arriving at the port of New York. They were part of a wave of Irish immigrants entering the country due to the potato famine in Ireland. He settled with his family in Harrison Township in Hudson County, New Jersey. After the death of his first wife Margaret, he married Mary Coleman. He had six children from his first marriage—Peter, 1843, Michael Jr., 1845, Patrick, 1846, John, 1848, Mary Jane, 1850, and Joseph, 1852—and six from his second—James, 1855, Thomas Henry, 1856, James Francis, 1858, Mary Jane, 1866 and William, 1869. It is likely there were several infant deaths, which was common during this period.

In the 1870 census, my great-great grandfather’s profession is listed as ‘retail grocer.’ He became successful despite the depression era, which followed the Civil War. He died on December 13th, 1882 at age 60 in Newark, New Jersey. My great grandfather Michael J. Cullen Jr. married Anna Nan Danaher and had four children—James, 1912 (my grandfather), Rosemary, 1914, Robert, 1918, and John, 1920. America’s first supermarket, King Kullen was opened in Jamaica, Queens on August 4th, 1930 by Michael Cullen Jr. After his death in April 1936, it was taken over by his wife Nan. She was known for her sharp business sense—a woman ahead of her time. My grandfather James Cullen Jr. was known for closely following his father’s ingenuity in the grocer business. He innovated the concept of store chains and established a multitude of King Kullens across Long Island.

My mother Patricia J. Cullen was born on September 12th, 1938, and grew up in Great Neck, Long Island as one of nine brothers and sisters. She lived a privileged life despite growing up during the World War II years when the norm was hard times for most people. Her childhood was near perfect except for the common family ups-and-downs. She spent summers at the family house in Point Lookout where she met my father William Groom at a local bar called The Bay House. She was a nursing student and he was a football player for the 1959-1960 undefeated team at Hofstra University. He was also studying to be a science teacher at their education program.

My dad’s father William Groom Sr. was originally from Nova Scotia, Canada and was Irish and English. My Grandmother Marie Groom was also Irish and English. The last name Groom was from English descent and in the olden days commonly given to horse groomers by trade. My dad’s parents met in the United States and raised their three children in Cedarhurst, New York. They are my dad William born March 11th, 1937, and his sisters Joanne, 1935 and Lynn, 1939. My Aunt Joanne was also a teacher and now retired, lives in Connecticut. Aunt Lynn owned a movie theatre in Poughkeepsie, New York and is now deceased. Grandpa was a typewriter salesman, and grandma a housewife who occasionally worked in a clerical office. Unfortunately, they both passed before I was born in 1970. I have no memories of them except stories and photos handed down from my father.
Although I am extremely proud of my ethnic heritage and roots, I don’t believe they entirely define me as American or Irish/English American. The roots represent my ancestors, and my DNA. To me, my own experiences, which mold me as an American, are much more significant. The recollections of my childhood for example: festive family birthday parties, spectacular holidays, warm and sad reminiscences of bonds tied by blood, tears, joy, loyalty and the devotion firmly based upon the unending circle of life. I can recollect a free-spirited childhood as one of seven brothers and sisters on a quiet maple lined block on May Place in Baldwin, New York. Summer afternoons filled with fox and hounds, dodgeball, riding around on my dog Ralph, a huge black retriever and chasing down the ice cream man.

We had a huge, white house with black shutters and a red door on a street lined with old maple and oak trees safeguarding us from the woes of the outside world. Through the kitchen bay window you could see an old apple tree blossoming with ripe fruit in spring, which were shades of red, orange, and yellow in the fall. In the center of the kitchen, we had an old round oak table called a Lazy Susan with a spinning tray built in the middle to pass each dinner dish along. The kitchen kept a cozy glow and mom prepared a feast for seven every night. The gang ate together habitually and there was no TV or radio during dinner but just conversation and laughter echoing throughout the pantry.

Across the massive family room ricocheted arguments over who was watching the Brady Bunch or Magic Garden on our 21’ inch TV. The 80’s spawned the era of the VCR and home videos. Now our battles were over Grease versus Jaws depending on who was in the room.

As I move through the house, I see the dining room where we spent many a Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas Eve meal. The walls are adorned with green leaves and reddish pink flowers accented by a quaint gold chandelier. I can visualize my mother calling us to say grace for dinner. She is dressed in a red and green holiday sweater with her beige and red Christmas apron.

The first room in the house, the living room, off-limits to the kids! There the blue linen couches and white and blue curtains to match the light blue carpet and white end-tables hosting my grandmother’s antique lamps, two angelic farm children holding water pails. My cat Benjamin lies comfortably on the recliner and my dog Thurman spread out upon Mom’s linen couch.

The bedrooms full of teenage and young adult angst depending upon where you look. A Barbie dollhouse in one room, a lacrosse stick in the next with an Iron Maiden poster on the wall. Then another girl's room at the back of the house with two beds: one with an anarchy sign above it; the Billy Idol poster, mine. No matter where you go love is in the air.

In the backyard, we had a small house, which we referred to as the playhouse. The playhouse was almost identical to our real house, painted white with black shutters. It must have originally been built as a horse stable when the property had originally been farmland. I can recall my first kiss in the playhouse, my first puff of a cigarette, my first drink, playing house with my siblings and make-believe games such as escape from the abominable snowman in those perilous 1970’s snowstorms. There were many dark times as well that included my parents’ divorce, alcoholism in the household and my own battles with addiction and mental illness. However, the feeling of warmth I felt in the house had a way of overshadowing these clouds.

I ask myself: Am I a product of my ancestral heritage or family upbringing? I am convinced it’s both. I am proud to be an Irish American and grateful for the struggles and perseverance of my
forefathers. Without the past, there would be no present. As I think of where I came from, it reminds me of how far my relatives and I have come and how the opportunities are infinite in a new and challenging world.

Yes, I define myself partly by my roots and partly by my own journey's footprints. Each contribution from my family background and life lessons have defined my unique American identity.

Daryel Groom

Daryel Groom is a long time resident of Long Beach, New York. She enjoys writing short stories, poetry, essays and is currently working on her first novel. She is a member of the Long Beach Writer’s Circle as well as the Long Island Performance Poets Association. She worked as a creative writing and English Teacher for the New York City Department of Education for over 15 years. She also taught writing at The Thomas Aquinas Summer Program for several summers. She is a proud Pitbull and feline owner and an animal activist. She has volunteered at a variety of shelters in the last 20 years including Long Beach Shelter, Rescue Ink, and Kitty Cove. She enjoys rock and heavy metal concerts and relaxing at the beach.
I am Rohini B. Ramanathan, the conceiver, creator and executor of this anthology as well as a contributing writer to this project. As for my own story, I was born in India to parents who were born in India, and whose ancestors going back many generations were, too. Thanks to one of my forefathers being an illustrious scholar and thus can be Googled, I can trace my roots up to the 15th century. More comprehensively, I am a Tamil Brahmin with Vedic roots going back 2500 years in time.

Naively, I insist that a neutral identity, or that we are all human, must be the single identity marker for all of humanity, but individual stories are born only out of our differences. For instance, when I learned about the identity marker of the 14-year-old Adul Sam-on, one of the twelve boys from the Thai Wild Boars junior soccer team stuck in a cave for over two weeks in June 2018, I was dumbfounded. He is known by the marker, “border boys,” meaning they are stateless like the coach himself and two other boys in the group.

One of our identity markers is our nationality. Border people are stateless. They have no documentation. At age six, Adul, ethnically a Wa from the Myanmar near Thailand’s Chiang Rai border province, was slipped into Thailand by his parents and entrusted to a Baptist pastor and his wife in Chiang Rai’s Mae Sai district. It was Adul’s knowledge of several languages including English and Thai that initially helped the communication between the stranded children in the cave and their coach and the British divers who located them. I was riveted by Adul's story. His identity was forged by his heritage of poverty and hardship, which also propelled him to excel in his studies, which in turn got him a scholarship and free lunch. After the cave incident, his identity was enhanced by yet more markers: a hero, a fighter, a survivor.

In my case, too, some of my identity markers were determined at birth but others I acquired as I grew up. Some of the more prominent ones begin with my perchance-move to the USA (many non native-born consider moving to this country a blessing) and the subsequent process of assimilation that included absorbing the cultural norms of my adopted country even while retaining many of the values of my native culture, one of which was not being a spendthrift. After living in the USA for many decades, I noticed that those born in the U.S. also retain big chunks of their inherited culture starting with their name itself.

Often, one can infer another’s ethnic roots from his or her name. If you enter their homes, you can even smell the aroma of the foods from their native country and their American English sprinkled with words originally from their ancestral land. So in this respect I am not that different either.

My assimilated part displays American clothing and manners and celebrates the commercialized holidays like Christmas and over a period began to feel comfortable using the local idioms and slang, while my indigenous side is more comfortable cooking dishes whose recipes were grown
on my family tree and feels happy to meet people who speak the other Indian languages I am fluent in, which are Tamil and Hindi.

The process of assimilation is long and checkered. It is somewhat organic (example: learning to drive a car or the meaning of cuss words and how and when to use them) but also consciously forged (example: using opportunities to socialize with the native-born).

I moved to the U.S. as the daughter of an Indian government official, who was on a deputation to Washington, D.C. in the 1970's. I was eighteen at the time and was armed with an honors degree in English Literature from a Catholic College in New Delhi, India. I finished high school at age 15 and college was three years after that. The first thing I noticed when I moved was, everybody--including non-adults--in the US worked or at least tried to get a job. This was a new concept for me. I had restrictions and could work only twenty hours a week, which I did as a cashier at a drug store near home in College Park, Maryland. Though making money was fun, I hated having to stand on my feet all day and I also felt small, as in my mind this was not work meant for a college graduate and clock punching was even more demeaning.

I was also doing my Master's at the time and within two years as I was about to graduate I found professional work with a professional salary as a “media intern” at a college in Washington, D.C. I felt very happy. The college obtained the required work permit for me normally granted for two years at a time which could lead to a green card if the employer pursued this route.

At the end of this assignment, my plan was to return to India and work in television. But, again, perchance, I got into a doctoral program in media and educational technology at Boston University. I felt lucky but also felt pained by the fact that I would be separated from family for God knew how long. The saving grace was I had by then met my future husband who lived in New York. At that juncture, long-distance romance suited me the best.

Eventually, I moved to New York and living in Flushing, Queens made a life for myself as a wife and a professional working as a corporate online education designer and developer at Chemical Bank (part of today's J.P. Morgan Chase) commuting to downtown Manhattan.

The next milestone to follow was motherhood though at the time my husband-to-be proposed to me, I said that I did not want children. Having confessed this, my two sons are two of the best things that ever happened to me.

My bi-cultural background, along with my frequent international travel, not to mention my training in classical music (Indian style), have expanded my mind to see only the common humanity among us. To me, music is my metaphor for life. We perceive and practice different musical systems but they all employ the same seven notes as determined by Physics. Possessing this kind of a liberal outlook, in 2007, I formed a fusion band along with a pianist trained in the Western Classical Musical tradition. I also worked with other talented artists, many of them gifted youngsters. In July 2017, Newsday did a front page feature article on my work in their Act II section. It is gratifying to see your work recognized on the media as this way, it is shared with the public.
As a member of the Long Island Writers Guild and the Long Beach Writers Circle, I write and publish quite regularly and enjoy sharing my work with others at public forums some geared toward charitable causes. In the past, I had done more community-based work as well and this too has shaped my identity.

When we are born, we are somebody’s child but later, life bestows upon us layer-upon-layer of experiences and at the very end we are an amalgam of everything that had touched our life.

One can talk about roots and heritage as in origin for almost anything. It could be a country’s, an object’s, an event’s, a book’s, a story’s. Anything! And they all could be equally interesting.

Rohini B. Ramanathan

A long-time resident of Oceanside, a member of the Long Beach Writer's Circle and the Long Island Writers' Guild, and a corporate learning and development professional with a B.A. Honors degree in English literature from Jesus & Mary College, New Delhi, India, Dr. Rohini B. Ramanathan, began her publishing "career" at age 19 with a Washington, D.C.-based, Indian-American newspaper. Over 200 columns/essays/articles and some poetry of hers have appeared in various publications, including the New York Times, Newsday and the Great South Bay Magazine. She is the conceiver, creator and compiler of this anthology, “Where are you from: My roots, My Heritage." A trained Indian Classical Music vocalist, and winner of several arts grants, Ro is the founder-director of the East-West World Music Epiphany band.