



THE HUMANITIES THAT SURROUND US

Youth Voices

Small Island, Big Story

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“Small Island, Big Story”

This summer, I was traveling to the mainland United States for the first time for a student leadership program. Everything felt unfamiliar: the size of the place, the speed of conversations, and how easily people named states I had only ever seen on maps. When I introduced myself, I said I was from Saipan, expecting that to be enough.

But then came the pause. “Where’s that?”

“The Northern Mariana Islands,” I replied. Another pause.

“What are the Northern Mariana Islands?” Not where. *What.*

I didn’t know how to respond because how can you sum-up a place that shaped your entire life to someone who had never heard of it before? It stings, the question felt personal in a way I didn’t know how to explain. I felt like I had to correct something about myself, so I started looking for easier answers. We’re three hours away from Japan or the Philippines, so that answer works. We’re also Pacific Islands like Hawaii or Fiji, and that usually moves the conversation forward. Heck, even saying that we’re a U.S territory like Puerto Rico or the U.S Virgin Islands was another fair answer, but none of them ever felt right. Each comparison felt like the Northern Mariana Islands were just a reference point near somewhere else, something more known. In those conversations, it felt like I had to translate my home into something smaller for it to be understood.

The moment meant something more complicated about my identity that I’m sure anyone else from the CNMI has dealt with before, something I had never fully put into words. I am a

United States citizen. I carry a U.S. passport, I grew up learning American history and civics, and in school, I recited the same pledge and studied the same narratives as students across the country. In many visible ways, I am a part of the United States, tied to its systems, its institutions, and its national identity in ways that are official and undeniable. And yet, the moment I say where I am from, I am reminded that this connection is not always immediately recognized or understood. Because I am also apart from the version of America that most people carry in their minds. The Northern Mariana Islands often do not appear in the mental map of what “American” looks like to many people I meet. So when I say I am from Saipan, there is often a pause, not of rejection, but of unfamiliarity. The pause is a strange kind of in-betweenness: to be legally and historically part of a nation, while still needing to explain your place within it. I began to realize that my identity was not divided between two worlds, but stretched across one that does not always acknowledge all of its own parts equally.

How could I feel fully American in my education, language, and citizenship, yet still have to justify the existence of my home to other Americans? But over time, I came to understand that this tension was not a flaw in my identity, but more a reflection of how uneven visibility is distributed. Some places are instantly recognized; others must be introduced before they are even believed. And so I learned that being a part of the United States did not always guarantee being seen as part of it.

The more people I met, the more this question came up. I was still dealing with that mixed feeling, but as it kept occurring, the feeling morphed into something else. Less frustration and more focused on what they said after: “Oh, I had never heard about that place.” or “Wait, you have summer all year around? No way!” or “How do I spell that? I want to search it up online.” What I once interpreted as distance began to feel more like responsibility. If my home

was not widely known, then every introduction became a small act of representation. I was not only answering a question about geography, but also trying to bridge a gap in understanding. In that way, being apart from mainstream recognition did not separate me from my identity as an American but it deepened my awareness of what that identity could include, and how much of it is still unfamiliar to many. I started to understand that I exist in both realities at once: fully within the nation, and also carrying a place that asks to be brought into view.

This shift could also be summed up by a saying my sister told me: just because you are from a small place doesn't mean you are small in presence. This whole time, I had been approaching the question like something to minimize. But I hated shrinking my answer, I wanted to expand it. I would pull out my phone and show pictures: Bird Island rising out of the ocean, quiet and steady, the sandy Managaha beaches where the water shifted between shades of blue depending on the light, and family gatherings filled with red rice, barbecue, and laughter that made every table feel full. I didn't try to make it digestible, but made it real and clear. And slowly, I realized I wasn't just answering a question anymore. I was bringing them home.

Those conversations slowly started to show how powerful it was to simply tell stories. And my stories in a way made me talk about growing up in a place where the ocean was never far away, where the sound of waves felt normal, and where culture was not something performed but something lived every day. I described neighbors who felt like family and a community where people showed up for each other without needing to be asked. The more I shared, the more I realized something important: the Northern Mariana Islands did not need to be compared to somewhere else to matter. They stood on their own, and people who asked these questions were excited and even mind-blown to hear about the unique reality back home. And every time I spoke about them, I carried that reality into spaces where they had never been mentioned before.

Through these stories, I started thinking differently about the future. I hope that in the next fifty years, fewer people will need to ask what the Northern Mariana Islands are. I hope more people will already recognize that there are communities across the Pacific that are part of the United States story and that the landmarks, traditions, and history of the Northern Mariana Islands could be taught in some sort of curriculum to gain better awareness of these other communities that have something more to offer. More than anything, and something that can begin today, I hope my peers and future generations from the Northern Mariana Islands never feel like they have to explain their existence before they can share who they are. I hope they can simply say where they are from and be understood without hesitation. I hope they carry pride in the journey, culture, and community that shaped them wherever they go. After all, belonging should not require explanation.

I still get asked where I am from and I know I always will. And sometimes, I will still hear the question that follows: “What are the Northern Mariana Islands?” But my reaction and response has changed. I no longer see it as something uncomfortable or something to avoid. I see it as an opening. Because now I understand that the Northern Mariana Islands are not just a place to define, but they are a place to share. They are stories, people, culture, and a way of life that deserves to be known. And every time someone asks, I get to bring my home a little further into their world. After all, being from a small island has never meant carrying a small story.