



THE HUMANITIES THAT SURROUND US

Youth Voices

Beneath the Surface of Home

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Beneath the Surface of Home

The first time I understood what it fully meant to be from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) was when I was underwater.

Above the surface, Saipan has always felt familiar in a way I didn't really think about. It's just my home with the structures, the heat, and the ocean always somewhere in the distance. You don't really question it when you grow up here. The water is just there, surrounding everything, like it has always been part of the background.

I remember when I was 11 years old, on my first dive with my dad. He checked the equipment in silence, tightening straps and adjusting my tank. Then he looked at me and said,

“준비 됐어?” (Are you ready?)

I nervously nodded with the regulator in my mouth.

The moment I jumped in the deep water, everything changed. The noise of the boat disappeared, replaced by the sound of my own breathing. The surface closed above me, and suddenly I was in another world with many schools of fish, colorful corals stretched across the seafloor, and sunlight breaking into a shifting pattern through the water. It made me realize that Saipan is more than what we see on land. It also exists beneath the surface, where another version of the same place quietly moves and lives out of sight. It was there, underwater with my dad, that I began to understand my home in a different way.

Diving with my dad, sometimes even traveling from Saipan to Tinian, became more than an activity. It became part of how I understand where I come from. My dad didn't just work in the ocean; he fell in love with it. Even after years of diving, he would still pause to look at the water like it was new. I started noticing the same thing, the way the ocean changes depending on light, depth, and silence. Helping my dad with his small diving business taught me that the ocean is not separate from life in the CNMI. It is part of work, family, and responsibility.

But that is not only understood underwater. It is also understood in the way people come together on land. At festivals, family gatherings and island celebrations, food is always at the center. Tables are filled with red rice, barbecue, coconut-based dishes, and recipes passed down through generations. Music plays loudly, conversations overlap and people move easily between laughter, languages, and stories. There is always a mix of remembrance and celebration, where history is honored but life still feels full in the present. These traditions are not just events, they are how the community stays alive.

That exact feeling followed me back to shore. Coming up from the water always feels like returning to a different version of the same place. On land, that same sense of connection appears in the way people live, gather, and take care of one another.

Underwater, I also began to understand something else: history is still here. On certain dives, I saw shapes resting on the seafloor that did not belong to nature alone. Broken ships, crashed planes, and fragments of metal my dad once told me were radios from World War II. It made me

realize that beauty and loss often come from the same place. They were not behind glass or labeled in a museum. They were simply there, lying quietly where they had fallen. Here, history does not stay in the past. It remains present. It sits beneath the water where people still dive, work, and live above it every day. Even outside of diving, the ocean has always shaped us. Just this April, a super typhoon passed through and reminded us as a community how unpredictable life on an island can be. It was a painful reminder that the same ocean that gives us life can also take things away so quickly. It made me understand that living on these islands means learning to live with both the beauty and the power of the sea.

That realization followed me back to the island again. On shore, I carry another kind of responsibility that many families here understand in different ways. As part of an immigrant family, I often help with essential documents, translating forms, explaining instructions, and ensuring information is understood correctly. Daily life here often requires trust in people guiding one another through systems that are not always easy to understand.

These experiences underwater, on land, and in community traditions have shaped how I see life here where it moves between layers. Many of us grow up learning to shift between these layers without needing to explain it. This is where belonging becomes complicated. We are U.S. citizens, and American systems shape many parts of how we live each day—education, currency and law. But living on these islands does not feel identical to what people often imagine when they think of the United States. It's not only distance, but it shapes access and its costs. Decisions made far away are experienced at home. At the same time, this place is not separated from American history. That becomes especially clear underwater, where the remnants of World War

It still rests in local waters. Those wrecks are not distant stories. They are physical evidence of a past that passed through these islands and remains part of the sea today.

From that perspective, life here is both part of and distinct from the broader American experience. It is included in its history, but experienced from a place shaped by ocean, memory, and distance. As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary and this place marks 50 years since the Covenant that shaped its political relationship with the U.S., I find myself thinking less about labels and more about what the relationship feels like in daily life. The ocean and the systems built above it both shaped how we move through life here.

Looking ahead to the next 50 years, I hope that this relationship continues to grow in understanding. Stronger support for island businesses like my dad's diving work would help protect livelihoods tied to the ocean and tourism. I also hope for systems that are easier for families to navigate, especially for those moving between languages and cultures, where barriers still exist. Greater accessibility would have a meaningful impact on communities that are often overlooked. Most of all, I hope Pacific Island communities are recognized not as distant edges of a nation, but as a place with their own histories, knowledge, and voices. I hope the CNMI continues to be understood not only from above, but from the perspective of those who live between land and sea every day.

Because here, identity is not fixed. It moves like water.

And for me, home is not only what I see on land, it is also what I see beneath it.