



WAH MEI NEWS



Director's Letter

It has been a year of exciting change and expansion for Wah Mei School. As we move into a new season and a new year, we reflect on the changing faces, developing interactions, and growing maturity of all the children and youth we serve. Similarly, we celebrate the growth and progress of our committed community.

Whether you are closely tied or far removed from Wah Mei School, we encourage your engagement. In this issue, we recognize and thank Kelly Wong McGrath for her story of multi-ethnic identity, language, culture, and educational beginnings rooted in the Wah Mei way. We are proud to now extend that early learning to school-aged youth in our After School Program with a profile of our Program Leader, William Wu.

Everyone at Wah Mei wishes you a continued growth and progress-filled New Year!



Ben Wong, Executive Director
www.wahmei.org

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*Special thanks to Anny Li,
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Holding the Whole Me: A Wah Mei Story

By Guest Writer: Kelly Wong McGrath, Class of 1985

I am the daughter of a Chinese man and an American woman of European descent – some would call me biracial, multiracial, bicultural, or mixed. But language is frustratingly limiting in that way. I am neither a collection of fractional people, nor am I a seamlessly blended archetype of post-racial identity.

Despite having grown up in San Francisco, a place that has long prided itself on inclusion and diversity, I have been routinely confronted by strangers' needs to categorize and understand individuals through the lens of race and culture. From the "Race (check only one)" box on forms and questionnaires, to the suspicious glances my dark-skinned father would get when loading his fair-skinned daughter into the car, to the maddening observation "Oh, but you don't look Chinese."

For many of us with multiple ethnic backgrounds, the frustration with racial categorization only intensifies the closer we get to home. My multiethnic friends and I have had lengthy discussions about the rejection and dismissal that can sometimes come from multiple sides. If my lunch smelled too much like fish, non-Asian friends would describe it as my "weird Asian thing". If I danced with too much abandon, my Chinese family would chide me for being "so Western."



These microaggressions have had a cumulative effect in my life and force me to think about the effects of racial and cultural identity on a near-daily basis – for better or for worse. Nevertheless, as an adult, I am grateful for the time and place of my upbringing.

I started at Wah Mei in 1983, less than a decade after it was founded in response to *Lau v. Board of Education*, a lawsuit brought and won by Chinese parents in San Francisco demanding equal education for Chinese children who didn't speak English. With little understanding of the hard work brought by those parents, I gleefully came to school each day, learning and reinforcing the languages that allowed me to communicate with both sides of my family.

Like most of us, my memories of preschool are hazy and few. But those that I do have are marked with feeling secure, a teacher holding me while I was sick; and loved, the children and teachers singing Happy Birthday to me over my Big Bird cake.

As a mother now, I realize more than ever that it is a parent's job to make a child feel safe. Only under the protective gaze of a loving caretaker can a child trust their surroundings and learn to test the limits of their growing selves. A child is fortunate to have at least one such adult in their life to help them thrive. With any luck they will have a few, and in the best of circumstances, they'll have a community dense with loving, attentive souls.

Wah Mei was the beginning of an educational journey that made me feel held and supported.



From Wah Mei, I moved on to the Chinese Immersion Program at West Portal (which later split to become Alice Fong Yu).

As an adult, I can now realize that both of these programs embraced me as a whole person, without dissecting and categorizing me into parts. My two home languages were taught side by side, and my two cultural identities were modeled with everyday normalcy. Through these programs, appreciating two cultures wasn't something that was unique to my family and families like us, but rather something that all the children and teachers were part of.

I continue to struggle with societal critiques and criticism of my cultural identities. Now, more than ever in my lifetime, voices of hate and intolerance are finding their ways to be heard in America. But I have long held that the racial and cultural intolerance that may find its way directed towards me is a stain on those who issue it, rather than any shame I must bear.

This self-assuredness and resilience is a product of the multicultural educational communities that have held me up over my lifetime – and it all began with a little pink school on the corner of 19th and Judah.

Kelly Wong McGrath graduated Wah Mei School in 1985. She is a San Francisco native and deeply committed to her local community. She works as a nurse practitioner serving clients at a Bayview Hunters Point clinic and volunteers to provide new mother support for women in transitional housing. When she isn't busy cuddling and chasing her two young daughters, she can be found (trying) to knit or read.

In Their Shoes

Wah Mei School continues to increase access to bilingual education through its After School Program. We stopped by to speak to William Wu, an After School Program leader to learn more!

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

William: Growing up, I attended a traditional Chinese school in Chinatown, San Francisco: Nam Kue School. My mom wanted me and my older brother to attend. I attended public schools and graduated from the SFUSD system. I learned English through the public schools.

What brought you to Wah Mei?

I wanted to give back to the community. During my youth, I spent numerous summers in Chinatown Beacon Center and YMCA. I was always looking forward to summer programs because it was fun and there were lots of memories. Being part of a Chinese community was valuable because it gave me a sense of identity and as well as being part of something bigger.

Tell me a little bit about the After School Program.

The After School Program offers elementary school students the ability to learn Chinese - Cantonese and Mandarin. We introduce children to Chinese as well as to help them to develop it, so they can apply at home and when they are outside of Wah Mei. We use enrichment activities to help them learn such as games and drawing.

How does your identity play as an After School Program leader?

I feel like I was once in their shoes. For example, I understand writing Chinese characters is difficult, such as writing my own name. Sometimes, kids express the same thing, saying it is too hard and they want to do other activities. Ultimately, it helps me think of creative ways to make it fun and a good experience for the participants.

What are the benefits of being bilingual?

Being bilingual is very important to me. The most important benefit is that I am able to communicate with my family. My parents are immigrants and they do not understand much English, so my brother and I help them with things like using the web and mail. I am able to use this skill to communicate with my family and understand where they come from and their struggles. It taught me to embrace my Chinese American identity. Having two cultures taught me about perspective because Chinese and American cultures are very different. It taught me to be more understanding because everyone comes from different backgrounds.

What does it mean to be bilingual in today's society?

Being bilingual in today's society is important, because in the United States, there are many immigrants and different languages. Having the skill to communicate with other people is important because I believe you can learn a thing or two from other people and where they come from. It also helps with daily life such as work, going to the grocery store, and ordering food. Being bilingual allows me to help others such as helping people with directions or essentially anything that involves translating.

What do you hope to pass on to the students who attend the program?

Besides learning Chinese, I want kids to learn integrity,

humility, and perseverance. I believe many things have changed since I was in elementary school but these are what I would hope they will get out of it. I think a lot of kids now always want to win or want things their way and they would try really hard to achieve that. I hope they learn that winning and losing is okay and they can learn from both experiences, as well as being a good person outside of Wah Mei, whether it's at home or being with friends. I understand that kids dislike homework and they do not want to do it. I want them to learn to persevere through their homework and whatever they want to accomplish.

What would you like to accomplish in the future with the After School Program?

I would like to build on the program and make the program bigger. I would like to make it bigger because I want to see more children be part of this program and learn another language. This is important because these children will be adults and they can use this language to not only help themselves but also help the community.

For more information about Wah Mei After School Program, email afterschool@wahmei.org. William Wu was born and raised in San Francisco. He recently graduated from University of California, Davis where he studied Economics. In his free time, he enjoys learning about finance. He has a passion for serving others, leading him to obtain an Emergency Medical Technician license as well as being CPR certified, stating, "I want to give back to this world because I am grateful for what the world has given me."

