Interview with Kelley Asamoto
By Katie Cunningham
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Kelley Asamoto (24) lives in Edmonds, Washington. She graduated from Western Washington University with a B.A. in anthropology and works in HR for Tommy Bahama. Her mother is Mexican, and her father is Japanese.

How would you describe yourself? Like, when people ask you, “What are you?” what do you say to them?

Kelley: Oh, that’s easy. I always say I am half Mexican, half Japanese. And that really catches people off-guard, because they’re like, “Half Mexican? You don’t even look Mexican!” That’s the response I get all the time.

Does that bother you?

Kelley: Kind of, just because everybody now is pretty much mixed, for the most part. Just because you don’t look like something doesn’t mean that you’re not. I feel like that comes up a lot, like, “How Mexican are you?”

You say that most everyone is mixed now. So you feel like we live in a world where you have a community of people who are mixed race?

Kelley: Yeah. I feel like now that we’re such a melting pot culture, it’s kind of rare to come across like, “I’m completely one thing.” All of my friends that I can think up off the top of my head are mixed race. So I feel like I’ve grown up in a community that has different types of people. I never felt like an outlier, and I think that was beneficial, growing up.
You think it was beneficial?

**Kelley:** It has affected my view of race and of things in general. I have a more open mind because I grew up with different friends from different cultures. I got to experience different things, not just one thing. Even being mixed race myself, I’ve been able to experience two different cultures and see things from a Hispanic perspective and an Asian perspective, which has been cool! It makes me sad when people don’t get to experience these types of things.

Could you say more about that? Do you have a specific instance of a situation where you felt like, because you have your experience, you were able to act more appropriately?

**Kelley:** I just think that growing up in an environment where I have been exposed to different viewpoints and different cultures has molded me into a person who can view the world with a more open perspective. I approach situations not with a closed mind, but with a very open mind, so I can try to gain perspective from both points of view. That’s helped a lot in school, working with different people, and it’s helped a lot now, especially with my job in HR, because you are exposed to tons of different people from all over the U.S. Even though they might be difficult, you’re trying to get into their head and experience what they’re experiencing and kind of put yourself in their shoes and approach the situation from that. I get a lot of stubborn managers, and I try to understand why they can’t do a specific process correctly, but then when I put myself in their shoes, I’m able to help them and not get angry. So it’s helped from that perspective.

Are there any things that you find particularly difficult about being mixed race?

**Kelley:** One thing that comes up a lot is people asking, “Who do you identify with more?” like you’re expected to pick a side. And I don’t want to pick a side. I’m just like, “I don’t know. What do you mean by that?” One thing I hate, my personal pet peeve, is those data questionnaires that ask you what race you are. They’re just like, “Hispanic, but not anything else,” but that doesn’t apply to me because I’m Asian and Hispanic. But I think that goes back to when they first made these forms, and they didn’t consider Hispanic a race, just an ethnicity, which is really confusing.
Do you think there are things that are particularly exciting or rewarding about being multiracial?

Kelley: Yeah, being able to experience different things—getting to take part in different cultural events from both sides of my heritage, which a lot of people don’t get to take part in—which usually equals more family time. Just being able to take part in all of these cultural events for both sides of my family has solidified our family bonds and our families together, which I think is really important.

Tell me about your family traditions. How are all of your cultures represented (or not represented) in your traditions? Are there any ways that your traditions “blend” or change to adapt to your family?

Kelley: A tradition that I only experience because I am Mexican is Easter. For Easter, all of my non-Mexican friends dye hard-boiled eggs and hide them around, but growing up I always was taught by my mom that you hollow out the eggs, and you fill the eggshell with confetti or money. Once it’s Easter, you go around and hide them and crack them on people’s heads. That whole event is a big family gathering.

On our Japanese side, we have our famous New Year’s dinner with all of our lucky foods. It’s been really fun to see over the years how it’s evolved. We’ve incorporated food from not just the Japanese culture; we have Mexican, Filipino—kind of a melting pot of everything. I don’t really separate it out, like “Oh, this is Japanese, this is Mexican.” I just kind of group it as, “This is spending time with my family, taking part in what I’ve grown up with,” which I’ve enjoyed, and I’m glad that I’ve been able to share it with my friends. I’ve always wanted to include all of my friends and all of my family in these traditions, and it’s fun to share.

Do you feel like being mixed race changes the ways that you relate to communities or your parents’ communities? Do you ever feel out of place?

Kelley: My family is so mixed anyway that I just kind of put us all in the same category. The only kind of difference is when we go to Grandview. It’s a very heavily Hispanic population there, in Eastern Washington, and I don’t look like the most Hispanic person in the world. I’ve never felt uncomfortable with my family, but sometimes I feel like when we go to the grocery store, the people stare. There probably aren’t many Asians there, but it hasn’t really affected me personally. I’ll just brush it off. I never felt
alienated from anybody or any group, and I feel like both my Mexican and Japanese side of the family have all been welcoming.

**What is your family story?**

**Kelley:** Let’s see if I can remember. On my dad’s side of the family, I think it was my grandma’s parents that came from Japan to California. I think my grandma was born here, in California, and then with the internment they got relocated to the Midwest, so that’s how they ended up in Ohio. Dad was born and raised in Ohio, and then after college he did his own thing and ended up in Seattle.

With my mom—her parents came over from Mexico, and they lived in Texas. My mom was born in Texas and then moved to Washington for school, and then my parents met and that’s how me and Ciara arrived. So, really, both of my parents were born in the U.S. Which means they’re American, right? But lots of people would not see them as American and would just assume that they’re fresh off the boat. When we go to the airport, they’re like, “Oh, so are you going back to Korea?” I’m not even Korean!

**Are there any things you want people to know about those who are mixed race?**

**Kelley:** We are just like you. We’re not mysterious! My daughter, Nora, is half white, a quarter Asian, and a quarter Mexican, but just because she’s half white doesn’t mean that she’s going to favor that side. Just because she’s a quarter Mexican doesn’t make her any less Mexican than a person who’s full Mexican. She can experience the same things, and that side of her can be just as important as her other sides. I just want people to know, just because I may not look Mexican doesn’t mean that I don’t appreciate my heritage of being Mexican.

**Do you think that, because you are multiracial, you will be especially able to help Nora sort through things when she is growing up?**

**Kelley:** Yeah, growing up multiracial and taking many classes in social sciences having to do with race has exposed me to issues that arise when a young kid might be confused about what they are, or what they “should be.” It’s been really beneficial, and I’ll be able to guide Nora, like, “Hey, yes, you’re white, but you’re also Mexican and Japanese, and here are some of the things that we do.” We’ll be able to expose her to all sides, and I’ll be able to put myself in her shoes. If she feels like she’s not white enough or something

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like that, I can kind of guide her, like, “You don’t have to be white, you are what you are.” Having experienced it myself, it will just be so much easier to help her through—if she has an identity crisis. Hopefully, she doesn’t have an identity crisis.

I think eventually, that whole race issue will—well, I don’t think it’ll ever go away unless we’re all the same color, but I think with more people coming into the U.S., more people mixing, that it’ll eventually get a lot better. And it won’t be as highly contentious a topic.