Max Cukurs (17) and Emily Cukurs (20) live in Meridian, Idaho. Their father is Latvian and Korean, and their mother is Filipino. They also have three siblings: Jacob, Nathan, and Tony.

This is sort of a precursor for the Smithsonian-wide “Our American Journey” project, which looks at immigration stories. What are your family immigration stories?

Emily: I know how our grandpa got here. He was escaping, because Russia had a communist government, and it crept into Latvia. My grandpa didn’t want anything to do with it, so he took him, his sister, his mother, maybe a couple other people...

Max: And there was like a baby along with them, I think.

Emily: And a baby, and a fishing boat, and they escaped to Sweden, and then they got to the U.S. The president figured out about it, and he wanted to invite our grandfather to dine with him. He got to eat dinner, and there was a newspaper article about it. I think it was more geared toward convincing America how welcoming the U.S. government was to immigrants.

I know my grandma on the Filipino side had a harder time getting over here. The reason they could immigrate was because of our mom’s aunts, Grandma Esther and Grandma Emma. Our Grandma Esther was a professor at a university, and our Grandma Emma was a chemist, and so our grandma had to go talk to the representative for the U.S. at the Philippines. What the government wanted to do was first send the kids there and then the mom. But our grandma was like, “No, my husband just died, and I do not want to have to separate my kids from me.” So, they were able to do that. That’s how they got here.

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How do you describe yourself?

Max: I would say that I was mixed. But I would probably emphasize that I was Asian, because I take pride in being Asian. My Asian side has more prominence in entertainment and in the singers and celebrities that I like.

Emily: I’d say Filipino, Korean, then Latvian, because I know more about my Filipino heritage than any of the other ones, and I know my Korean grandma. I identify myself as Asian because I know my Asian family.

Do you think that being “mixed race” is an important part of who you are? Would you feel differently if you were, for instance, full Asian?

Max: I’ve never really thought about the importance of being mixed. I’ve always thought that if I were full Korean, or full Filipino, that that would be so cool. But I guess I’d probably be really stereotyped if I were “full” something, and I feel like I would be in a clique or something if I were one race. Being mixed, I feel like I have more of a mindset to be with anyone, and just be diverse and talk to everyone, not just certain people.

Emily: Yeah, I think it definitely makes me more accepting. As a small example, I am able to accept more things, especially with food, because I was raised with rice, kimchi, all those things. It kind of shows when my mom goes shopping in order to buy all of the fun food, which is hard, especially in Idaho, and you’re able to share it with friends, like, “Oh, you want to try something else?”

Max: Yeah. And I think being multiracial makes us be able to be more excited about our culture. There are so many new things to learn about, and we can explore and compare one tradition with another tradition, and how it relates with you. And I feel like, for people who aren’t multiracial, it’s just like, how things have been. They think of it as a normal thing. We can maybe appreciate it more.

Are there ever situations where you feel like it’s difficult to be mixed race?

Max: Yeah, because I look at my full Korean friends as more authentic, like the real thing, and I feel like I’m not enough, and I can’t measure up, no matter what. And I can’t speak the language, but even if I could, I’d feel like there would be a boundary, even though I shouldn’t, because we’re just people. Still, having the mindset of not being full, and them being full creates a boundary already, even if I don’t want there to be one.

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Emily: I’ve never felt negative attention from anybody. No one ever brings it up, especially at school, so there’s no reason for me to feel like I’m brought down. It’s nice when people notice my race, though. People at work ask me what race I am, and because I feel like I don’t know much about my race, I’ll say, “white.” But then they’re like, “No, you’re Asian. I can tell on your face.” I guess if anyone’s doing the putting down, it might be me, because like Max said, I don’t feel like I know enough about it to claim that I’m Asian.

How does your family celebrate traditions? Do both cultures “blend” in your family traditions or do they stay separate?

Max: Food is a big part of it. If we have a Filipino party, my dad will have kimchi or add some Asian marinade in the meat, and that’s not Filipino. Seeing other races besides Korean enjoying that is pretty cool. I’m trying to think of something besides food.

Emily: Well, I know that we did dances.

Max: Dances?

Emily: Yeah, remember the FilAm dances we used to do? It’s not really so much combining the two ethnicities. It’s more to keep Filipino tradition in our minds, so that the Filipino people can share with their kids what they had to do. I know Jacob [my brother] got to do the tinikling.

Max: The people who performed weren’t even full Filipino. Some of them aren’t Filipino; some of them are white...

Emily: They typically were the husband.

Max: They like to participate in and learn in the culture, and support the tradition of those dances.

Emily: We also got to mix in with hip-hop, too.

Max: Yeah. So, mixing genre-wise, I guess.

That’s really cool. So it’s preserving the entirety of the tradition and making sure that you keep the integrity of the tradition also—like bringing in other influences, but they don’t degrade anything.
Max: Yeah. Having a white person in the Filipino dance isn’t a bad thing. It won’t, like, affect it. It’s like, “Oh, that’s cool that they...”

Emily: Joined, and wanted to help.