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# Flag of our fathers

Tens of thousands of abandoned Filipino Amerasians have grown up in poverty and under a cloud of shame. Now that the United States is pivoting towards Asia once again, the fear is that history will repeat itself, writes Sunshine Lichauco de Leon



ACTIVISTS IN MANILA PROTEST AGAINST UNITED STATES MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE PHILIPPINES IN MAY LAST YEAR. PHOTOS: AFP; CORBIS; GUARDIAN NEWS & MEDIA; RAISSA ROBLES

They call them "Amerasians" - a throwback to a time when America had soldiers based in the Philippines, and some of those soldiers had local girlfriends.

Most of their mothers worked as "bar girls" near the sprawling American naval and air force bases. When the troops returned to the United States 20 years ago, they left behind the product of their liaisons with these women: thousands of infants who would grow up never knowing their fathers. Many were also abandoned by their mothers, who were financially unable or too ashamed to keep them.

Now, this generation is starting to find its voice, after a lifetime of discrimination, bullying and worse. These "second-class" citizens are concerned that with America once again taking a close interest in the Pacific and likely to rotate soldiers through the Philippines as part of its "pivot to Asia", history may be about to repeat itself.

Most Amerasians - an estimated 52,000 were fathered by Americans during the military association with the country - grew up in extreme poverty. They experienced intense discrimination for being "illegitimate", mixed race or the children of prostitutes. Many were unable to finish high school, lacked the skills to find work or were denied jobs because of their skin colour.

Michelle Zavala Nunag, 28, says: "People assume that if you're Amerasian your mother worked in a bar - and that you will be just like her." Working in a bar, in the Philippines, can be a euphemism for prostitution.

"Black Amerasians" - those fathered by African-American servicemen - suffered the most. Brenda Moreno, 43, does not know the name of either of her parents. As a child, she hid at home because she felt ashamed. Moreno says: "They always call me 'nigger'. When I was younger I told everyone I wanted to change my blood so I could

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be white."

Forced to leave school at the age of 10, she feels imprisoned by the circumstances of her birth: "I can't find a good job because I can't go to school. I am just always working as a housemaid," she says. "How can I change my life? I am just trying my best."



Anthony Dizon.

2010 study by Dr Peter Kutschera, director of the Philippine Amerasian Research Institute, concluded: "The clear majority of Amerasians live in abject poverty, including high incidence of joblessness or underemployment, homelessness or housing insecurity, alcohol, drug or familial abuse, identity confusion, unresolved grief issues over the loss of their fathers, social isolation and low self-esteem."

The US administration of Barack Obama has made it clear it considers Asia its pre-eminent strategic consideration, and it is expected that more US warships will pass through Subic Bay, the site of the former US naval base a few hours north of Manila, as America seeks to bolster and utilise its traditional alliances in the region.

"It's not good," says Moreno, adding that she is worried "there will be more of them in the bar. And more Amerasians."

Second-generation Amerasian Jennifer Stephen, 27, feels forgotten by both the US and Philippine governments: "I am not against US troops - I just think the Philippine government should come up with an agreement that they have to be responsible for what they are doing."

Many Amerasians dream of finding their fathers and going to America, a land they believe can offer them birthrights, opportunity and acceptance. Dizon says: "I dream to touch the sun of America because there, we belong."

Emmanuel Drewery longed to see and be acknowledged by his American father, who had abandoned him as a child. "I pinpointed his location in Florida, where he had retired from the air force and was active in church. I got his phone number, but when I was about to dial, I stopped," he tells *Post Magazine*. Drewery says he realised he no longer needed his father to acknowledge him.

Now aged 25, Drewery - who bears his father's surname - says he has moved on and has dedicated himself to helping others do the same: "I want them to change their mindset and not pin their hopes on the American dream. [I want] to help them realise they can stand on their own."



Emmanuel Drewery.

For those still intent on finding their father, though, US legislation is a formidable obstacle. In 1982, the US Congress passed the Amerasian immigration act, giving preferential immigration status to Amerasian children born during the Vietnam war in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The Philippines remains forgotten. The only way a Filipino-Amerasian can become a US citizen is if their father claims them - but most don't even know their father's name.

"War sometimes has unexpected consequences," says Emma Rossi Landi, co-producer of *Left by the Ship*, a documentary about Filipino Amerasians that examines their fight for respect within a bigger geopolitical picture. "Why do women and children pay the biggest price of global politics?" she asks, referring to the plight of "children who are left behind, whose lives are shaped by the situation they were born into, which they could not avoid and are not responsible for".

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With the re-election of a mixed-race US president, many Amerasians feel this is a good time to fight for their rights. "We are hoping there will be a discussion even just to open the issue," says Aida Santos, managing director of WeDpro, the NGO that has helped Amerasians form advocacy group United Philippine Amerasians. "There are more Amerasians than the eye can see. They need shelter, education, training, jobs."

NGO People's Recovery Empowerment Development Assistance (Preda Foundation) has tried to meet some of those needs. In 1992, Preda filed and lost a class-action suit against the US government in the Court of International Complaints in Washington on the basis that "we sent out the [military] bases but they left all the children behind", says Irish priest and Preda president Shay Cullen.

"We have been able to educate 60 to 70 [mixed-race] children. Many of them did very good. We lost a few. I was able to hire about 15, including Emmanuel [Drewery]," Cullen says, adding that Drewery placed seventh in the state board exams for social workers and is now pursuing a masters degree in administration.

Despite the US military withdrawal, the problem of abandoned mixed-race children has become even worse in recent years, Father Cullen says.

"Today, with sex tourism, the bar women, when they get pregnant they don't know who the guy is. In the US navy days, it was easier to tell because most were not one-night stands. Most of them lived together for weeks and years. They knew their man.

"Now, it's very hard to identify if the father is American, European, Japanese or Korean. We have children fathered by Japanese on sex tours. We are helping one boy like that," he says.

Says Drewery: "I am very, very angry whenever I see sex tourists because they bear no responsibility for their actions."

The same can be said for many a long-departed US serviceman.

#### Guardian News & Media

*Additional reporting by Raissa Robles*

### LEFT BEHIND

## Father figuring

**Ashley Descalier's** mother, who met her American military father while working in a bar, left her daughter with relatives at birth. Half African-American, Ashley (right) remembers a childhood fraught with discrimination: "They would tell me I am ugly because my skin is dark; I was always crying when I got home."

Dropping out of school at the age of 10 and pregnant at 16, she found herself stepping into the cycle she had been born into: "I worked [as a prostitute] in a bar for three years. I did not have a choice - I do not have an education and I had to earn money for my son. I thought maybe it's our destiny. Sometimes it was hard - I really needed money so I forced myself to go with them."

But now she says she is one of the lucky ones. Her father, whom she had only known by name, contacted her through Facebook and is now trying to get the documentation to be reunited with his daughter and grandson. She says: "I asked him if he [would] accept me as his daughter and if I could call him Dad and he said yes. I couldn't stop crying. I really wanted to hug him."

**Jennifer Stephen** (right), 27, is a second-generation Amerasian. Her grandfather was a black US air force pilot, her grandmother a Filipina working in a bar near the Clark Air Base during the 1960s.

Poverty led her black-Amerasian mother to work in a bar at the age of 14 and by 15 she was pregnant - Jennifer's father was a white American air force pilot whose name her mother never knew. Jennifer says: "When I was younger, I thought I would end up working in a bar." She recalls the pain of a childhood in which she was teased for her skin colour and where she came from: "When they see



you are Amerasian, they say you are bad. I once punched a classmate because he told the whole class my mom was a prostitute. They told me I was a mushroom - just popped out from nothing."

She wishes people would see Amerasians as human beings: "It's not our fault being in this situation. You have to understand that we, too, have feelings. We, too, feel pain."

**Kevin Bardos** is one of the few Filipino Amerasians who know the name of their father - his is a US air force pilot from Texas, who, he says, knew about him: "My father even gave me my name - he and my mother exchanged letters until she was three months pregnant, then he stopped writing."

Now 22, Bardos finished high school and dreams of finding the money to attend college. He admits life has been easier for him as a white Amerasian. "I was always voted as president or as a leader in school because they think my colour makes me a person who can manage."

But the sting of abandonment lingers. "I have not looked for my father because he never looked for me," he says. "It's not my job - if he wants to see me, he has my address."

He adds: "And if I ever did see him, I would ask him one question. Why? Why did you not come back and find me?"

**Guardian News & Media**

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