

Minoru Yasui - Refugee and Immigrant Experiences

“You broke the ocean in half to be here. Only to meet, nothing that wants you.” This quote was written by poet and artist, Navvrihah Waheed which, Prerna Lal, an author and immigration attorney reposted on her website. This summarizes the experience that undocumented immigrants had when they first immigrated, one of them being Prerna Lal. Prerna Lal was born in Lautoka, Fiji on December 14th, 1984 and attended Primary and Secondary School in Fiji. A few years later in 2000, Fiji was dethroned in a militant coup. Experiencing this, Prerna’s family made a decision that would change Prerna’s life in a completely new direction. They decided to emigrate to the United States. At the time, Prerna’s grandmother was a U. S. citizen. So, her family applied for permanent resident status through her grandmother. While the application took a decade to get through, Prerna and her family became undocumented immigrants in the United States of America. Prerna graduated high school as an undocumented immigrant in 2002 and since she was not certified in any type of financial aid for college, she worked for a cleaning business her family had started. Subsequently, Prerna got a Bachelor’s in Arts and a Master’s in International Relations from San Francisco State University. Afterward, Prerna enrolled in The George Washington University Law School and graduated in 2013. She was the Communications Director and founder in a website called DreamActivist. In addition, she was an important member of the DREAM Act Movement in 2008 and 2009. In addition, she was the Communications Director and founder of DreamActivist, and she served on the Steering Committee of United We Dream. Now, Prerna Lal has established a firm called LalLegal and has written several books. She continues to help more and more people like herself (Lal)(Lal).

One of the movements that Prerna Lal took a big part in was Dream Activist. Dream Activist was launched in 2008 by 5 undocumented minors. One of those 5 undocumented minors

being Prerna Lal. They created this website for undocumented immigrants to come together to defend themselves and stop the country from defining them as illegal. It slowly became the biggest site from undocumented minors to visit. Till this day, undocumented minors are contacting each other through this website. Prerna Lal also took part in the Dream Act Movement which started in 2001. The Dream stands for Development, Relief, Education, Alien Minors Act. The Dream Act Movement was an effort to try to grant temporary conditional residency and the right to work to undocumented minor immigrants who entered the United States of America. Prerna Lal was also majorly associated with the United We Dream group; in fact, she was the part of the Steering Committee. United We Dream is a group that emancipates undocumented immigrants to speak up, “fight for justice and dignity for immigrants and all people” (“About United”).

Prerna Lal faced many challenges through her journey, fighting for the undocumented youth. But, one of the main challenges she faced was that she identified herself as lesbian. People looked at her differently, some in a good way, but many others looked at her negatively. When others in her community found out, they neglected her, and she responded with determination. Determination to stop the world from thinking like this. She didn't have any support from anyone she knew, which made the impact on her stronger. She neglected herself, and she said this famous quote: “Once bitten, twice shy”. In fact, she also said that all the medals, awards, certificates, and fame she got weren't from hard work. “They are a consequence of burying my pain”, she says on her website. But, after this she realized something important, that hiding the best part of ourselves gets rid of our humanity. If I were to “build bridges” to help newcomers to this country face the challenges presented to them, I would do it by supporting the immigrants financially and mostly, emotionally. The neglect nonimmigrants would give these

people would be endless and that would affect them deeply. Instead of supplying these people with money, I would give them jobs. So, they would work for their money and use it wisely instead of greedily using the money given gratefully to them. I would also make sure that these people understand and can speak English. Hopefully, given the circumstances that they would face in this new country, they would be able to make a living that they would enjoy (Lal).

While Minoru Yasui and Prerna Lal have their differences, they also do have several similarities. At some point in both of their lives, they faced financial difficulties. For Prerna Lal, when she entered the United States of America, her family and herself were suffering from some financial difficulties. That led them to starting a cleaning business and working from there. For Minoru Yasui, when he returned from Chicago to Hood River to report for military duty, he was arrested for becoming an enemy alien and he had his assets frozen. Afterwards, Minoru Yasui opened a private practice in Portland to help Japanese Americans. Although Minoru Yasui's financial problems weren't as evident, both activists did have problems such as these throughout their journey. Both activists were lawyers and opened their own law firms. Both activists were also recognized by President Barack Obama. Minoru Yasui had gotten the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama. President Obama had recognized Prerna Lal in 2007 about her attempts to give freedom to undocumented immigrants. One of the main differences between Minoru Yasui and Prerna Lal is Minoru Yasui was born in the United States and wasn't an immigrant while Prerna Lal was born in Fiji and was an immigrant. Another difference is that Minoru Yasui was arrested multiple times while Prerna Lal hasn't been arrested. One other difference between them is that Prerna Lal mostly spread the word through the internet while Minoru Yasui spread the word and fought in-person. This could be affected because of the period

they were alive in. Both Minoru Yasui and Prerna Lal are different in their unique ways (Densho Encyclopedia).

Like Minoru Yasui, Prerna Lal is an inspiring activist who is slowly changing the world for the better. She continues to write more about these topics in her book: *Unsung America*. The book is about fighting for undocumented immigrants and their freedom. Hopefully, in the near future we will experience these changes and fight for our freedom. Minoru Yasui once said, “If we believe in America. If we believe in equality and democracy. If we believe in law and justice. Then each of us, when we see or believe errors are being made, has the obligation to make every effort to correct them (Minoru Yasui).

Works Cited

"About United We Dream." *United We Dream | The Large Immigrant Youth-Led Community*, 2018,

unitedwedream.org/about/.

Densho Encyclopedia. 2021, encyclopedia.densho.org/.

Lal, Prerna. "Lal Legal." *Lal Legal*, Prerna Lal, 2018, lallegal.com/.

---. "Prerna Lal." *Prerna Lal*, 2021, prernalal.com/.

Minoru Yasui Legacy Project. 2020, www.minoruyasuilegacy.org/.