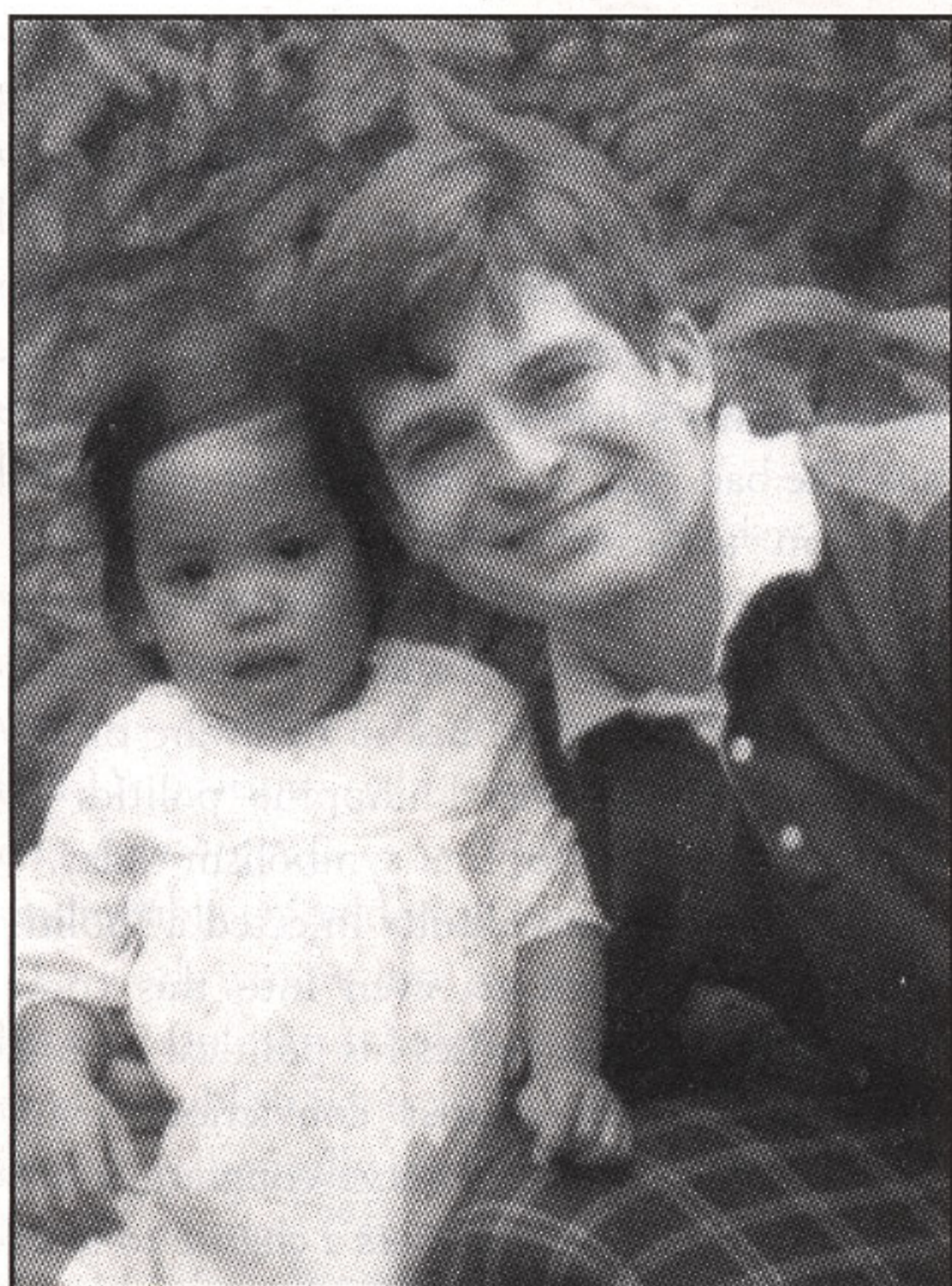


**In the Same Boat: Having met when they were five years old, Sharon Cuartero (left) and Lorial Crowder founded the Filipino Adoptees Network, a forum where other Filipino adoptees can share experiences similar to theirs.**

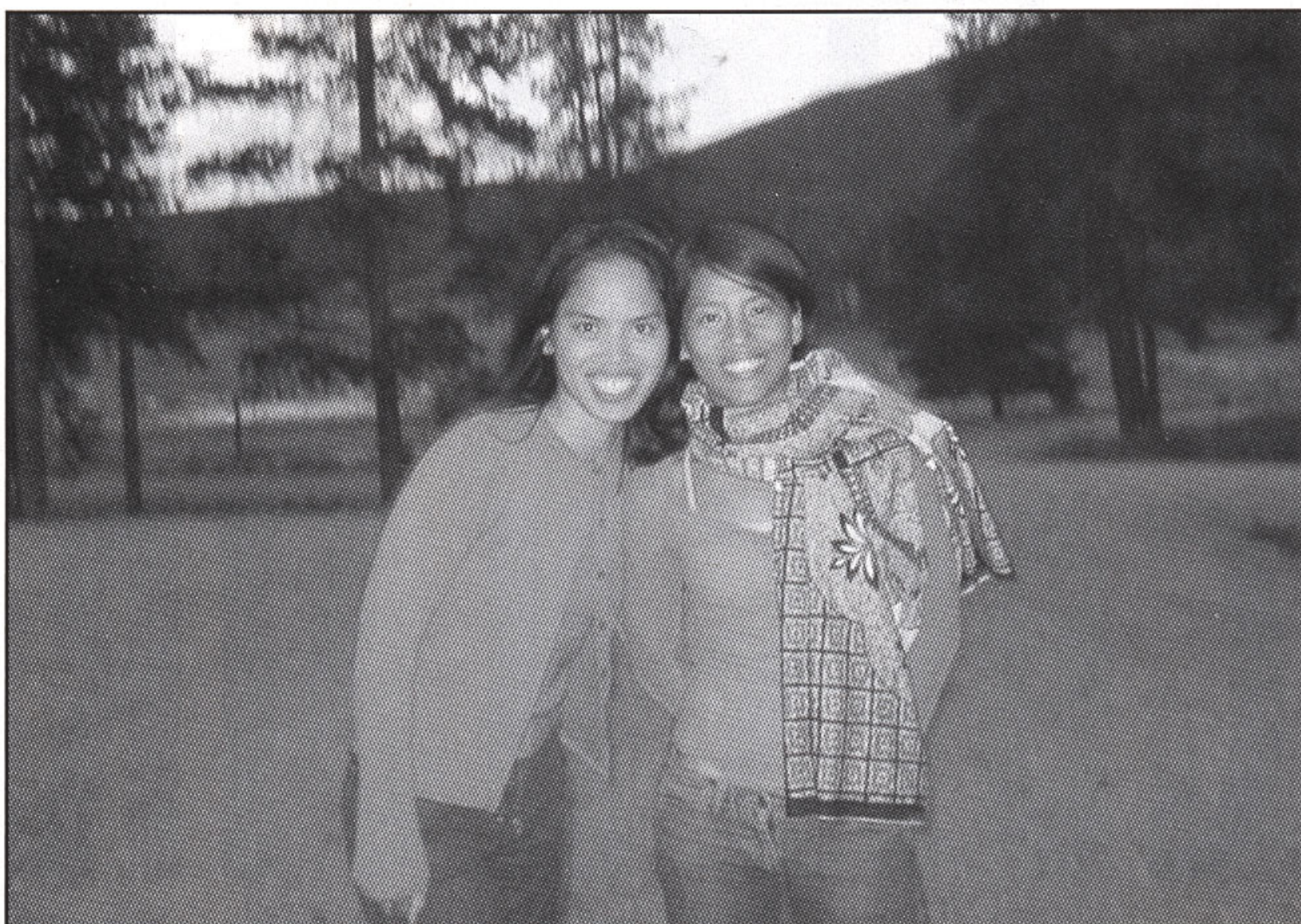
Sharon Cuartero was 14 when she visited Manila's largest garbage dump. Smokey Mountain was a reminder of former President Ferdinand Marcos' disregard for the poor, a 30-acre dumping site where over 60,000 people lived and worked, scavenging mounds of trash as high as buildings for items to resell. After reading an article on it in the U.S., she decided it was the only place in the Philippines she wanted to see.

"You want to go where?" her taxi driver asked, incredulously. "Are you crazy?" Surrounded by miles-long clouds of smoke, the fumes from the garbage piles were almost unbearable. Cuartero's suburban-Connecticut mom sank into her seat in the taxi, trying to keep herself from screaming.

Born in the Philippines and adopted by a Jewish American family at the age of two,



**Happier Times: The search for her "true" identity has left Cuartero estranged from her adoptive father, David Goldwasser, who she remembers as a loving parent during her childhood (circa 1979).**



## *Unfinished Lives*

By Lisa Wong Macabasco

*Questioning the true nature of their adoptions, two Filipino Americans are searching their past for much needed answers.*

Cuartero returned to her homeland as a teenager to search for answers. She found only more questions. She wondered, if she hadn't been adopted, could she have been one of these children running naked among the broken glass on the ground? Could her birth mother be here, making her livelihood by hawking salvaged goods from the rubbish?

"My view of the world changed that day," she later wrote in a high school essay. "Third world poverty was no longer a story I read in the newspaper. It was real. It existed."

The memory of Smokey Mountain and the dilapidated state of the country of her birth still haunts Cuartero, now 28. She's hoping to share both her good and bad experiences with other Filipino adoptees living in the U.S. through the Filipino Adoptees Network, which she launched last January with her childhood friend and fellow adoptee Lorial Crowder. Both were adopted in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of the first wave of adoptees from the Philippines. The International Alliance for Children, a Connecticut-based private agency specializing in adoptions from the Philippines, placed Cuartero and Crowder—as well as approximately 250 other adoptees from 1970 until the agency closed in 1998—with suburban Connecticut families.

In 2004, the U.S. issued 196 visas to orphans from the Philippines, which has been consistently among the top 15 sender countries of transnational adoptees since 1990. The early wave of Filipino adoptees is now coming of age and building a presence alongside well-established Chinese and Korean adoptee groups. Their experiences point to a darker, more complicated view of the international adoptee story and have sparked a new movement for post-adoption resources organized by adult adoptees instead of adoptive parents.

### **All-American Girl**

Cuartero grew up in an upper-class suburb of central Connecticut, thinking she was a white Jewish American girl, uninterested in her Filipino heritage. "I was a Goldwasser," she says, referring to her maiden name. "I was a hamburger and hot dog kind of girl." But around age 12, she started to wonder about her identity and where she came from. In sixth grade, her Hebrew teacher asked if she was a foreign exchange student, with her long wavy black hair and brown skin. "Maybe I do stick out in synagogue," she remembers thinking.

Her mother brought her back to visit the Philippines at 14, which opened up a lot of wounds and prompted her to question who

she really was. She longed to know the truth behind her adoption. Her family had always given her a vague back-story: her mother was poor and couldn't raise her. Later, upon visiting the hospital, she was shocked to find that the hospital barred her mother from taking her home because she could not pay the hospital bill. She has found no answers from the Philippine government about its policy toward poor mothers at the time, but her anger continues to this day. Her story of "fishy circumstances" surrounding her adoption is a common one, says Cuartero, and many Filipino adoptees' stories raise questions about whether the birth parents' rights were violated.

Cuartero's search for her past created a rift in her entire family that is only beginning to heal. Her adoptive mother struggled the most, and they had many battles during her teen years. "My mother felt threatened, like her parenting wasn't good enough," Cuartero says. Their relationship was distant until the past few years when they began to talk again. Her mom, a housewife, has shown interest in the adoptees' network, as have her older brother and younger sister, neither of whom were adopted. With time and the launch of the network, she has grown closer to her whole family except for her adoptive father, a Nike executive who lives with her mother in Oregon. While he was a loving father when she was growing up, he didn't know how to handle her teen years. They had no communication for a while and are still strangers today. "I don't know how to start the relationship again," Cuartero says.

As a young adult, Cuartero had difficulty getting close to anyone. She warned all the boys in high school that she would leave them before they would leave her—and she did. She acknowledges she didn't want the feeling of being abandoned. When she eventually found someone, she made sure he was the right one with a six-year engagement. Now married for four years, her Dominican-Spanish husband still doesn't completely know what she's going through. Although supportive, he's never been to a Third World country and always took for granted that he knew both his parents. After

bouncing around different community colleges, then dropping out to do administrative work for a few years, Cuartero is finishing a degree in English through online classes at a local Connecticut college and fixing up her home in her free time. While she hopes to pursue a technical writing career, she's still trying to settle into her life and coming to terms with her past.

## Reconnecting

In 2004, Cuartero was Googling for information on Filipino adoptees when she stumbled upon Lorial Crowder's name. The two had become friends at age five through their Connecticut adoption agency, but had lost touch since childhood. Crowder was

Her parents were always supportive of her curiosity about her heritage, which made her search easier. "I don't feel like I'm being a traitor if I'm curious about learning about my past," she says. Her interest in international adoption has taken her around the world, most recently to Dublin where she attended a conference on the topic.

After reconnecting through the Internet, Crowder told Cuartero she had been looking for a partner to help establish a web organization, but couldn't find anyone to help; Cuartero jumped at the chance. Both believe it's time for an organization run by and for Filipino adoptees instead of by adoptive parents.

"It's a safe space to share experiences and ask questions, to know there are others out there who you share a common connection with," Cuartero says.

Cuartero's teenage-through-young-adult years were the most difficult of her life, and making things worse was that she knew no other Filipino adoptees and faced all those issues alone. "I want to create a support system for all those who went through what I went through," she says, adding that she hopes to turn her writings about her adoption experience into a book someday.

Mark Kunkel, a 29-year-old Los Angeles resident and Filipino adoptee who met Cuartero and Crowder through the Internet, believes that while discussion involving all parties in the adoption process is useful, it's important to have a space and a forum that's only for adoptees. Kunkel looks forward to taking the conversation off-line as well.

"We are all connected in this certain way, however, we've never met in person," he says. "At the least, we would have a lot to talk about."

Cuartero and Crowder continue to be a support for each other. "Almost like a family," Cuartero says. They're thinking of a conference for Filipino adoptees in the U.S., a gathering not only for adoptees, but also for adoptive families, parents and siblings. At times both feel like outsiders in the Filipino



**Part of the Family: Crowder's family is supportive of her desire to connect with her heritage, but she has no plans of finding her birth mother. With her brothers Edward (left) and Bruce, mom Julie and father Robert in 1983.**

adopted when she was five by a Yale psychology professor and his wife who already had two sons of their own. She rejected her Filipino heritage until she was in high school, thinking that if she expressed any interest in it, she would be sent back to the Philippines. But today she embraces her ancestry as well as the culture she was raised in.

"I always wanted to claim being Filipina and was also very WASP-y," said Crowder, 28. "I can be very WASP-y. I grew up eating meat and potatoes, no rice at all."

American community.

## Claiming Their Heritage

"I've been invited to some Filipino functions, but I feel so out of place," says Cuartero, who is less interested in Filipino culture than her own personal past. "I don't have the kinship everyone seems to have, so I avoid going to them." Even Crowder, who has become involved in many Filipino American community groups, still faces prejudice for not knowing Tagalog. "When I meet Filipino people and when I speak to them with my American accent, people can be cruel," she says.

Both have mixed feelings on how international adoption is practiced, and both urge adoptive families to educate their children on all aspects of their homeland, good and bad. Cuartero's family doesn't know anything about Filipino culture, while Crowder's well-educated, well-traveled parents understand racial differences more than the average family. Cuartero criticizes some Filipino adoptee heritage camps, where parents and children attend cultural classes organized by Filipino Americans, for portraying only the "touristy, uplifting side of Filipino culture," not the whole picture.

"You run into parents who only want to learn about the Philippines from arm's

length," says Crowder. "They mean well, but they're missing the point. You have to make a connection to our heritage, and not just acknowledge it, but also absorb it, every aspect of it, and also understand the relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines."

Crowder obliquely refers to the country's 300 years as a Spanish colony followed by another five decades as an American colony, both of which remain strong influences there today. The overwhelming majority of the population is Catholic, which means that in the face of extreme poverty and corruption, most choose to bear their crosses instead of working for change. The country has also been exporting a large percentage of the population to work abroad, further crippling the domestic economy. If parents fail to educate their children on their heritage, Crowder says, the result is adoptees who are either whitewashed or who have made cultural connections independent of their adoptive parents.

Crowder's parents exposed her to developing countries on family vacations, preparing her for what she eventually found when she visited the Philippines after graduating from college. She discovered that her birth mother planned to put her up for adoption before she was born—she still had her umbilical cord attached when she was taken away to the

orphanage. Unlike Cuartero, Crowder was never interested in finding her birth mother. "I never saw the benefits," she says. "If I was to list any, it would be genetics. I'd like to know what she passed on to me."

Cuartero's search for her past is a frustrating series of dead ends. Last year Cuartero searched for the foster parents who cared for her before she was adopted and who supposedly knew her birth mother. She even got a friend who was visiting the country to deliver a letter to them. The news came back that both foster parents had passed away. She cried for a week.

"You get all these hopes," she says. "But how do you grieve for someone you don't remember?" She says the hardest part of running the network is talking to young people looking for their birth parents and facing old feelings that are brought up. Today she has concluded that she won't find her birth parents. "They were so poor, and they left false addresses," she says. She's still working on being at peace with that. At least she knows she's not alone. ■

*Lisa Wong Macabasco is a student at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City. Originally from San Francisco, she has written for the San Francisco Bay Guardian, AsianWeek and Hyphen.*



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