

The Legacy of Susan Ahn Cuddy

by Evelyn Lee

Have you ever heard of Patsy Mink? Kristi Yamaguchi? You've probably heard of Kamala Harris. These are three examples of Asian women who have immigrated to the U.S. or are descendants of immigrants. They have shaped our nation and will undoubtedly go down in history if they haven't already. But this isn't about them. There are so many Asian women immigrants or descendants of immigrants who are not known to the general American public even though their accomplishments have impacted the nation. One Korean American woman's story stands out. Susan Ahn Cuddy is a pioneer who broke many barriers and made paths for other Asian women.

Before we learn about Ahn Cuddy, we must know about her parents. Dosan Ahn Chang-Ho and Helen Lee Hye-ryeon were very well-known pioneers and freedom fighters in Korea. They both fought for Korea's independence during the Japanese colonization. Ahn and Lee left Korea in 1902 and arrived in California to pursue a better education. When they settled, they supported the Korean American community, which began growing since the first wave of Korean immigrants in 1903. Ahn and Lee became the first Koreans to legally immigrate to the U.S. as a married couple. Dosan Ahn Chang-Ho had still been working hard and fighting for Korea until he was arrested and tortured by the Japanese which ultimately led to his death in 1938.

Susan Ahn Cuddy was born in 1915 and was the oldest daughter of Ahn and Lee. When her father died, Ahn Cuddy wanted to honor his memory and help Korea fight the Japanese. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, she felt a sense of duty to help, so she applied into WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). She was rejected the first time because of her race. Undaunted, Ahn Cuddy reapplied and this time was accepted! She worked harder than ever during training and assignments. Her determination was quickly noticed by one of her superiors who recommended her to officer training school. Ahn Cuddy attended a 90-day training course and was commissioned as a WAVES officer, becoming the first Asian American woman to become an officer in the U.S. Navy. But she wasn't stopping after this achievement. She worked as hard as ever and was sent to gunnery school where she graduated and became a gunnery officer. Ahn Cuddy was the first female gunnery officer in the U.S. Navy. She then transferred to the Office of Naval Intelligence as an elite

codebreaker and became the first Korean American in the U.S. Naval Intelligence. She dedicated her life to support her country by fighting against the Japanese and becoming an important figure in the Navy. She broke barriers and persevered against racism even though she was born in the U.S. and a rightful citizen.

Learning about Susan Ahn Cuddy's story made me wonder how many of these unknown heroes have been forgotten in history, and that there are a lot of opportunities to educate the public about them. Her story is only one out of an infinite number of stories about Asian women immigrants who helped shape our nation, but I chose her because I could relate to her. I am also the daughter of Korean immigrants, and I had family who went through the horrific Japanese colonization. My great-grandmother was born during the colonization. She and her family were living in constant fear of their lives until the Japanese surrendered. She was fluent in both Japanese and Korean since the Japanese did not allow Koreans to speak their native language. They were only allowed to learn and speak Japanese. She secretly learned Korean through her family and neighbors. Many Koreans did this because they felt more comfortable speaking their native language and did not want it to be forgotten, as preserving the language is a huge part of maintaining a country's cultural identity.

The U.S. was built by immigrants, like Susan Ahn Cuddy, who brought their unique cultures and experiences with them. This is what makes our country rich in diversity. She, alongside other Asian immigrants and their descendants, helped shape our nation in our 250 years of history. She truly was a role model for all women and fought against racism towards Asians. At a time when Asians were looked down upon, it was incredible to have an Asian woman in the Navy representing us. She paved the way for other Asian immigrants and showed how women can be just as good as men. Ahn Cuddy is a pioneer and a hero for all, and I hope to share her amazing story through my writing.

Sources:

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