

Identity, Control, and Togetherness: IVRPD Brings APIDA Community Together with Heritage Month Celebration

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On May 19 in Little Acorn Park, Isla Vista Recreation & Park District hosted the APIDA Heritage Month Celebration event. Approximately one hundred people attended the showcase of Asian Pacific Islander Desi American culture, with seven tabling organizations and performances from SS805, Iaorana Te Otea, UC Santa Barbara Taara, imKENNETHY, and Jomch.

“I saw a lot of smiles today,” said singer-songwriter Jomch, an alias for Josh Chan, a third-year political science major at UC Santa Barbara (UCSB). “I feel like this community really needs events like these: just bring us out and give us a reason to come together. And it was just nice seeing all my friends in one place.”

“Growing up, I would rarely see someone that looks like me—someone who is Asian American—performing up on stage or even get celebrated at all,” Chan, who is Filipino American, added. “So it’d be cool if I can play that role for someone else down the generation.”

Free food was provided by Naan Stop, Farm Cart Organics, and Kin Bakeshop, the latter selling brioche donuts, strawberry mochi donuts, and black sesame mochi donuts, all for \$2.50 apiece.

“Kin is an idea that came about during the pandemic, experimenting with baking and, as a pandemic hobby, grew into something bigger,” Stephen Kim, a second-year Writing & Literature major at UCSB and a barista at Kin Bakeshop, said. “We really want to be able to provide a product that isn’t just, you know, cobbled together from the cheapest things that we can find but really is something that reflects the amount of love that we’re putting into it.”

Jessica Arnold, a third-year environmental studies major at UCSB and a fellow barista at Kin Bakeshop, found togetherness in the donuts and in the event.

“As an Asian woman, I think that there being a period of time within the year that Asian Americans can celebrate their heritage is really important, especially in a white-dominated town,” she said.

For members of UCSB Taara, an all-female Bollywood fusion dance team that has competed and won awards across the United States, the group and the event introduced Desi culture to a larger audience.

“Because we’re always performing somewhere else, I’ve noticed that a lot of people here don’t really know who we are,” Sunaina Karunakaran, a second-year financial mathematics and statistics major and the finance chair of UCSB Taara, said. “So just being able to perform here and show everyone what we have is just a really nice opportunity.”

“You hear music and performances, and people just come outside and hang out with each other,” Anannya Deshmukh, a third-year environmental studies major and a captain of UCSB Taara, added. “And that’s part of what makes Isla Vista so great.”

Polynesian cultural club Iaorana Te Otea (ITO) performed Tahitian and Hawaiian dancing and drumming at the event. Sabrina Ng, a fourth-year psychological & brain sciences major at UCSB and the publicity and social chairs for ITO, appreciated sharing part of her culture but spoke out against the myth that Asian Americans and the APIDA community constitute a monolith.

“A lot of people in the ‘PI’ part of it don’t face the same struggles as ‘AA’ or vice versa,” she said.

“Sometimes I hear people saying things like, ‘oh, Hawaiian, is that, like, Asian?’” Zoe Moody, a third-year environmental studies major at UCSB and the volunteer and culture chairs for ITO, added. “But I think AAPI [Month] is a really great opportunity to showcase these differences and to just educate people more about Pacific Islander culture on its own, aside from the similarities of Asian culture,” Moody added.

Taiwanese American singer-songwriter imKENNETHY, an alias for Kenneth Yang, a third-year economics major at UCSB, expressed a similar unease about being boxed in by labels.

“I’m proud of my identity, but I don’t want to be known as an ‘Asian rapper’; I just want to be known as an authentic artist,” he said. “And then all the Asian kids out there, they look at me, and they’re like, ‘Okay, oh, and *also* he’s Asian.’”

“You form your own identity,” he continued. “Regardless of what background or who your parents are, where your family comes from—you are in control.”