

## A Dad Has His Moments

*By Dennis Knight*

Ethnicity by definition denotes distinctive ways of living according to particular cultural or racial backgrounds. Demographers paint it with broad brushes for statistical reasons but do it no justice. Like mixing primary colors may yield infinite hues, the unceasing blending of cultures and traditions results in an infinite spectrum of ethnicities. We each inherit a unique ethnicity into which we imbue our own perspectives and often new, even contrary traditions.

I was born into an Irish Catholic family, but I tempered my ethnic orientation profoundly when I married a woman of Japanese descent, a third generation American with her own rich ancestral traditions. While the marriage lasted but fifteen years, we had two extraordinary sons who we raised in a system that valued both cultures. We taught them they were not by halves Irish and Japanese, but all Japanese, all Irish and all American.

Thomas and Robert, seven years his junior, were active boys with separate interests, but they shared and grew together in one special activity, the thunderous art of Taiko drumming. It's distinctly Japanese, steeped in centuries of ethnic tradition. In the modern performance style, it has taken on American jazz influences and has become a sensation in our own country and around the world.

Thomas had already become accomplished in the form, even gaining national attention, and Robert was coming into his own when we lost him in February of 2007. He was just shy of twenty and a promising sophomore at the University of Colorado. Maybe it was a romance lost, but he left no note on that awful Valentine's Day. He took his life abruptly and without explanation.

It was by far my worst day as a parent, and I might rightfully be angry with him for such a terrible decision, but I can't and never will be. I was proud of him before he died, I was proud of the throngs representing his own bright rainbow of cultures who came to celebrate his life, and I carry that pride in him today. I'll miss him, and I'll continue as a father to dream for what he might have been.

Thomas is now by profession a sushi chef and continues to beat the drums whenever he can. By chance, nearly a decade ago he added a new aspect to his own ethnicity when he developed a close relationship with an entirely different culture. The connection started at Denver's Parade of Lights when a troupe of artists of East Indian descent known as the Mudra Dancers were placed immediately behind Denver Taiko's loud drums. They couldn't hear their own music, so they happily improvised steps to the rhythms they could hear. They soon took a shine to Thomas and asked him to bring his drums and join in their own performances. He has since become part of the Mudra family, and it is a roaring amalgamation of cultures that may be unique in the world. It's a little more color in the spectrum.

Last night I attended a Mudra dance concert with my Japanese Irish Mudra All-American son drumming on stage throughout the show. I was approached in the lobby by a distinguished gentleman who overheard me talking about Thomas. He introduced himself as Doctor Kishan Khanna. I have since learned he is a renowned writer and attorney with practices in India and the United States. He is the father of Namita Nariani, the founder and director of the Mudra Dance Studio. After the introduction, and learning I was Thomas' father, he got straight to the point, telling me what a good man Thomas is. He took my hand, said it again with conviction and I believed him. "I will tell you, Thomas is one of the finest human beings in the world." It was maybe my best moment ever as a parent.