

My Mentor and Me: A Conversation about Racial Identity in a Mentoring Relationship



Lauren B (left) with Yanni Z (right) have been paired as a mentor/mentee match since 2021 through Community for Youth, a non-profit organization based in Seattle that connects high school students with adult mentors and empowering peer community.

Q: How did you both meet?

Lauren (Mentor): We were matched through CfY after our camp retreat weekend. We bonded over our shared love of makeup, puppies, boba, and r&b music!

Q: How does your shared racial identity show up in your relationship?

Yanni (Mentee): We have so many cultural similarities. In East Asian culture, it's important to respect elders, work hard, and have strong family bonds. Also, in my experience, it's been difficult to talk about mental health with members of my family, because of the stigma that still exists in my culture so I like that I can talk to Lauren about it.

Lauren (Mentor): I know what it's like feeling like I have 2 different identities as an Asian American. At school, it's one way, and at home, it's totally different. Yanni and I both grew up speaking 2 different languages in the house and we both have parents that grew up in Asia and immigrated to America. We bond over our shared identity and experience a lot!

Q: What is it like having a mentor who is also Asian American?

Yanni: It's nice to talk with a mentor who understands my cultural background. I feel comfortable talking to Lauren about my experiences because I know she's had similar experiences. I also like that I can talk to Lauren about things that I don't necessarily want to talk about with my parents. The generational differences have sometimes made it hard for them to understand what I'm going through. But I know that I can talk to Lauren about it since she can understand how I feel. Something else I like about having Lauren as a mentor is that she gives me a different perspective on my life. Right now it feels like my life is going to be this way forever, but talking with Lauren and learning about her journey, and seeing her achieve success helps me think about my options for the future.

Lauren B (Mentor) is a 2nd generation, Korean American who was born and raised in Washington state. Lauren got involved with Community for Youth in 2020 so she could stay connected to her community during the pandemic.

Yanni Z (Mentee) is a 2nd generation, Chinese American high school junior. Yanni got involved with CfY her freshman year following the footsteps of her older sister who was also a mentee in the program.

Q: What makes Lauren a good mentor?

Yanni: Lauren always leads me on the right path. She is encouraging, understanding, and open-minded. I can talk to her about anything and not be judged. I know that when I tell her stuff she gives me ideas and advice when I need it but she also gives me the option to vent and listen to me. She's also helped me prepare to be an adult. She's helped me with my resume, job application, internship interviews, and getting a leadership position in CfY. When we hang out, I always feel like I've been productive, gained knowledge, and leave feeling positive. I know that Lauren doesn't give up on me and that's what makes her a good mentor.

Q: What do you admire about Yanni?

Lauren: I deeply admire Yanni's ability to articulate her feelings. When I was a high school student, the language around mental health was still relatively unfamiliar, and I've learned so much from Yanni's approach and openness around talking about her emotional well-being. I'm so impressed with her vulnerability and how authentically she shows up when we meet up.

Q: What advice would you give to a mentor who doesn't share the same racial identity as their mentee?

Yanni: Be understanding and patient, and get to learn their culture. What you may think is wrong in your culture might be right in their culture. Be open-minded and prepare yourself to earn their trust. In my experience, it's important in Asian culture to be respectful and polite to elders, so it might take a while for a younger mentee to open up to an older mentor because of the age gap. It also might take extra time to get to know the mentee's parents. Some Asian parents that I know can be strict and skeptical of strangers. Don't be alarmed if they ask you a lot of personal questions because it's probably to get to know you better, but it may come off as rude, tense, or invasive. They just want to ensure their kids' safety.

Lauren: I think allyship plays an important role in mentorship relationships across different racial identities. I would say, stay curious and read books! If you don't know where to start check out some of my favorite books on the subject, "So You Want to Talk About Race" by Ijeoma Oluo, "Minor Feelings" by Cathy Park Hong, and "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" by Beverly Daniel Tatum.