BURKE MUSEUM, RESEARCH FAMILY, AND THE DISNEY FILM, MOANA [1]

Submitted by Catherine M. Zeigler on June 7, 2017 - 11:11am

Research Family, as it is affectionately known, is a group of Pacific Islander students at UW, primarily anthropology students, who gather at the Burke Museum each week. The students are drawn to the thousands of objects from Oceania in the ethnology collection. Research Family members decide for themselves the type of research they want to explore in a family-like atmosphere.

During winter quarter this year, Research Family became interested in the depictions of Pacific Islander people and culture in the Disney film, Moana. Students had many critiques of the film, but they also felt that the film’s popularity created an opportunity to better educate people about the living cultures and people represented in the film. Research Family identified numerous objects in the Burke collection portrayed in Moana, and decided to make a video highlighting the cultural objects from Oceania that appear in the film. The students did not want audiences to think that the cultural practices in the film are fictional; instead, the students wanted to emphasize that the cultural practices are alive and thriving in Pacific Islander communities, and for audiences to connect the film with Pacific Islanders in their own communities, such as themselves.

Public response to the video was beyond expectation as the video went viral on social media. It was posted on museum websites around the globe, and was viewed approximately 17,000 times on Facebook. The popularity of the video underscored for the students the important contributions that they can make as undergraduate researchers, and the need for more educational materials focusing on Oceania and Pacific Islanders.

Senior Lecturer Holly Barker established Research Family four years ago to create a space for Pacific Islanders to see their culture, values, and ways of knowing reflected in their educational experience at UW. As Research Family progresses each year, the juniors and seniors mentor those who are new to Research Family and take the lead in teaching newcomers about inspiring Oceanic authors, activists, artists and community members. Starting in the Fall of 2017, Research Family will have several Pacific Islander graduate student participants for the first time, students who participated in Research Family as undergraduates and are now taking their exploration of research to the next level.

To learn about the Oceanic objects in the Burke Museum’s ethnology collection, Research Family often reaches out to family and community members. Building connections between students' academic and community lives helps students gain an appreciation for the relevance of their UW education to their own lives, and hopefully improves students' ability to put their UW education to use after graduation in ways that best support the interests of their communities.