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Journey to Juneteenth: What Does Freedom Mean Today?

Juneteenth is a poignant reminder of an important chapter in U.S. history, the day enslaved people in Texas learned that they were free in 1865. But for all this, America is celebrating freedom worldwide, which resonates deeply. Having emerged from the Philippines, where I was born and raised, and having lived for four years in Detroit, Michigan, this passage is based on what freedom means to me, my family, my home, and our country. For me, freedom is to be able to dream and chase after what I want, not be constrained by it. That kind of life: As I grew up in the Philippines, I had it shaped by tradition, family expectations, and sometimes economic hardship. Moving to Detroit was nothing like it was for many others — so much more for different possibilities, different cultures, different thoughts, different opportunities, new ways of living, new life, and times to imagine. And it provided the opportunity to express myself in ways that were often challenging to fulfill at home as a result of social or economic limitations. In Detroit, a city steeped in resilience and a history of fighting for civil rights, freedom has layers of meaning. It is about racial justice and equality for everyone in education, health care, and economic opportunities. It is about reducing barriers to flourishing — racial, class, or immigration status-based ones. Living in this community, however, freedom means a shared journey — one that involves empowering each other and establishing a society in which all aspects of individual rights and dignity are honored. Freedom in the United States is still a work in progress at the national level. Juneteenth brings us back to what we heard: Freedom was fought for and won, but the work toward full equality and justice is not done. Systemic racism, voter suppression, and economic inequality serve as dire reminders that our liberation is not

automatic and must be fought for and expanded every day. For me personally, freedom is what comes from having a voice — as an immigrant, as a student, and as a member of my community. It means being safe to be myself, to express my opinions, and to take up the torch for other people who may not benefit. Freedom allows me to learn, grow, and create a life that pays homage to my heritage but allows for the future. The crux is that freedom today is a gift and a responsibility. From Juneteenth's momentous moment of freedom to the current fights in Detroit and nationwide, freedom challenges us to a way of life in which we're making the world a more equitable and inclusive place. Freedom is to see that, in the eyes of somebody who has journeyed far from home to a new country, they have the right to belong, make an impact, and celebrate the journey that humans have made towards being equal.