

New Film 'No Look Pass' Follows Gay Asian American Basketball Star

by **Julianne Hing**

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There's a scene in the documentary "No Look Pass" that should ring true to many Asian Americans, and any child of a Tiger Mother.

Emily Tay, a star basketball player for Harvard in her senior year who has yet to figure out what she's going to do with her life even with graduation day quickly approaching, has had the game of her life. It also happens to be Senior Day, and her parents, strict and traditional Burmese immigrants, have made it out from Los Angeles to watch her play. It turns out to be totally worth the trip; Tay scores a stunning 34 points in the triumphant game, which includes her usual mix of stunning basketball acrobatics and her signature move, the no look pass. After a great shot, Tay's mother stands up quietly to applaud. After the game is over Tay's teammates chant, "MVP! MVP!" around her, and the camera eventually finds her parents.

Her father says, stoically, "She played okay." Her mom adds flatly, "Not shoot enough."

It's a classic moment in a film full of them as Tay negotiates her relationship with basketball, her family and ultimately with herself.

"No Look Pass" isn't just about basketball though, or even solely about American-born Tay chafing against the demands of her immigrant parents. It's a coming of age story that follows Tay as she asks the big questions: How do we deal with our tough 20s, when us young people lucky enough to have choices must balance big dreams with hard real world realities? What happens when we fall in love with the wrong people? What happens when what we want most for ourselves is exactly everything our parents have cautioned us against?

Tay dreams of playing basketball professionally abroad. While her coach chides Tay for not being a more forceful leader on the court, she's still just the 13th player in the school's history to reach a 1000 points in her tenure, and ranked in the top 25 nationally for assists.

"What would you do if I just spent my life being involved in basketball?" Tay asks her parents around their kitchen table in the opening scenes of the film. "Girl have to be stay home and taking care of your house," Tay's mom says. "Girls or women, they don't play sports in Burma. They support their brother," Tay's father says.

"She wants to find me a rich husband," Tay says, half-jokingly, but her mother stays quiet, her face unsmiling, and her head nodding with such sincerity, you know that it's not funny to her at all.

But Tay's also gay and not yet out to her parents, and after being recruited to a pro team in Germany and meeting a woman in the U.S. military stationed there in the waning days of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," is forced to live life with more secrets piling up around her. We see Emily hide girlfriends from her parents and walk around with the heavy burden of not being out to them. There comes a moment when it's not a matter of whether or not she'll come out to her parents, it's just about shoring up the courage to handle their inevitable frustration and anger.

As difficult as it is negotiating the cultural and generational divide, Tay's still protective of her parents. "I don't

want people seeing the film or reading about it to think that my parents were unloving at any moment in my life,” Tay said.

“I think it’s great to have structure and this tradition and culture behind you and those pressures are good sometimes, but ultimately it’s your life and it’s your decision and sometimes you have to go against everything you’ve known since you were little to make yourself happy for the rest of your life.”

Still, her parents have yet to see the film. Tay said she wants them to watch it one day, when they’re ready.

“I think, Emily really represents this paradox,” Melissa Johnson, the director of “No Look Pass,” told Colorlines. “I can say on the one hand, she’s the only Burmese gay basketball player from Harvard who’s gone on to play pro who’s nationally ranked. She’s one of a kind—she’s got it on lock.”

“On the other hand, you don’t need to be gay or Burmese or a basketball player to understand: my parents don’t get me, but I love them and I’m scared about what I’m going to do with my life.”

These days, Tay’s relationship with basketball is evolving. Tay’s about to start her third season in Germany, but after this one she’s coming back to the U.S., with her girlfriend. Working everything out with her family is an ongoing process.

“My greatest hope is people can watch this film, and see someone who’s in a tough place in her life and digs deep and finds the courage to live the life she imagines,” Johnson said. “I hope other people will watch Emily, and whatever it is they’re struggling with, think, ‘Maybe I can take this on too.’”

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