

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Ben De Guzman

Please Note: Due to a machine-automated transcription process, there are significant errors. The times noted are taken from the unedited audio files and do not match the edited videos.

Ben De Guzman [00:00:06] My parents immigrated here from the Philippines in the sixties and so settled down in suburban New Jersey, and my brothers and I were born there and we grew up in Paramus, New Jersey, a suburb outside of Manhattan. My dad came for graduate school. He is a civil engineer and so got his education here. And my mother came with her sister who came to the States to become a nurse. They actually met in Manhattan, in New York, and then they fled to the suburbs. I have two brothers. I have an older brother and have a twin brother. Actually, we grew up in this kind of suburb of New York. New Jersey is fairly diverse. We grew up in a there was a larger Asian-American community than I think we were realizing at the time. There weren't a lot of Filipinos in our community growing up. But I think we realized later is because they were all in Catholic school. So my brothers and I are products of public New Jersey's public education system. But you so we grew up there and my twin brother and I grew up together and he went away to the Naval Academy and I went as far away from New Jersey as I could without having to swim somewhere. And I went to college in California.

Ben De Guzman [00:01:34] I feel like we grew up with this sort of sense of being the other, you know, like you grow up, you don't see a lot of other people like you, especially in the media. You know, we grew up in a predominantly white suburb. Again, I think there were more Asian-Americans than we admitted at the time. But yeah. So I think we grew up with a very sort of sharp sense of how we were different than those around us. Our parents were immigrants, for example, when we were in high school, they didn't know what it meant to apply to colleges in the US. I mean, they had been to college in the Philippines. But, you know, a lot of the kind of systems and governmental institutions in the US were sort of new to them. And so I think my brothers and I had to navigate those systems just as much as they did. I mean, I think that we fought to assert our American identity. We wanted to kind of make sure that we cleaned ourselves as Americans, even if those of us, those around us were saying to us in ways large and small that we weren't, I think it instilled in me at least a sharp sense of equity. So I was very aware that that there was mistreatment happening, that there was I didn't know to call it racism at the time. And some of it was and some of it was kind of other maybe more benign forms of discrimination. But, you know, I think we were very clearly not like the others. And I think that affected a lot of different ways in which we perceive the world.

Ben De Guzman [00:03:27] I went to UC Berkeley. A lot of that identity was politicized in a lot of ways. Again, I didn't realize it when I was applying, but and in fact, when I applied to schools, I had heard so many different things about affirmative action in the 80s was when a lot of discussions were happening about Asian-Americans with respect to affirmative action programs. And I heard so many conflicting things. I actually did not state my

ethnicity, which I think is ironic in a lot of ways, not realizing that, not stating your identity is in some ways stating your identity. But I did not realize that Filipinos were actually still on the affirmative action roles at the time. And my class was the first class where we were beginning to be eased off of those roles. So, you know, so I attended Berkeley, didn't really do Filipino community stuff until my junior year. And then when I started to get involved in some of the community groups and some of the issues that the community was facing, particularly with respect to, you know, inequities in the educational system and how we were being treated, that was when I began to learn more about the Filipino American community and and, in fact, to the veterans. Yeah, you know, it's interesting, I think that we knew, obviously, that the Philippines was involved in World War Two. We were not a military family. So my twin brother actually went on to the Naval Academy. And so he turned us into a military family in many ways. But we didn't have direct relatives like many. So many of my friends and colleagues have a lolo who fought or an uncle or what have you. And there weren't a lot of military stories that my family told about the war.

Ben De Guzman [00:05:34] I went on to later learn that some of the stories that my family told or didn't tell about the war. Were there, but they didn't really have them about the war, so, for example, my father's family house was bombed during World War Two and and actually his sister was in the bedroom when one of the pieces of the bomb hit and and she died in that bombing incident. And so my father's eight siblings that grew to adulthood did not include my Aunt Clarissa because she died when she was a child. You know, we didn't really talk about it. And a lot of these stories didn't actually come up until we asked our parents about our histories. We became adults and then particularly making more explicit connections to their family history during the war, when I became involved in working with the Filipino World War two veterans. So so a lot of what I learned about the Philippines and World War Two was I was probably in history books until I went to college. And it was fortunate that Berkeley had a lot of resources for the community. I actually never took an Asian-American studies class, which I think is one of the ironies of my life, given the work that we've done before, the issue and for the community. But but, you know, I was able to learn about the Filipino community through my colleagues and through that kind of student activism that we were doing on campus. We came about at a time when the issue was just beginning to get new political legs again, not knowing it at the time. But nineteen ninety was when the veterans got citizenship. Right. And so that was actually nineteen ninety. That was the fall that I entered college. And so, you know, when I was going to college, we were just beginning to learn about some of the veterans who were beginning to come to the US. I actually remember in a technology class that I was taking, we were talking about how some of those veterans were being taken advantage of by lawyers who were exploiting them for for money and how some of the veterans were actually out on the streets. And so for us, just thinking about, you know, homeless folks that were from our community and not just that they were from our community, but they were, you know, that they served our country. It was kind of an early lesson in kind of how our government treated those soldiers as we were beginning to do to talk about our representation on campus, dealing with issues around affirmative action.

Ben De Guzman [00:08:32] The mid 90s was kind of a hotbed for California politics around affirmative action. SB one and SB two were passed during those years that effectively dismantled affirmative action on campus. That actually happened my senior year. We also our campuses, Asian-American studies department denied tenure to the professor who was teaching Filipino American studies, and he was the only ethnic studies professor who was doing teaching that material. And so it essentially closed the door to us, to the curriculum that we kind of helped create during the Asian-American studies

movement in the 60s and 70s. And so I came to that work to the student activism that we were doing right when we were just beginning to fight for our own educational equity. My brother would come to visit me for spring break and he would look at it. And I'm still captured by the turn of phrase he used because he would talk about how we were taking ownership of our own education. As someone who was like in a kind of very stodgy military educational environment and thinking about us taking ownership of our educations, which is a very powerful frame that that I used to think about the work that we were doing on campus. I did an internship during graduate school in D.C. and, you know, I think I was supposed to go back to California, but I looked at what I was doing. I had found the Filipino community here in D.C. And so I was thinking, well, no one stays in D.C. very long anyway. And it was much closer to where I was back east still for school. And so it's like I'll just go to D.C., stay there a couple of years and then go back to California. I was twenty two years old. So I somehow cobbled together a life and a career here and somehow the Filipino veterans. A very large part of it, I came to D.C.. At a very politically opportune moment, literally, the year that I moved to D.C., kind of a lot of the political stars came into alignment and the National Federation of Filipino American Associations was started this summer that I got to D.C. It was the result of a lot of people sort of putting aside their differences during the Marcos era, for example. So a lot of the sort of old time Filipino community leaders who had had a lot of political differences were ostensibly going to come together in nineteen ninety seven to form this organization. And really the veterans were kind of at the core of that origin story. They were like, we're going to come together and we're going to support the veterans. And I think you really began to see the political fruits of that is literally the next year was the first time there was ever a hearing about the veterans. Right.

Ben De Guzman [00:11:48] And so I remember being the early 20s kid at a school in this big congressional hearing probably fell asleep a little bit of it because it reminded me of one of my lectures in college or something. But but, you know, I feel like I was part of that history without even knowing that I was part of that history. So I had just someone who was new to D.C., you know, was doing stuff in the Filipino community. And this was what the Filipino community was doing. So to me, it was like, you know, get involved and sort of see where it would take me. And I was just in D.C. was trying to figure out how to make a livelihood. I was probably kind of doing odd jobs here and there. I was temping at some point. And so, you know, in the free time that I had people that I get to work with now, like John Melegrito probably told me, hey, Ben, there's a hearing you should go. It's like, OK, well, I'll go. Not realizing that it was the first time that this was ever going to be at this level politically as an issue in the US Congress. So I remember a lot of the veterans being there, you know, and it's not even like I feel like my memories of that event were probably of that time, you know? So I remember being in that room. I remember the veterans being there because it sort of jives with the pictures that I would see years later, like, oh, yeah, these are the old pictures from that time long ago. And it's like, oh, I was mean. But it was also around the time where some of the marches that we had took place. It was the time when the veterans chained themselves to the White House, a time when one of the veterans unfortunately passed away while they were here lobbying Congress and walking the halls and whatever. And, you know, I mean, they were old at the time. Right. And so I just have memories of trying to be behind the scenes, like just trying to be helpful in whatever way I could and given how young I was and just kind of not even knowing that it was going to be part of our communities history. But just like I'm in a new city and there's this stuff that's happening and I wanted to be a part of it. Well, actually,.

Ben De Guzman [00:14:36] I first came across his name when he was writing for Filipinas magazine, which was a hard copy magazine in the nineties, is there were such things back then that he actually wrote an article about the Filipino club at the Naval Academy where my brother was in the leadership at the time. And so, you know, my brother told me they're going to it's going to be an article about some Filipino magazines, really. And it was written by some guy, John Melegrito. And then when I came to D.C., he was one of the very visible faces of the community that I got to meet and made the connection like, oh, you met my brother. And so he was one of the people who was part of what would eventually become my political home, kind of officially. He was the founding executive director of NASA. Right. And so he was the public face of the Filipino kind of larger political movement. Know the veterans were coming together under groups like the American Coalition for Veterans in D.C. and Justice for Filipino American Veterans in California. But under the larger rubric of the Filipino political empowerment movement NEFA and also the civil Filipino civil rights advocates, which was another kind of strain of that political work that had its genesis in the Bay Area. You know, John was really part of Nafiz public face as their executive director, as someone who's very charismatic people, you know, even when they disagreed with him, I think he was able to have conversations across the different kind of lines of difference that people had. Sometimes we joke if you have 10 Filipinos in a room, you'll have 11 organizations. But he knew how to talk to all 11 of them. And they felt good enough about him to say, well, even if I don't like her, I like John. So I'll be in the room with him and her and all of them over there. So I think he was able to be a presence that people could feel comfortable coming together around. I feel like I did not attend a lot of the demonstrations that we were putting together. I feel like I was doing other things during those during those events, which is why I remember going to the hearing.

Ben De Guzman [00:17:28] And but like I am one of the marches, I think I was at one of the marches that I remember not being there when the veterans chained themselves to the White House, for example, just remembering that it happened and people were talking about it among the big boys over there getting getting arrested. So, you know, I feel like we were part of that political moment, even if I wasn't necessarily part of all of the different actions that were happening at the time. I kind of go back to the rescission acts of nineteen forty six, I think about them is the original sin of the US government with respect to Filipino veterans equity. You know, they had their reasons at the time around, probably saving money. There was the million dollars that ostensibly was given to the Philippine government as a like here's what you're going to use to take care of your own. And we're sort of walking away from our obligation. But here's a million dollars for you to do it. The Philippine government denies taking that money. And so, you know, I mean, those are historical antecedents. Right. But I think that the government kind of just was stuck in its own inertia and they just weren't willing to move off of that original political position that they took in the forties. Right. And so even when even when allies and our champions on the Hill fought for us, for example, they didn't fight for back pay, you know? And so it was never a question of. How to fully treat our veterans fairly, but but what could we what were we able to do for them? And I think that that has always been kind of the political debate within the community. Like, how hard should we push? You know, so and just in that 9D moment when those political arguments became framed, it became a thing that we wouldn't talk about back pay, you know, that that the arguments became around strategy and tactics for a fight for full equality, including pensions, as opposed to sort of piecemeal benefits, like what could we get at a given moment? So some groups thought that we should just fight for health care and then move on to this other piece and then move on to burial benefits. Whereas other groups thought, no, this is we draw a line in the sand with full equity and then make them make them push us back. Right. And so I remember very

clearly those were the those are the lines that were being formed. And again, I didn't even realize that they were being formed at the time. I just saw that that was sort of the political kind of bickering back and forth. But but that was how people were sticking their claims and sort of positioning their arguments.

Ben De Guzman [00:20:57] I eventually kind of settled into my own career. So I started doing I started working at Georgetown and then ultimately fell into Asian-American civil rights work. And they say that first because it brought me back to the to be in a position to be able to do more work around Filipino veterans, because it was an issue that my organization was working or at least was supportive of at the time. But I think that. So I remember when when we got burial benefits, I remember when we got access to the clinics, I remember being kind of a more than innocent bystander, but again, someone who wasn't as deep in the work as as I was pretending to be when I was in my early 20s. So but I remember when all that stuff was happening. And then in 2004, there was some new energy. We had a Filipina in the in Leader Pelosi's office. And so there were other political stars that were moving in alignment for us to be able to think about this issue again in a more direct way. And that's when I became more involved. Again, it looked like my involvement at the time. It looked like going to some of those marches, going to some of those protests that that I didn't have time for my early twenties. So I think about why we. But it looked like having my organization make more public statements about the issue. It looked more like having them. Let me have time to go to these marches, go to these rallies and have it kind of count as part of my work. Well, at the time of the organization that is now called Asian Americans Advancing Justice Agency was the sort of D.C. hub of three local organizations that were doing work in L.A., New York and California, although our New York partner eventually broke up from the band. But but I was doing our national community outreach efforts. So actually, it was a really good platform for me to develop a really robust Rolodex of community leaders from around the country, but also let me stay in touch with and build new relationships with Filipinos who were doing this work in San Jose and San Diego in Chicago. So so I was able to sort of keep in meeting my professional work with my kind of volunteer work for the veterans.

Ben De Guzman [00:23:49] I think there's two things. One is it is a very clear example of discrimination. You had the rescission act that said you are no longer treated like the other soldiers with whom you stood shoulder to shoulder. You know, like the US government gives money to foreign veterans from sixty three other nations who served under US command in the Philippines was the only foreign government that was singled out proactively for different treatment. So it's a very clear example of discrimination. At the same time, because it's veterans and because it's World War Two, it sort of touches on a lot of very. Deeply profound wellsprings of American identity. Like I always actually always really it never ceases to amaze me that we think about Pearl Harbor and Pearl Harbor at the moment when it was attacked was not a state yet. And. I'm always surprised, the people. Don't even think about that, they just like they know even people who should know that the Hawaii became a state in nineteen fifty nine, but we're like, oh yeah, no, it was part of the US. Well, actually, no, you know, and so it's there's this cognitive dissonance that allows us to think about Hawaii as US soil, which it was in some ways. But, but it just is such a part of the American mythos when in fact it was still just a territory at the time. So but again, I think it speaks to the deep the deeply held position that World War Two holds in the American kind of narrative about itself.

Ben De Guzman [00:25:45] Again, I think in two ways, one, the Philippines was such an important part of that story, you know, like we're remembering in this moment on June

20th, remembering the anniversary of Normandy. Right. But I think that those stories get told in ways that the Philippine theater and the Pacific theater don't get told. There's people talk about the liberation of Guam. We'll talk about the liberation of the Philippines. But it's not in the same way, you know, and so there's this weird like we don't get to think about it. It's sort of a second class kind of narrative about World War Two. You know, people think about the Bataan Death March, but that's really kind of how much they know about World War Two, if they even know about that. Right. And so so on one hand, it is just a very powerful example of the war, the Bataan Death March, the fact that Manila was the second most bombed city after Warsaw and people don't know that. Right. And so so on one hand, it is a important part of World War Two history that needs to be told just on its own merit. But then when you sort of compound that with this kind of narrative about discrimination that they faced afterwards, I think it becomes even that much more compelling. You know, I never want to sort of have oppression Olympics, but we've always followed in the footsteps of the Congressional Gold Medal lists that came before us. Right. And we always invoke their history and we do so with pride. Right. The Tuskegee Airmen, the Women's Air Service pilots, the Navajo Code Talkers, the Borinqueneers, the Nisei veterans. And we're proud to be part of that lineage. And they all got their benefits. So for us to think about how the Filipinos, we're still just as proud just as their service was just as valid as all of those other veterans, not to mention the other veterans. Right. Everyone else is served, but had to bear the burden of the 70 years of insults of denied claims red stamps on their applications for service benefits is is something that I think we should never forget. And the problem is not enough of us know of it to begin with, to forget. But I think that part of it is America is loath to admit when it makes a mistake, you know, we're still we're still getting ready to make the mistakes that we made 70 years ago as we're putting detainees in Japanese internment camps. You know, I think we have never come to grips with fully with the internment experience, much less the rescission acts and denying service to people who served under your command in World War two. So I think that a lot of that is part of this kind of. Willful amnesia that the US government is weather propagates just by virtue of inertia, you know, like we don't tell the stories and so they don't get to be remembered. So and I think it's easy to forget because it's so far away, literally, you know, even places that are supposed to remember our story. We've been involved with the battle on Memorial Death March in White Sands, New Mexico, the past four or five years. Right. And if you go to that weekend of this sort of concentrated World War two, but on history, like later on in the Filipinos were sort of this exotic backdrop to the focus on the veterans. And of course, the focus should be on the veterans and the handful that are still alive. Right. But but no one talks about the Filipinos who were there, much less the fact that we took away their service afterwards. So so it's interesting to sort of be in that space as a Filipino for the last four or five years.

[00:30:12] And we talk about how we put the Bataan back in the Bataan Memorial Death March. So, you know, it's it's just sort of think about this place that is so far away and this exotic place that is not part of our American experience, when, in fact, what happened there allowed us to have an American experience in the first place is they helped ensure our democracy. I think that Asian-Americans have a unique opportunity to think about connecting military history with civil rights history. I think that other Americans, you know, came here, they were here already. They served or they didn't serve or. But for those of us. On whose soil they fought, whose people they recruited to fight, whether it was Filipinos, whether it was among veterans that they recruited to fight in the secret wars in Laos. I think we have an opportunity to make a clearer distinction of like a different example of how American institutions fail to treat everyone equally within a military context and have it look differently. So that's always been what has been of interest to me. I'll say

one thing when we were doing this work to try to get benefits. The Senate passed an equity bill in 2008. The House wasn't able to follow suit. And so we ended up with the compensation fund. Right. But when we were doing that work, a lot of the pushback that we got was monetary in nature. Right? Like it's going to cost too much money, what have you. But then the next thing you know, if the if the Filipinos get their money, then the Koreans are going to want their money. And then it's a slippery slope. And no one is like you don't know the community here. It's not the Koreans you should be looking out for. It's about it's those Hmong veterans. They're the ones who are sort of chomping at the bit. But but no.

Ben De Guzman [00:32:28] But I think that we the ways in which we enter. US military history as both bystander and victim and. Friend and colleague, we occupy these sort of three positions at once, at the same time, allow us to shine a different light on military history and how it fails to protect all of us equally. Whether. I don't know which cart is in front of which horse, but I think that I think that the US government took the opportunity of independence as a reset button, which allowed them to sort of reshuffle the terms of the debate. So they were able to say, oh, because there's a lot of you, you know, we're going to take this moment to just give you this money, which is not at all sufficient to meet the needs of the soldiers that served under our command. But you're going to have to do with them what you can. And we're going to use this moment of giving you your independence to reset the debate and to define it in terms that benefit us as the US government. I kind of think that's how it happened, at least as I look at it 70 years later. You know, there's this weird kind of sense of duality, on one hand, I'm so proud to be able to have fought for these victories that we've gotten for them. And I'm also weirdly proud of the fact that the Philippines was the first project of American colonialism and that we are both the result of that. And we get to think about the history of our veterans through that lens. So we've gone through so much. The Philippines has survived so much and still got to teach the world about people power and overthrowing the Marcos regime that the US helped propagate in some ways, but also being able to be proud to be Filipino and to talk about the stories of these veterans and to be able to have played some small role in getting them the recognition that will allow other people to know that story, too. I just think it's it's really important to tell the story. I never thought of myself as an historian. You know, the my career has sort of evolved without me thinking about it, but has afforded me such important opportunities to be able to be involved with things like this. And so it's just always something that I'm very profoundly grateful of.