

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Marie Blanco

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.

Marie Blanco [00:00:05] I was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. My parents are Filipino descent, they immigrated to Hawaii and that's where they took up residence. They're naturalized citizens. And I grew up going to Catholic schools. And until even when I left for college, I went to Catholic schools, Catholic universities, so large community, my wife, parents were very involved in the local community for the Chamber of Commerce. A lot of Filipino Catholic organizations my parents were involved in. My dad was he had his own real estate company. Eventually he used to sell insurance and and real estate. And so a lot of his clients were Filipino. Who needed help and they could converse in any talk of real estate and stuff. So my dad. Very mixed. Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino. Americans and so. And in any Catholic school, it was an all girls school, so. My grandfather came to Hawaii to work for a lot of the pineapple fields. But he took somebody else's papers to come in to Hawaii. And then when he petitioned my grandmother and my mother and the rest of her siblings, he used his original name. So that caused a lot of problems.

Marie Blanco [00:02:03] And my grandmother, my mother and siblings had to go back to the Philippines, get things cleared out. And so my mom on my mom's side, they were able to come in, adjust, and eventually she became a naturalized citizen. She worked over what is now called Army Corps of Engineers. And she also real estate and insurance was bought. It was territory and we became a state. August of nineteen fifty nine, I went to University of San Francisco. I got one that bachelors there and I sort of like wanted to stay up in the mainland. But I did come back to Honolulu. I did work over there at a savings and loan bank for a while. And then in nineteen in the 70s, nineteen seventy eight, I Senator Danny Noé was looking for secretary. So my I put in my my resume, my in my interview on the phone, the senator was in Washington, D.C. and I went to his Honolulu office and I was interviewed by the rest of the staff. And then Secretary Neut called in, ask me three questions and then. I went home and figured, oh, well, OK, this is fine. And then about a week later, I got a call saying, well, the senator wants you up in two weeks. I said, Does this mean I got the job? And they said, oh, yeah. And so I didn't tell my parents anything until a week before I was to leave.

Marie Blanco [00:04:08] I said, I'm going up to Washington, D.C. and and they said, what are you going to do? I said, I'm going to work for senator, you know? They were not happy. But I said, I'm going and I left. They didn't want their daughter to leave and they wanted me to stay in Hawaii and after going to college and and being there, I just didn't want to stay in Hawaii. So I went. To Washington and the rest is history. I didn't see the senator until it was kind of funny because I didn't see the senator until a week later and I nearly collided with him walking in the corridors. He was coming one way. I was coming the other,

and we nearly collided. And so I said, oh, senator, Illinois. I introduced myself. And it was just funny the way he said, oh, Miss Blanco, I would have thought you would have waited for a while and get settled in before coming. And I said, well, I was told to report. I have a cousin who resides in Virginia. She came to pick me up and I quit and also the chief at the time, they call them administrative assistant. He came to pick me up and I brought the kitchen sink and brought pillows, blankets, TV, the whole kitchen. And. The administrative assistant said, you know, we have pillows, blankets, TV. Why are you bringing on this? I came prepared, so it was adjusted, but I got a wrong I got around it just to familiarize myself with Washington, D.C. I didn't have a car then, and so I took public transportation and investigated and, you know, and. Took the bus a lot and walked around the museums and stores. I learned. I learned and. And as I grew into it. It. Because I didn't want to stay just as a secretary. So as I became comfortable, I began asking the senator if I could do other things. Casework on some legislation. And that's how I familiarize myself with the Filipino veterans. And he gave he he was pretty good. He said, yeah, OK. And I did both being a secretary and doing that just of issues. Eventually, a couple of years later, I became a legislative assistant. I handled. Filipino veterans handled immigration, I've handled banking, I handled taxes and the whole gamut of issues. And a couple of years after that. I became his legislative director. After that became his deputy chief of staff and my last year and a half till he passed, I was his chief of staff. So that's how I went up the ranks and. Worked on, like I said, a different gamut of issues. First of all, there was there was a couple of court cases, Supreme Court cases and. The court ruled against them. They were trying to get some benefits and the court ruled against.

Marie Blanco [00:08:16] And I I familiarized myself, I had. I had suggested to the senator that maybe we try and do some kind of legislation, so we went with and we worked with congressmen more time this office of California. He's no longer alive, but but I worked with the staff and coming up with an immigration bill or that would allow the veterans they lost their benefits after after they served. They were not able to. They were given the right to become American citizens, but the immigration officer was recalled in the Philippines, so they were not able, a lot of them, but a lot of veterans were not able to take advantage of the. Naturalization. So what Secretary Noyan, what's with Congressman Dimmy did was come up with a bill. Senator, on the Senate side, Senator Innouye attached it, he is a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and in particular the Commerce, Science and Transportation. Subcommittee. I remember working on that legislation where we put a provision in in the bill that basically gave the veterans we took the bill the Didley and Innouye had introduced, we put the provision in in the appropriations bill as a rider that granted the naturalization for Filipino World War Two veterans twenty five thousand, approximately twenty five thousand veterans or naturalized. It caused a little problem because a lot of veterans wanted to come to the United States to get naturalized and senator Innouye, Marie, find a way so that they can get naturalized in the Philippines and it wouldn't cost them much, much. So, Senator, Illinois again put a rider in another bill, we made sure that the bill contained a provision in there that they could be naturalized in the Philippines, American citizens in the Philippines, and became it became law. It was and it was a short period.

Marie Blanco [00:11:01] But twenty five thousand Filipino veterans took advantage. We put it in an immigration the immigration part of the of the funding bill. So it was somewhat related. What this bill did, what this provision did not confer was veteran's benefits. That was totally separate when Senator Chinois after that, he used to go around saying, this is just naturalization, it does not confer veteran's benefits, but that's the next. And he tried his best one to get rid of that. Nineteen forty six decision, Jack, that basically didn't recognize

their service. The Filipino veterans service, he tried for several Congresses to introduce a standalone bill, but it never got considered only because the cost involved to. To do this to to grant them full veterans benefits like any other American who served during World War Two. The the. The chance came when they did the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. It started on the House side, one hundred ninety eight million was provided it granted it granted benefits, a one time benefit for the veterans residing Filipino veterans residing in the United States. Got fifteen thousand veterans residing in the Philippines, got nine thousand. Where's the equity in that? But there was a reason they the argument was that. The cost of living was much less in the Philippines versus the United States, so that was the next that was the closest thing that Senator Illinois could could make sure that the the veterans, the Filipino veterans were going to at least something. I mean, he he tried he tried so hard to to wipe out the nineteen forty six recision act, give them full benefits, but it was hard if we could never achieve at the time that he started this initiative. The cost involved everybody was seen was one billion dollars when they heard that they back. In between, we've had. Small things, burials, benefits, maybe Social Security, things that were. Small, mean, but. Like I said, senator and other senators to Senator Corker. From Hawaii and other California senators, they came and tried to support a full full fledged veterans benefits bill. It was not.

Marie Blanco [00:14:41] That was, I think one of Senator Innouye's regrets is that he could not do it, but he tried his relationship with the Philippines stems back to when he first. When he was a junior senator, junior member of Congress, the US House of Representatives, back in nineteen fifty nine. At the time, he was serving the subcommittee appropriations subcommittee on Foreign Relations. And at the time that when he went, there was a big flood and senator, I helped the Philippines, he became friends with a lot of the leaders there. President Marcos was one general who Centas. I mean, that's how Senator Ninoy learned about the Filipino veterans was through a little Centas throughout my years with the Noyer. He talked a great deal of Centas and how he he told the senator about the history of the Filipino veterans. And then throughout the years, Senator Inouye tried and. His best to help them, he did an interview a while back. I could probably send to you some of the questions and he talks about how he talks about the Filipino veterans of the Filipino community in Hawaii at that time. He gave an interesting speech in the State Department. It was it was during a Asia Pacific conference back in nineteen ninety eight. And one of the things that he and this is how he admired the Filipino, just the Filipinos in general. 9TH October of nineteen seventy nine, when the United States was negotiating the American bases in the Philippines. President Carter had called on senator to be a special representative to go to the Philippines and meet with President Marcos. President Marcos had stopped the negotiations because he was slighted that the Philippines couldn't fly the Philippine flag at the U.N. at the bases next to an American flag at the bases in Subic and whatever he felt slighted by. So President Carter had asked Secretary Inouye to go to the Philippines and find out what's going on. Also there, you know, he did go. What also Illinois did was pick up the phone and talk to President Marcos and asked, well, OK, what's wrong? And president told. And so, sir, I apologize to the person. I mean, they allow they allow the Japanese flag to fly over the written flag, to fly over all these other countries, but they wouldn't allow. The Philippine flag to fly. And that's the negotiations started when, Senator. Went there and smooth things over with. That's. That's how much respect and admiration he had for the Filipino people, and, yes, he had a big constituency in Hawaii. But but those guys also emigrated to Hawaii. And and they are the ones that help the state of Hawaii to what it is today, and for that, the senator was always grateful. And he and he says that in a speech and he says that we had we had a Filipino governor. Senator Innouye, first chief of staff or administrative assistant at the time, became he was Filipino

and he became a judge for the Northern Marianas. So, I mean, you know what they brought to the state of Hawaii?

Marie Blanco [00:19:31] This is very good in our communities, is very large at this point for us, so. Actually, it was because of. Why my work at the senator's office? I remember just my mother telling me. Before she passed, she said, I want you to help out. The Filipino veterans. And and so I said, I promise I will. So that's exactly what I what I'm trying to do and. From the time that I worked for Senator Illinois two, he passed. I know the White House, sir, Pinoy was not in favor of those kind of things and he was not very happy with. Because with him, he wanted to he wanted not to be involved and we hurt them. And yes, we tried to do like I said, senator tried his best to to provide benefits for them and regretfully piecemeal. But it was something that I mean, that's the best he could do at that point in time. It was not something that he could just say, but he he used his influence, his across the aisle, his friendships across the aisle to see how best he could get the benefits for the 14th Amendment. And. Not because he's my boss, but he he was a great statesman. General Taguba had asked me if I would come in, sir, and I said, sure, why not? And we started we would meet in a bar and and start talking about what he what the vision would be the bill. We had Dr. Colleen Wood writing the findings of the bill, what it was like 15 or it was really a long view. And normally when you take it to the Legislative Council, who drafts it up in the in the regular legislative format. They looked at it, they said it's sure long, can you cut it and and then there was one section in their. That that we wanted separate to identify who the veterans were, they served honorably, they served in the Philippines during a specific period of time, and village council wanted to mix it all up and just make it like one or two pages. We said no. And I made sure I made sure that the no, I didn't want to do that. And I use. I asked for the assistance through Senator Humanos office. To make sure that we retain as much as we could, we cut some down, but. And that was it was it got preserved Section three of the of the act. It got it it it got retain to the specific section that we wanted and it was separated so that we could identify with anybody, anybody wanting a Congressional Gold medal had to go through a specific criteria and the criteria spelled. What else we had to meet?

Marie Blanco [00:23:49] Three Fort's we had to meet cosponsorship, three fourths of the Senate, three fourths of the House. So that you're talking about three hundred something in the house, sixty seven in the Senate, so it wasn't bad because I went to my former colleagues and I just said, you know, Senator, you know, and they said, oh, don't worry, we'll we'll we'll get the boss to co-sponsor. So we were able to. The house was a little different. We had we have to get three hundred, and I wasn't too familiar with the house. I mean, most of my work is in the Senate. But I had as I told the general, I said, OK, I'll set up the appointments. You get the crew and will and I did. Five, maybe a day to a day, three a day when we met. The whole week, a couple of weeks, we had to pass this legislation within a two year period, one Congress, otherwise if we did it, we'd have to start all over again with the entire cosponsorship. That was not good for us. And we did. Thank God we did. And pass the House first. Then it went to the Senate. I'm sorry it passed the Senate first, and then it went to the House and passed the House, and then President Obama signed it into law. And then from there, Jindal took it over. And we met with the minute to minute the middle. And we have a process of even now, we've conferred over a thousand middle's replicas, the bronze that goes to veterans living veterans and their next and all next of kin. So that was that was an experience everybody, my personal friends told me very you never going to make it a. Watch. Just move. Leave me alone. Don't you want to go? I no. No. No, I'm busy right now. And sometimes they wanted John. John Miller to the general, other people, we had our our consulate's time, but he has since passed away

Soriano, our major core group. We think they all came. And if they do that, sometimes what we had to do was if we had enough people, we would split the group up because we had back to back meetings and. But it worked, and then I got to give credit to Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard. She went on the floor to like Senator Hirono and went up to her colleague, their colleagues, and say, hey, will you co-sponsor the legislation?

Marie Blanco [00:27:09] So, I mean, we couldn't have done it all. I mean, the members did it as well. And it went through so. It's good. It was it was really, really good. I remember sitting on the the on the House side with General Taguba with all of us. We're sitting in the gallery and they got up and they they said their speeches and whatever, and then they voted in the past. I've never been to. I mean, all my years there, I mean the hall and I mean I've been to the hall and stuff, but I got to see the veterans and their next of kin all sitting out there and the members speaking. And of course, Senator Hirono and Representative Gabbard spoke the minority and majority leaders in the House and Senate. And then, of course, the veterans that we honored some veterans to accept the the the one gold medal and stuff. So and then, of course, we had a ceremony, a reception after after that, the Galen's, they were never recognized. I mean, it took so long. To even get to this point, seventy five years. And and it was important to them it was not but the recognition they fought for this country. They died. All of them died for this country and and they got nothing. They got, you know. And. That to them is free energy and if you go to the ceremonies. The presentation, because General Taguba set a standard as to how it is to be presented, like I've attended a couple in in Hawaii. There's a citation read. The names are called General Taguba or whoever hired General or an admiral or somebody higher than the veteran status would come up and present. It would be General Taguba or someone higher, like a general or someone higher than the on the veterans status. And they would come up, they would call the name, the veteran would come up. General Taguba would present them with the medals, they would take a photograph and then. You know, a lot of them that it's very, very emotional and stuff, so I have an uncle who served as a guerrilla. We could not we didn't have at the time, I told the general look that, yes, they're not. We won't have a general to present it. Let me go. And all my relatives on my dad's side lived on the big island. King. But I preserved that by reading the the citation. And I presented the medal to my uncle's daughter, so there's a lot of tears. But the fact that I came and presented it to them meant a lot. So that's how a lot of that's how a lot of the families, especially the ones the next of kin, when they get the middle on behalf of the brother, father or whatever it is, uncle. Very, very emotional years ago, even before this even happened. I had made an inquiry on behalf of my uncle just to inquire as to his status, because some some veterans are not on the roster. But I got a letter from the VA back way back when that basically said that, yes, he's on the he's on the register. He's a recognized guerrilla. And it was from the V.A. that said that he did serve and I use that as a people, I asked my cousin to fill out the papers that were required under the FilVetRep to get the medal. And I said, whatever papers you have of your dad, send them to me, but I also had the from the VA and that was sufficient. And he's also on the recognized the roster. So it's gratifying.

Marie Blanco [00:32:35] I have a. I have a consulting company. I've done some work with it, but. I don't necessarily want to do it anymore because I've been doing a lot of volunteer work. This is one of them. I do other things outside of that has no relation to fill that rep. But but still, the gratification is is volunteer work for me. Yeah, I could use some money. Not many people know what the contributions that the Filipino veterans provided. Nobody knows, I mean, you kind of wonder whether they even care. But a lot of people. Need to. You know, they they came to protect. The United States. The veterans protected territory

of the United States, I mean, they were. The Filipino veterans served to protect the United States, and a lot of people don't even know that a lot of people in the Congress, when we walked the halls of Congress, we had to start almost from the beginning until their staffs. What what their contributions. You know. So it needs to be and I think the younger generation needs to notice. Heck, my nephews need. They're grown, but they still need to know about the Filipino veterans. If it wasn't for them, they wouldn't be where they are now. That's the way I feel the history. More of what? Our elders did for us as Filipino, Filipino Americans, maybe they'll come away appreciating their grandparents. My parents.

Marie Blanco [00:34:43] Their sacrifices and they were not even involved with with the Filipino veterans, but nevertheless they came from the Philippines and that is their home country in this country before they move to Hawaii. But what I want my nephews to also have the appreciation as to what our elders did for them. I just hope that, you know, I'm going to work with General Taguba and hopefully we can get this education piece together because I think it's very important. I'd like to see this not so. Plus I'm having fun with. Trying to see how we could do this actually is really the gratification of trying to put something together on behalf of the Filipino veterans. Welcome to.