

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Marlan Maralit

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[00:00:01] Camera speed. Sound speed. All right. June 20th. 07. Take one. When. Money. Time or speed. Came in for thirty four thirty. We're good.

[00:00:16] This is Yannick Smucker and with the film that wrapped oral history project. And joining me today is Marlon Marlon. Can you say your name and spell. Sure.

[00:00:25] Marlon morale it. Marlon I mean R L N last name is morale it may are a slight T.

[00:00:33] Thank you so much for joining us here today. And can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up. Sure.

[00:00:40] Up and down the East Coast. I was born in Portsmouth Virginia two second generation Filipino American. Proud son of a. Retired chief petty officer of the Navy and son of. A medical technologist who retired from George Washington University.

[00:00:59] University Hospital.

[00:01:02] And when you say second generation does that mean that your parents were the immigrants. Correct. When and why did they come to the United States. A good question. And.

[00:01:15] It's a good question. I mean as part of the generation of Filipino Americans young. I'm sorry young Filipinos who who came abroad to find opportunities for their families. You know both who were college educated. In the Philippines but came here looking for opportunity.

What does your Filipino American.

[00:01:41] Identity mean to you. Well. It's probably. The center of my.

[00:01:50] You know as I was a college student sort of defined who I was defined my experience. It wasn't something that's growing up Filipino American that I was that I had embraced or was surrounded with. It wasn't till I got to college that that I realized that. It was something that had defined who I was. But I know too much about it and so I spent much of my. College tenure. Seeking out information looking for resources and then realizing that there was a. A world of history a legacy that was you know that I wasn't familiar with. Why do you think it was in that moment in those years in college where you began. Being surrounded by other folks who had similar questions. Right. I had just gone through high school and experiencing dynamics where you know kids wouldn't. Kids would drop out of school. They would you know respond to like. The lack of culture in their lives. And so getting to a place where we could be ok with ourselves and figure out our own identity and being Filipino was a large part of that that not only I sought out but others did as well.

[00:03:13] And if you just we have we're not here just you're talking to her. If you're looking at her that's great. And.

[00:03:22] Where did you go to college. I'd spent the whole torture watching adversity. And.

[00:03:30] While you were at George Washington University How did you become involved with the grassroots efforts to seek recognition benefits for veterans.

[00:03:41] That's a long story. On campus there was organization called Filipino cultural society older sister who who was a couple of years ahead of me and had been involved in the organization. Prior to me getting on campus and she encouraged.

[00:04:01] Myself and others who came in the school way to get more involved. It was through that organization that I had met a mentor someone who within the Filipino American movement in DC was who many considered a mentor. Jon Melegrito. Was our student adviser at the time. And among other things embraced us. And just shared sort of his world view with us. And that's probably one of the critical things that. Lent itself to. Not only myself but others finding a home in the community. How would you describe his worldview. Well shaped by social justice. Economic justice and making sure that our stories are being are being told and that you know for us to create spaces in our own lives where we can see value in those stories.

[00:05:02] Prior to that going to jump if you could try to or when she's asking questions to answer in a full sentence like John Malik Reno does this. Or just because we want we'll be editing out. Got it. Tell Jones. Prior to these experiences in college. And.

[00:05:20] Meeting John M. credo. Were you familiar with. The Philippine history during World War Two.

[00:05:29] Right so as a college student. Much of my exposure to the Filipino American history was through the lens of. Culture and food less on politics and our history of.

[00:05:45] Resistance. For example. So he was pivotal in again you know opening our our world view.

[00:05:58] Do you have any uh. Did you know any veterans you had either from the Philippines or were American veterans.

[00:06:06] No not at the time.

[00:06:09] But it wasn't till later on that sharing of stories and our families. My eventually my wife's grandfather was a Bataan Death March survivor.

[00:06:23] Have you learned more about those experiences. Yes but. I think what shaped my ideas around why this issue was so important here. It. Was.

[00:06:38] Because it was a generational issue. Right. As a college student in the 90s I was afforded certain luxuries. Going to college being able to explore our community's history being able to get involved and share with others and in shaping our sense of community was around. How can how can we as a community sort of how our how is our

community defined by our experiences. You know hearing about the story of a generation of men who were denied benefits after their their service. It seemed like a no brainer in terms of why can't we support this issue after you know literally 30 or 40 years after they had. Completed their service to this country. So in that sense we had an obligation. To not only champion their issues but to get involved locally. And by virtue of us being in D.C. and being close to the decision makers who ultimately can decide whether or not veterans received full equity or recognition where it was you know sort of within our grasp. So we had to do something.

[00:07:59] Can you describe some of the activities that you participated in as part of that.

[00:08:04] Sure. So. The early 90's.

[00:08:11] Was a period especially on college campuses that was defined by multiculturalism. And. For us it meant being able to create spaces where our experiences were were validated. But that happened outside the classroom. And so the community was our. Way to not only inform but also educate and inspire others to take a more active role in what it meant to build community here in DC. There were a number of in the early 90s community dialogues where not only stakeholders but students like. Like I said Dad you did George Washington versus you in other college campuses could get involved. And so you know community stakeholders were interested in engaging youth in a much larger discussion. And it wasn't until we actually had.

[00:09:09] Spaces on college campuses where students from all over. Up and down the East Coast were coming together to explore some of these other critical issues of our time whether it was Filipino World War 2 veterans representation in media access to higher education or all the things that we discussed. In terms of our local work. You know we were college students. And one of the questions that we were proposed with was how come. We were the only ones that were getting access to this information on college campuses. You know why wasn't it that younger folks couldn't be informed or get access to this information so that. We could start at an earlier age and so. We began a battery of cultural programs to engage youth both middle school and high school youth throughout the Washington D.C. area. One was through a full day youth. Youth conference.

[00:10:14] And those other programs that we had to engage youth regularly.

[00:10:19] And those events were about building awareness. What kind of oh what was the idea of.

[00:10:29] Well I can't. Young folks have access information. Right because classrooms weren't reflecting our own experiences and so peer education became the one tool that we can use to again inform educate inspire young folks to get more involved in the The World War 2 veterans issue was probably one of our one of the major issues that we took on as part of our youth organizing work. And it meant that. To create spaces where young folks can get engaged. But also discuss and dialogue about why these issues were important. And because of that dialogue you know we learned that more and more of them were impacted by this issue than than they thought. Right. In terms of their own doing their own personal exploration finding out that their you know their grandfathers were involved as veterans. And so more and more young folks got involved. Not only did we do educational forums but we mobilized them. We will allow them to do actions we mobilize them to do advocacy work. And we did that for a number of years through our youth organizing.

Were you involved in any of the marches and demonstrations. For it.

Yes. For over a number of years whether was the White House or the halls of the capital. I can remember one of our actions was that was the first time we had you know some of our activists chained themselves to the fence outside the White House. Even even in 1998 there was a student wide conference I was being held in George Washington University and as part of the conference activities we took all of the conference delegates on a march through from from George Washington University to the White House. So there was some of that some of the pivotal moments not only to engage youth but to engage college students pretty pretty broadly.

[00:12:35] Did the politicians. See. Pay attention.

[00:12:41] It's a good question.

[00:12:45] I mean there is a number of folks that we had the ear of. I wish I could remember their names but. To say that our work had an impact. On on the on the outcomes of flip it over to Veterans Recognition. I think by and large the impact was on the community itself. The you know the struggle between recognition and full equity was a long and arduous struggle for you know for community members stakeholders who were involved. Before our generation I think the student activism really lent itself to.

[00:13:32] Us defining you know making sure that we defined this issue as part of our generational experience. I. I can't.

[00:13:46] Just respond to her but it's just a. The climate of.

[00:13:53] Student activism in the 90s when you were in school. How do you think that compares to.

[00:14:01] The undergraduate climate today and why is it different. Or is it. Where is it. And is it better or worse or just different. We'd love to get your insights into that.

[00:14:16] She's my answer carefully.

[00:14:27] They won't have heard my question. So yeah.

[00:14:39] I need a minute to think about take this. Yeah. So to the question about. The generational differences. On college campuses between now and the early 90s I think what defined. Our work by and large was.

[00:15:14] Many of my colleagues whether it was here in Washington D.C. Virginia or Maryland. We operated on the premise that. We had a social contract with our community. Right. That. It was built on. Relationship building. And that was key to. Us being successful organizers. And you know. Without much said we discovered that that was also the. You know the the M.O. for many other.

[00:15:53] Community efforts you know throughout college campuses across the country from the northeast to the southwest. And then in California and even in places like Texas. Where. Regardless of our. You know recent history in student organizing. We saw a lot of common threads in our work. Right. That.

[00:16:24] You know we approached it with the fact that we had to create the space where there was none. And that we relied on each other to do the right thing. And to discover information that was you know that was there before us. And recognizing that you know we were part of a much larger struggle that existed way before us.

[00:16:51] And how that you know now I think it's fairly different in terms of you know information is more accessible. And we. Rely less on you know the network or the relationship building.

[00:17:06] That we had to rely on. Otherwise we wouldn't have. The information that we did. Because information is so readily accessible. Sometimes we do forego having to build those deep connections. I'm not saying that it doesn't exist or it doesn't happen. But by and large you know relationships are legitimate to happen faster without really having to put the work in.

[00:17:37] So in that sense. Does. The work of community building because it cannot. Withstand the test of time cannot withstand tension and conflict.

[00:17:52] Cannot withstand. You know. The unknowns and so you know for the most part you know we. Again we. Were able to develop those relationships where they were built on trust and.

[00:18:10] Understanding that we were you know had. For the lack of a better word vanguards for our community.

[00:18:22] How did the experiences that you had in the 90s as a student and activists how have they continued to resonate in your life.

[00:18:30] Well I interpret the question again sorry.

How did the experiences that you've had in the 90s as a student activist um.

[00:18:38] Really centered on the Filipino community. How is that continue to resonate in your.

So to the question of how does my activism in the 90s.

[00:18:51] Continue to resonate today. Well as a. Nonprofit worker and. Activist now.

[00:19:02] It still continues to shape the work that I'm doing at least in Virginia. So I talk about the work that I do. OK. So in Virginia I'm tasked with. Doing the work of. All over again in Virginia. I'm tasked with. Trust.

[00:19:26] Me figure out is not very. So in Virginia Asian-Americans represent a considerable. Population in the Commonwealth.

[00:19:38] Over six hundred and fifty thousand state wide. A majority of them are in Northern Virginia and tasked with engaging them to make sure that they're involved in the electoral process. And Virginia is one of the states where we have. Elections every year. And by large Asians vote only generally through the general elections which means federal or presidential elections not necessarily. Elections that change the political landscape of local and regional politics. So the task is to encourage them to be more engaged voters.

And I I I lean on a lot of the experience I had as a community organizer doing youth organizing work. And I find myself you know doing the same things right. Creating a space where there isn't any in in. Trying to encourage what's broadly Pan Asian Community to see value in doing community organizing work.

[00:20:44] How do you think the experience of Filipino veterans in the United States relates to the larger narrative of civil rights within American history.

[00:21:01] So the question is how. How do you see this.

[00:21:05] Um this kind of micro level the Filipino veterans of seeking equity and benefits relate to the larger narrative of civil rights. Given the. Current political context. Of.

[00:21:25] The struggle to. You start.

[00:21:33] Formulating to be efficient with my words. OK. So. The struggle the Filipino where were to.

[00:21:44] Assuring equity that you know I see that as a as a micro level civil rights issue essentially like how does that connect to the broader narrative.

[00:21:57] Of civil rights over the last you know I mean not that you have to expound on all of American history.

[00:22:03] Yeah. OK that's tough.

If it's not something you want to address.

[00:22:11] No I do it's just again the floodgates opened in terms of like you know civil rights issues. Yeah.

[00:22:17] Well you can connect it to whatever you'd like.

[00:22:29] Uh. Civil rights and voting civil rights and. The current anti-immigrant. Okay that's gonna to figure out where I want to.

[00:22:48] Go with that.

[00:22:50] Okay. Yeah. I want to surest you know stay within my wheelhouse and not go to foreground. Yeah. Mm hmm. So how does the struggle for equity.

[00:23:06] Or recognition for a Filipino war veterans fit in the context of our struggle for civil rights.

[00:23:20] OK. Um. Maybe another way to ask the question or the answer is just. Slightly different but I think it's similar. Just. Why.

[00:23:32] Do you think Americans regardless of their background. You should know this story. Why is it important for them to just think out a few things here.

[00:23:49] That's helpful. Because that's the message that we want to be able to get out. Club. Do a laundry list here. So. Veterans were denied benefit will they. They were.

Promised. The rights and benefits as as more were to. Fighting under the U.S. flag in the Pacific Theater. The. U.S. government rescinded that through the 1947 rescission act. We spent the better part of the last.

[00:24:44] 50 years. Fighting for. Justice for a group of men that are.

[00:24:56] Quickly. You know. Dying. Okay. And then the question is how is this how is this relevant for.

[00:25:09] Current generation of Americans who. OK. That's the last word I gotta do right by this answer. OK. I'm.

[00:25:19] Gonna write something down with kidneys. All right well let's not do that. I want to take up too much more your time. OK.

[00:25:27] OK let me ask you. Do you um do you work with any student groups now do you teach. Do you. Have any. Teenagers are 20 somethings have to pitch this story to you.

[00:25:41] Yes well not no not really but I know I could.

[00:25:44] But yeah just curious like you know yeah if you want to catch their interest. Yeah you know how do you how do you get it.

[00:25:52] Yes ma'am. Okay. I haven't turned the corner on this question yet. That's tough. Okay. If it was an easy question.

[00:25:59] Yeah yeah yeah yeah. We wouldn't be you know for everybody to answer.

[00:26:02] No. And I said I feel like this is we're like you know the meat and potatoes is okay. So. Yes or just whatever aspect of it inspires. Doesn't have. To.

[00:26:13] GRAIL. YEAH. YEP. YEAH. Whatever part of it thing. Resonates. So to the question of. How the story of a generation of men who fought for. Recognition for their service during a war or two.

[00:26:48] Is relevant to people today. I think most people by and large assume. That we live in a country. That. Where a government does right by our people. Yet when we uncover the story. It's only part of the story. And the struggle that not only this generation of men.

[00:27:20] Had lived. Fought. And died for. Is a story that we need to remember. So that we can remain vigilant. Right. And then thinking about our own experiences as. Second generation six second and third generation Filipinos in this country today were. We feel that. You know. For the most part that we've.

[00:27:54] Been accepted. It's a good reminder to not only. My kids. And upcoming generation that. We need to stay. Informed. And inspired by the story of the Filipino World War Two veterans.

[00:28:22] And what does it mean to you. On like a personal.

[00:28:39] Lay off workers. You're doing great. So.

[00:28:49] What does the story of the Filipino or were two veterans mean to me. Well I wasn't necessarily impacted. Personally in terms of my family having members who. Were. Were to veterans but does does not mean that it hasn't shaped my experience as a Filipino American. Growing up in the Washington D.C. area. The people that I met. The monologues who. We stood beside. The women and the youth. That challenged us to. Learn more and to do more. Shapes my shapes my world view. Right. That. Here is a generation of men in the twilight of the years that were. Fighting for. Some basic dignity. And it's a reminder to all of us that. Nothing is given to us right. That we do have to fight for and fight for justice and fight for dignity. And it's a constant reminder of that.

[00:30:12] Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today about your.

[00:30:17] No I think I've said enough.

[00:30:20] I have one last night I don't have an answer for this is fine. You can you share a story about John. That's.

[00:30:28] Just something that he did.

[00:30:31] Like it as part of the memoir to stay for as as the adviser to his work it sounds like he's a pretty smart person.

[00:30:42] Yeah. So. So the interest so the issue being about. John Miller Greta was was he was our student visor.

[00:30:55] To our student group. The Philippine Cultural Society on campus. And there was no really formal introduction with.

[00:31:06] At least students of my year and him as our advisor. The way we got introduced to John was that we would go into the student union on weekends and see a number of rooms reserved in the name of our organization. But none of us knew about it. And it turned out that he was also a. Director for a local theater group an online Filipino where he would leverage his position as a student finds her GW to reserve rooms for his community group. And we all took a step back. We're like. What are we going to do about this guy who's reserving rooms and our name and not telling us. And so we you know we had this plan to like sort of stomp into his office at the. Glenn library where he worked and like you know have a word with him. And it turned out to be this gentleman who was a wealth of knowledge. Not only on Filipino culture in history but he himself was a you know social justice warrior through the 70s and the 80s and 90s. And it's because of him that you know students that went through George Washington University.

[00:32:25] You know. Have the worldview that they do so. To his credit. No thank you to the john.

[00:32:37] That was a great quote. Yeah it was really wonderful. Yeah. She. Got.