

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Pattie Umali

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.

Pattie Umali [00:00:05] I grew up I was born in Chicago, in the city of Chicago, and mostly grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Buffalo Grove is my town. I spent a year living in Manila when I was five, so about nineteen ninety five for about a year. And got a little bit of an experience of the Philippines in that time, and I think for me personally, coming back and seeing the stark differences in the quality of life and everyday goings on really impacted me and focused me into. Looking at international development, international relations, particularly more on the individual level, I didn't speak Tagalog, but I went to an English speaking school, so that wasn't necessarily a problem in class. But socially, it still did have a few setbacks for me.

Pattie Umali [00:01:05] And I definitely remember. I had been surrounded with my mom's family back in Chicago and then met a bunch of extended relatives when I moved to Manila, got to know my dad's family a little bit better. But it was is a very. Alien experience and I think. To move to a lot of extent, I was sort of had my head in the clouds and wasn't really aware of everything else I was going on, but definitely there are several visual memories that just have imprinted on my brain that I'll always remember having my mom drive me to work, being stuck in traffic jams and then hearing the pitter patter of little fists on my window of kids who were street kids going from car to car asking for money. And I would kind of just raid my mom's purse and pretty much do the whole thing by giving it to them. It just was astounding to me that so many people were without when I was used to seeing that. So definitely imprinted a sense of gratitude and awareness. I think with everything I do and everywhere, I am my mom. The vast majority of her extended family was and is in the US now because we'll probably talk a little bit more about it with all of my mom's family was petitioned through my great grandfather, who I believe came over here on his veteran's benefits.

Pattie Umali [00:02:52] My father's family is now split up the half on the West Coast, but my grandparents are still back in Manila. And personally, my father's never actually lived in the US. So it was always sort of more mom's family here in the US. As a kid, it was something that was sort of. Something I could give random facts about because most kids knew nothing about the Philippines and. Growing, it wasn't really until college that I started to think truly of my Filipino heritage as an identity marker and. As with as is common with a lot of Filipino Americans joining the Filipino Cultural Association and then learning more about Filipino history and a little bit more about Filipino American history, really in combination with being away from home and seeing those members sort of become your surrogate family members. It really was a. It really created a strong tie for me to the Filipino American community and and then doing a short internship in Manila in summer of two thousand nine, I interned with Ashoka, which is a social entrepreneurship organization.

So I got to learn about what youth are doing with social entrepreneurship in the Philippines and the more established social enterprises that are already running. And it was really exciting to see a different side of the Philippines than I was used to seeing. I went to Brown University in Rhode Island, we were about 40 or 50 active members with even more sort of popping in and out and certainly compared to some of the some of the larger state universities or definitely the university on the West Coast, we weren't that big, but it was still we were very active and performed often in different festivals and things like that. So it was very strong bond, I would say. So his name was Antonio Saldivar Abre, he was my mother's grandfather, he was a supply officer for the guerrilla contingent that was in the province of Cotabato in Mindanao. And I'm not aware of how he got into all of it, but it seems that fairly he was involved fairly early in the sense that they were already sort of moving our families, our family and their family, friends around.

Pattie Umali [00:05:53] In advance of Japanese movements and coming into the area. So here's a picture of my great grandfather and my great grandmother, my great grandmother is Tobes a Beera and. My great grandfather, he was a civil engineer in normal times, and my grandmother helped run the farm that that their family lived on. My great grandmother sold Pilau, which is on unmilled rice to farmers and others and. The if I can start talking about really what happened, I mean, the majority of what I understand of events that occurred with my family are all through my grandmother, my mom's mom, Ophelia Adwana, well, Ophelia Obiero daughter. And she would tell me stories of her experiences even during that time when I was just a little toddler sucking my thumb. And certainly there weren't that many details. It was often sort of like, OK, do you want to hear a story? While Lola was during the war, Lola went into the forest and she hid and we hid there from the Japanese. And I go, oh, OK. And fall asleep. And and I would hear snippets of it as I got older, but never really a lot of details. In fact, the most detailed account that I have now and many things that I found out, not directly from my grandmother, were through her memoirs because I think. She. Felt that it was important to talk about it, but at the same time, I don't necessarily know that a lot of Filipino elders. We like to open up about the hardships in their life, whether it's for reasons of thinking that somehow they might sound like they they're complaining or they're ungrateful for their lives or something like that, or whether they simply want to focus on the good parts of their life. But it's been it's always been something that I've always mentioned to my friends is that my grandmother went through World War Two. And I think part of that came from growing up in Illinois, which has a very large Jewish community. I think Illinois state curriculum, we learn about the Holocaust almost every year in school. And so there was always sort of this other side of me, of my brain saying, well, the World World War Two happened in many other places and my grandma was one of those people who experienced that. And why have I never heard anything about the Philippines during the war or anyone like her in in high school?

Pattie Umali [00:09:01] I took AP US history, but as far as I can remember, the most significant mention of the Philippines was its annexation into as a US territory after the Spanish American war. And I think perhaps sort of the the classic General MacArthur, I shall return that quote was mentioned by our US history teacher. But it was. There was no mention of the actual events surrounding the invasion or how long it was or it was more of always contextualizing the Philippines as the base for the Americans in the Pacific. And so I was very always very aware that she experienced that and it never really I didn't really connect the dots that all the rest of her family had also experienced that until I read these memoirs as she was getting older in these past in the past few years, we were really encouraging her to write all these things down. My cousins and I start to get a little more curious about all aspects of their life before they moved to the US. So as we heard more

and more stories, we were really encouraging her to write down everything about her life. And so she was able to write quite a bit down before she passed away. So we're really lucky to have that. She was born in nineteen thirty one, so she was about 10 when the war started and. I know that because my grandfather was already sort of planning things with other guerrilla leaders and. Aiming to avoid the Japanese, of course, the family, they stayed together with other family, friends that were, you know, trusted, and so they thought safety in numbers so they would stay at large houses of friends and sort of all stay together. And as soon as they knew that the Japanese were coming, they often burned the houses down themselves. The quote that from my grandmother's memoirs is that they were worried that the Japanese would use the buildings as concentration camps or W camps.

Pattie Umali [00:11:31] So they over a period of about two to three years, I believe they were moving. They moved from. Across three different houses. And after that, it finally, I think, became too dangerous for them to be living out in the open anymore. So my grandmother went into hiding in the forest with her family. So by now, she was probably about 12 or 13. She was with her mother and her older brother and their five younger siblings, one who had just been born in the past few months. My Lola, Edna and so certainly my great grandmother was extremely busy caring for all the kids. And it was the responsibility of my grandmother and her older brother, Tony, to find food to Tony. My little Tony would be in charge of sneaking back to the family farm to mill the rice and bring it back to forage for vegetables or find whatever he could to fish. And then my grandmother would be responsible for cleaning the fish at night. And because it had to be at night to be less visible and because of cleaning, you know, fish guts in the middle of a river bed in the middle of the night in a forest, she contracted malaria and it was she had malaria for her entire time, hiding in the forest. I think it was about two years. And she says very specifically in her memoirs that. When her older brother found the Americans, once the Americans had finally fully come into Mindanao, I think not until nineteen forty six, they just gave her a tablet. And just like that, she was so much better and they were so happy to get cheese and powdered milk and all the supplies that the soldiers could provide. And it's kind of fascinating because in her memoirs, it. Her memories of the war just sort of stop and then all of a sudden she starts talking about as if she starts talking about the rest of her life and it really was just a certain part. Yes, certainly very memorable. I believe that. My Lolo Tony, my grandmother's older brother, I think he was actually the first person to come to Chicago. He had come because he had received a job and he then. I believe I was able to petition my great grandfather, who had an easier time gaining citizenship because of his veteran's benefits, I would think. And and from there, my great grandfather petitioned all the rest of my mother's siblings and eventually her. And so throughout the eighties, slowly, my grandmother's family started to trickle into Chicago. My grandmother got there, I think in nineteen eighty two. My mom was the last of the kids to be petitioned because she was already over 18 when my grandmother had moved there. So my mom came to the US in nineteen eighty eight. So this is an excerpt from my grandmother's memoirs, specifically about her experiences during World War Two.

Pattie Umali [00:15:15] I was in the fifth grade when the war broke out in nineteen forty one, and we don't have the idea of what is going to happen. We live in a town 30 kilometers from the city of Cotabato, and the news regarding the war is not so well heard because we don't have radio and newspaper. So we just listen to people talking about the news they heard. Sometimes it is exaggerated. They call it radio Porlock. My mom told each one of us to prepare a bag for all our clothes and personal needs. There is a carabao and a small cart ready near our house any time we have to evacuate. Mama had bought

slacks for me and a dud one and only, which we were excited to wear when the Japanese entered Cotabato City and started burning the houses, we were so excited because it is time for us to wear slacks and to evacuate in the secluded places. We left our big house and the army has to burn it down for fear that the Japanese would use it as a concentration camp. My mom and dad were crying and all of us to see our house burning. We evacuated into Bonn and some of mom's friends, like Mrs. Villegas, can't go back to the city. So it was a blessing for Mama, for she was about to deliver my sister Edna. We didn't stay long enough to bond because there was a war going on between the Muslim and Christians after that Sunday massacre of the Muslims that took place at the marketplace. The Longo's retaliated because lots of stealing and killing were made by the Muslims to those Christians having farms in the secluded area by the mountains.

Pattie Umali [00:16:53] . So the Christians live in a community at the town called Bakeware, where groups were formed to protect families from oppression. Everything seemed quite normal. We stayed with a family friend to your Tabun and Tilla, and as soon we got they had children named Liz Francisco and SEATO. They were so hospitable, hospitable and accommodating to many people who evacuated in their place. My parents built a small house in Bangor and enjoyed staying there for a while. We have friends in the neighborhood and on Sundays we go to the market to buy groceries and meet. But it was a short period because the Japanese invaded our place and we had to hide in the forest that evening, we slept in a deserted house of a native minable. All women and children slept upstairs, the men below. It was really a miracle when we found out the following morning that the post was so dilapidated and the whole structure of the house managed to carry 20 people that night. The following day, we have to stay under the trees and hide ourselves because we can hear gunshots and trench mortar coming from the place we had left, all our houses were burned down by the Japanese. Even our pig was roasted because it was tied under the house. We have to find a place where to stay. And lucky enough, we have friends, the natives called Minable, who are helpful and sympathize with us. They helped us build houses with materials available inside the forest. They were fast and knowledgeable and using materials that can't be found at that time, like nails instead of nails. They use vines and bark of the trees for flooring. Thank God for those good people. We stayed inside that forest for two years and we had to move from one house to another for three times three, fearing that somebody would find our place.

Pattie Umali [00:18:49] Our dad is a supply officer, so he is wanted by the Japanese. Every week they come down from the mountain with some men to get food supplies. It was very dangerous because they have to cross the highway road to get supplies several times. They almost encounter the Japanese and Filipino spies. It is through God's protection that they were not seen. My brother Tony, second to the eldest, was our food provider. Thanks to him, we owe him a lot. Without him, his courage and his labor, we could have gone hungry. We were helpless at that time with our dad in the army and also this hour, we were young kids with our mother hiding inside the forest. We had nothing to eat there because we could not even plant vegetables as land is low and there's water all around for morning, Tony, he has to stay in our farm, pound the rice and carry them on his shoulders to our place. He also catches fish, fresh water, fish like catfish for our food. Every time he brings home fish, he usually arrives at night. Just imagine the force is dark. We only use oil lamp and there's plenty of mosquitoes. I have to stay by the well to clean all those fish, otherwise it would get spoiled. Just picture the mosquitoes stinging all over the exposed part of my body. This is where I got my sickness called malaria. I had the sickness for almost a year and every time I was attacked I trembled so much. It was so cold. And after this, the severe headache and very high fever, there was no medicine

available at that time. So we end up taking herbal medicine, which was very bitter and was not effective. We prayed so hard that the war would end so we can live a peaceful and normal life. Finally, the Americans came to liberate us from the Japanese occupation. We were all excited, praising and thanking God for answering our prayers. At last we could come out from our hiding place, live in our farm with our friends and our entire family.

Pattie Umali [00:20:53] My brother Tony met an American army man and asked some medicine for my malaria. He gave me the Taban tablet and it immediately cured my disease. We were happy to taste corned beef and big cans, cheese, powdered milk and many others. We enjoy this freedom that we have now. And very soon we could go back to school. As I kind of mentioned before, I actually had no idea that she had malaria for a year until I read this. And when I asked her about it, she said, Oh yeah, I just didn't tell you this. It's it just reinforces that. Our grandparents lived in such completely different circumstances to the point that I cannot empathize or imagine and. They I think, yeah, they were just so tough, and I think that's part of also why they didn't necessarily talk about it that much. So in twenty sixteen, I became very interested in creating games that could teach about other cultures, specifically cultures of color and more specifically cultures that are in a post-colonial state, having experienced colonization and the after effects of gaining statehood afterwards and the all the complicated things that come along with that, I think that there are not enough games that show people of color in a more modern context. There's a lot of games about ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, the Vikings yet. And you know, you're never you. Well, I shouldn't say you're never going to see, but there aren't many games that would necessarily show Egypt post Arab Spring or or Brazil in the 20th century trying to find its way. And so I thought that it was important to work towards that as someone who was already working in international education and is very passionate about intercultural awareness. So I started learning how to make games, wanted to make start making one and really wanted to make a fantasy game. I was really thinking about it. The fact that most fantasy video games, fantasy stories are also about European cultures most of the time. And so I thought that I should make one a fantasy game set in a very different place. And the Philippines felt like a very appropriate place because I have the cultural references and sort of knowledge to work with. And even thinking then that I knew enough about the Philippines and Filipino culture to make a video game. I had no idea how much more I would learn about indigenous Philippine culture, about the richness and variety of our religions, of our ways of life, our writing and and everything. There was so much to learn. And so I've been really lucky to have this experience.

Pattie Umali [00:24:25] And so, as I said, I wanted to portray people in these stories in their post post-modern post-colonial contexts. And so because certainly I was I entertain the idea of setting the game during the Philippine American war, also known as the War of Independence in the Philippines. But. Once I realized that World War Two would be a great way to not only show a different side of World War Two as it as it were, as well as honoring my grandmother, my Lola and and everything that she went through, and it was exciting. The game is set. In Pigcawayan, which is a variation of an actual of her actual hometown Pigkawayan in Cotabato, not only would it give me the chance to tell her story and the stories of people that were in her area, but also. Pay a little homage to her and it. Even teach. Those who might know something about the Philippines, about a lesser known area of the Philippines, even when reaching out to various references and sources when researching, you know, can I make this story in Cotabato? Will people be receptive to the setting? People ask me, why would you set it in Mindanao? Nothing happened in Mindanao during World War Two, and it made it a lot easier for me to say, well, actually,

things did happen because I have firsthand experience or firsthand knowledge of those experiences. And so I think that certainly given me more confidence to move forward with the story and its and the receptions that we've gotten as we've advertised and fundraise for the game has taught me a lot about what people understand Mindanao to be, what people understand. Or what people think a game about the Philippines and about Filipino culture should be.

Pattie Umali [00:26:53] The name of the video game is the girl who sees it is we're building it for PC and Mac and it's set during World War Two in Cotabato, about a young 12 year old girl named Quina Laban. And at first Quina was sort of a stand, as a lieu stand in for my grandmother. But as I was writing the story, I thought it might actually be more meaningful to have more. Well, Real-Life testimony in the game, so now my grandmother, my Lola and my little Tongyeong, my great grandfather are both characters in the game. They are family, friends of Kenan. And it was important to me to have the guerrilla fighters present in the game. So you will see guerrilla fighters. You will meet my great grandfather and my grandmother. And I thought that it was. Very exciting to think that I could help sort of immortalize my grandmother's story in this way and rather than it being sort of masked in fiction, it's much more directly about her. Yeah. And a and a dedication to her. So Keeneland is the main character, she's living in her small town, which is already under the control of the Japanese of some Japanese soldiers, and she is asked by her mother to go pick mangoes in the forest. And she happens to upon a one day, which is the mythical dwarf, one of the many mythical dwarves of the Philippines. That one day his name is Edgar. He's running away from a sarangi, which is the Filipino Minotaur. It's a large bull. And essentially, Edgar has found this mysterious ancient scroll written in one of the ancient Philippine scripts by Bayan. And he sort of enlists Kino's help to figure out how to translate what this mysterious scroll is and why there are these evil beast that are seem to be coming after it. And so through. Edgar is able to enlist China's help because in that moment in meeting him, she all of a sudden gains this magical ability to see Tagalog words over different objects in her environment. And there's. So then they think, oh, maybe this is linked to the scroll.

Pattie Umali [00:29:35] And so the player eventually has to go about collecting items in their environment to complete different quests for different characters throughout the game. But you're you're also building up your own Tagalog English dictionary that you will use to translate the the mysterious message that's on the scroll and. So that's sort of the adventure side of the game, and then there's also a really traditional Final Fantasy battles component to the game where you get to fight the different mythical creatures of the Philippines that are under a evil spell. Who knows who who cast a spell, but. It's been a really exciting experience to learn so much about sort of the law of the Philippines, which I've always learned about in tidbits and random ghost stories from my family. But to find more of the scholarship and find out that it's becoming it's experiencing a resurgence of interest in the Philippines as well has been really exciting. So this has been a great time to make a game about Filipino mythology. Concept, the story for the game has been a moving target, certainly. Especially in the sense that we had to sort of reassess what we could include in the game after our fundraising campaign and. I was very intent upon making sure that you would be able to speak to different characters in the village and in the town throughout the game to sort of not only learn basic facts about Filipino culture, but also to. Give the players a sense of what everyday life would have been like in that context. I was really wanting to be as ambitious as to find real life testimonials and directly insert them into the game. But sadly, ambition is a dangerous thing and we didn't get that far. But I definitely intend to make the story of Quina, not just about her sort of magical

adventure. There's definitely some. Drama and some stakes for her life with the Japanese being there in the sense that sneak a little teaser for the storyline is that a colonel of the Japanese army comes to their town and he her mother has just been widowed. And he, the colonel, takes a liking to her mother and is interested in becoming and in taking his her mother back to Japan with him after the war ends.

Pattie Umali [00:32:42] So there's sort of the sense that. Things are there mistakes and that certainly it is in China's best interest to also see the end to the war and so. I would love really so we're releasing the first half of the game in just a few weeks, actually at the end of this June, June 30 is the first half of the game. And we're hoping to release the the rest of the game by the end of the summer. But even after the full story is out, we plan to continue to add more information about the about Filipino culture, more information about World War Two, because. This in an effort to make the game more accessible to non gamers. I created two versions of how to get through this game. There's discovery mode and battle mode. Battlement is the traditional sort of monsters versus players combat style that you would see in a game like Final Fantasy discovery mode. We we sort of stumbled onto after talking to more potential players who were not as familiar with combat games, battle style games. And so we started discovering mode, which is essentially that you fight with the pen instead of the sword. You have to answer trivia questions about Filipino culture, Filipino mythology and World War two Philippines and sort of the knowledge defeats and vanquished the monsters and still is able to get you through the story. So in order to make that aspect of gameplay much more rich and interesting, we'll definitely be adding a lot more content for the rest of the year. Really. I think that. We need new mediums for sharing stories. I think that audio visual are great ways to share and in their very engaging and. To keep up with the newer generations of Americans and of people all over the world, I think interactivity is a great thing to insert into storytelling. And I thought that a specifically a role playing game such as at the such as what the girl who seizes and a role playing game in the sense that you're following a certain character in their progression through the story, you really get to know them and they're what they're feeling and what and may help them make decisions. And I think that games like that are a powerful way to tell stories and to learn about other people and other characters in a way that an arcade game or an arcade style game would not be able to communicate as well. I would love for people to just now have that sort of notch in their brain recognizing that World War Two happened in many places and that the experiences depend on where those places were in during the war. And I especially would love to see kids asking their parents, asking their grandparents what happened to our family during the war and what were their experiences. I think. To just sort of get players who are of the Filipino diaspora to recognize that this is not some foreign story or some fiction that never really happened, it's a real thing that they can connect to and that they can learn so much more about their family, about and. I would really love to see Filipino grandparents playing with their younger kids, with their grandchildren, in part because it's hard to teach. It's hard to teach your native tongue in another country, especially among Filipino Americans.

Pattie Umali [00:37:16] There was such a. Such a drive to assimilate in in earlier decades that teaching Tagalog or Besi or any native tongue was not encouraged because of worries of the kids. Getting getting an accent and as a second generation Filipino American, I feel really fortunate to. Recognize that I can be many things and an American all at the same time. And so I think. That would be great for kids who play this game as well, and certainly not just kids. I mean, I think that a lot of. Young adults might be able to connect with this game as well, because they may have also heard from the grandparents about the war or about from their families. And all of us have certainly been yearning to

see a Filipino face on screen that we can connect with. The presence of Filipinos in the United States and in the United States and in US history in general has been largely over shadowed or even kept hush hush. The fact that the Philippines was essentially an American colony for the first half of the 20th century is not something that most Americans today would want to come to terms with or have to face. You know, Teddy Roosevelt is a very lauded president in our history. Yet the statements that he made about Filipinos during the Spanish American war and many times after our shameful and disappointing and I think that coming sort of with that colonial mentality, a lot of the Filipinos that came here even earlier on, we're not eager to speak up about the fact that they were Filipinos, not to mention that there was there were many cases of discrimination along the West Coast in communities that had gained that had built up a Filipino migrant population.

Pattie Umali [00:39:43] So. If anything, I think a lot of Filipinos thought, OK, I'm going to put my head down, work hard and kind of blend in, and that's the key to the American dream, not to make a big fuss and draw a lot of attention to myself and. I think a lot of that extends to World War Two and also certainly the fact that the European theater was just such a huge part of World War Two and certainly the Pacific theater was. More damaging to the to that part of the world, much more damaging. And so I think those are some of the reasons I certainly wouldn't venture to say all of them. The as I said, the majority of my context of World War Two in the Philippines has all been through my grandmother, but I should also mention that also my grandfather fought as well. Unfortunately, he passed away before my mother even moved to the US. So I never got to hear his stories. And from what I can tell, I don't believe he ever really talked to my grandmother about it either. But I do know that he was older than my grandmother, so he was about 17 or 18 when the war started. So he also fought. I think it's my my grandmother is one of 10 siblings and her oldest brother, who was mentioned in the memoir, Sister, he was fighting alongside with my great grandfather. And of the 10, eight were alive during the war and all of them survived. And and I certainly assume that that was sort of a more fortunate outcome compared to other families in the Philippines during that time. But. Every one of them also knew someone else that fought or had to hide or flee and. I think it's so important for Filipinos to find out what happened to our our ancestors and our bloodlines in those times and because it certainly has. Influence the way that they raised us, and so I did want to mention that within my family, multiple there are multiple veterans. My great grandfather, Antonio O'Gara, my grandmother's brother, sister Barbara, in fact, her older brother Tony, who we mentioned, also did some scouting, I believe, for the guerillas and my grandfather, Pedro Eduardo.

Pattie Umali [00:42:53] I can almost guarantee that the vast majority of Americans know a Filipino American or a person of Filipino heritage, Filipinos are the third largest group of Asians in the country, and most people don't know that. I don't think most Filipinos know that and. I think. Certainly, Americans are very are at a time when they're open to learning about lesser known groups throughout the world, and the Philippines has been a very strong ally of the United States, for better or for worse for. For all this time and, you know, we we care about many of the other allies that are out there in the world, certainly it would be important to care about the Philippines and. Not to mention that so much is going on still in the Philippines that is worthy of the world's attention, and I'm very happy that I get to make a game that. Gives. The Philippines and its people, positive stories and stories of honor and respect during a time when, unfortunately, the Philippines doesn't get much great, good press these days. So I think it's important to have other stories about average Filipinos, common Filipinos, not just the very VIPs out there for the world to consume.