

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Rodney Salinas

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.

Rodney Salinas [00:00:05] I was born in the Philippines. I was brought here when I was a whopping one year old raised in New Jersey. I come from a pretty typical Filipino household in that my father served in the US Navy and my mother was a registered nurse. So they came to Jersey City, New Jersey, of course, to raise a family. And that's where we first started in Jersey City, moved further south into the central part of New Jersey, where my sister and I were raised. And from there, we just wanted to see me and my sister go to college.

Rodney Salinas [00:00:39] We did that and of course, just raised our families. So my dad, like many other Filipinos in the Philippines, actually enlisted in the Navy from the Philippines. Yeah, it's a pretty big tradition and a calling for many Filipino men. And it's really, quite frankly, one of the only tickets that they have to come to the United States if they don't have a formalized college education especially, or are not working professional. So that's exactly what my dad did, was that he enlisted straight out of the Philippines, that my mom and the rest is, as they say, history. So my father, of course, became a United States citizen. I became a naturalized U.S. citizen, as did my mom. My sister was born here. Much of my family still in the Philippines. My mom is one of nine brothers and sisters and only a handful of them made it over here to the United States. So I have many, many aunts, uncles, first cousins, second cousins, you name it, back home.

Rodney Salinas [00:01:33] And even my parents to this day have since retired and moved back to the Philippines because of the fact that so many of their family members are still back home over there. And the honest to goodness truth is that the US dollar goes very far in the Philippines. So they're able to live a very comfortable life back over there and retire. So it's just there in twenty seventeen will be back there again in at twenty twenty. Having been born over there in the Philippines, but raised here, I always consider myself one point five generation. I'm not quite first generation, I'm not quite second generation. I'm somewhere in the middle. I identify heavily on both sides of the aisle. I consider myself strongly Filipino.

Rodney Salinas [00:02:09] But you know, when the United States anthem is played, I'm the first one to stand up and put my heart over my hand, over my heart. So, you know, I consider myself lucky because I can celebrate that duality, you know, in my own special way. Pretty unique. I think. I actually didn't hear about the issue until about nineteen ninety three, nineteen ninety four. I was a freshman at George Washington University here in D.C. and you know, through the community leaders in the area, they just started educating me about what is the issue exactly and what the struggles that these veterans are facing. And as the son of a Navy veteran twenty years, I couldn't help but really think about

what if that was my dad. You know, when you think about that, you get emotional and you start thinking, gosh, I would absolutely go to bat for my dad and do whatever I could to make sure that he got what he was promised from day one. So that's why I got really involved through college. I think it was maybe an awakening right in college with so many. I would say Filipino Americans kind of go through where you are trying to find out who you are in terms of your identity. And then at the same time, you're learning more and more about your history, about the people who came before you.

Rodney Salinas [00:03:25] And so I think that kind of all converged for me in college, especially in my freshman and sophomore years. And it was the community elders at the time who really opened up, were able to tell me their stories and tell me more about the history of our people in the United States. And I gravitated towards that. It's just something that I found a lot of interest in. And because of those stories and the proximity of where we were at this campus is four blocks away from the White House. And every time there was a protest or a demonstration, we were the first ones on the speed dial to get a call and say, Rod, you know, like we've going to galvanize today, tomorrow at the White House. Can you round up some students that are like minded and believe in the cause? And let's go down there and show them what we're made of. And we answer that call every single time. And I was proud to do so. Gosh, they're pretty. Sort of looking for exciting, especially as a college student.

Rodney Salinas [00:04:29] I mean, that's what you think about, right, when you look at footage of the sixties and stuff like what they were fighting for, something that they believed in. This is my turn to do the same. And we used everything from puppets, if you will, that kind of demonstrated what the issue was, obviously signs. But the one thing that for me truly resonated was when the demonstration where the veterans themselves handcuffed themselves to the gates of the White House. Could you imagine that being like 70, 80 years old and you believe so much in what you're fighting for, that you're willing to handcuff yourself to the gates of the White House knowing that you will be arrested and that you're willing to fight for that. And as a young 18, 19 year old, you see that you're like, my gosh, if you're willing to do that, I should be willing to do just as much, if not more, to be able to fight on your behalf. So it's moving images like that that really get me.

Rodney Salinas [00:05:27] I can recall also one time that we were demonstrating at Arlington National Cemetery during Memorial Day and every Memorial Day, it's that Rolling Thunder tradition where veterans from across the country, tens of thousands of them, come to Washington, D.C. on their Harley Davidson's. Right. And that's the thunder part. It's just so much noise from the motorcycles. And as they were coming through the bridge over Memorial Bridge and going towards Arlington National Cemetery, we were there demonstrating and every single one of them recognized that we were two Americans. I mean, that's amazing. That's so powerful. They didn't care about what my complexion looked like. They recognize that these men served on behalf of the United States and that they were denied what they were promised. And the fact that despite what we looked like, you know, they were willing to support that cause and believed in it just as much as we did. That's that's absolutely powerful.,

Rodney Salinas [00:06:24] John, or as we call him, students, Tito John, which is Uncle John at the time, was working at George Washington University. And so he served both as an administrator but also as a faculty excuse me, as an adviser, if you will, to the Philippine Cultural Society, which is the student organization for Filipinos on campus. So that was my first interaction with John back then. And it was through his stories, through the

community events that he invited us to, that we became more aware of who we were as Filipino Americans. And that was really how we got introduced to teach to John over the years. He's invited me to be part of countless events and demonstrations on behalf of the Filipino veterans. So much so that I've grown so close to him. I invited him and his wife Elvie to be the godparents for my wedding. So now I don't only have the honor to call him Tito John. He's also my nino John. So he's very close to me. And I has a very special place in my heart.

Rodney Salinas [00:07:25] John's played an integral role in the fact that he has been able to not only galvanize the members of the community together around the issue, he's helped educate them as well. But more importantly, he himself has walked the halls of Congress up and down, left and right, to make sure that everybody that needs to be aware of this issue is truly aware of this issue. So when you talk about a community leader that is putting his mouth, you know, his actions where his mouth is, it definitely Jungle Negrito. There's no doubt about that. Over the years has been like twenty five, almost 30 years now, there have been so many different ceremonies or events surrounding particular veterans, some of them have reached the age of one hundred. And I've been lucky enough to be there to meet them. You know, it's incredibly touching to talk to them, to see them. And back in the it was I think it was two thousand and one. We did a ceremony for one of the veterans and I got the chance to present him with one of the awards over there. I actually have photos of it. And it's so touching because at that moment you realize, my gosh, I'm just playing my new part in this veteran's life to be able to honor all of the sacrifices that they did many, many decades ago. And I consider myself pretty lucky.

Rodney Salinas [00:08:51] The unfortunate part is, you know, with every passing day, more and more of them are not here, you know, so I kind of take it up as my flagship to do something on their behalf, like whether they're here or not anymore, they're their legacy needs to continue on and we can't stop fighting on their behalf. I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't angry at first, because the more you learn about just the straight facts about the fact that these hundreds of thousands of Filipinos were, for lack of a better word, almost conscripted to serve alongside the American forces, basically the president realized that, hey, we're not going to win the Pacific if we don't enlist the help of the Filipinos that are there. And because he commanded them to serve alongside the Americans, we were able to win the Pacific at the end of the day. And then you learn the fact that at the Recision Act is passed after that and all of the promises that they were made to fight on behalf of a foreign country were taken away from them. Write US citizenship benefits conferred on both themselves, on their spouses. I mean, you can't help but feel like a part of you has been taken away and that more importantly, that they're not recognized as a US citizen. And you have to understand, for me, that hits home. I'm a naturalized U.S. citizen. And if it wasn't for my father serving in the US Navy, I would not be where I am today. So, yeah, it hits home to me so hard. And I think that as I talk to more and more of my classmates back then at GW and I, I told them about the struggle that they were facing, I think they saw that they were like, hey, Rod, we get it. Like, it means a lot to you. This is an issue about justice and we want to embrace it. We want to become a part of that. And, you know, I think it was nineteen ninety nine. There was a national gathering of Filipino American organizations through the National Federation of Filipino American Associations. And there was about seventy five to one hundred young people that we had brought here to Washington, DC. And that was the one issue that we all galvanized around together to demonstrate on here in Washington, D.C..

Rodney Salinas [00:10:59] Could you imagine, like, you know, up to one hundred young people that cared about a singular issue that we're willing to fight on behalf of these veterans? It's it's absolutely moving. And, you know, I'm just very fortunate to have played a very small part in the entire history of it. I I don't like to be cynical, I just think that, you know, it's a it's an ugly part of history that, you know, you would like to sweep under the rug so that nobody hears about it. But I think that that is why it's important for me and members of the community that care about the issue to continue to bring it to the forefront. Right. To shed light on the issue in history. Right. They say that only the victors are the ones who get to tell their story. Right. And I could not disagree with that more. In this particular case, we have a story to tell, and we were an integral part of that victory in the Pacific. And I think it's well within our rights and well within our duties to bring that issue to the forefront. When you look at other civil rights movements and other communities of color that have been affected throughout the United States history of their rights being taken away or they're being swept under the rug, there's so many threads that are similar or parallel. Right. You want to look at Japanese Americans being interned at the same time in World War Two. Right. But then be getting the restitution that they deserved many, many years ago, OK, many, many years later. But they didn't do that and they didn't achieve that without fighting for it. They had to tell their story right. In order to receive the benefits that they got. Right. And the recognition of their history. And that's all we're trying to do at the same time is to fight for something that we believe to be just and to tell the story that, quite frankly, the history books in most high schools don't tell.

Rodney Salinas [00:12:54] And I guess that's why I'm so thankful to have the opportunity to participate in this project of yours, because we get to tell the stories firsthand and the people that actually lived it. And if we don't document it now, it will be lost to history. And I'm glad that we're able to do it. It doesn't work if you don't believe in it and you have to understand the entire story. You can't just fight for one aspect of it or blindly follow a leader without understanding what is at stake, because I think you're missing the point, I think, by educating yourself about the issues at hand and then listening to not just one leader, but maybe several of them so you can get different standpoints. I definitely learned that lesson. You want to, you know, pick and choose your battles, as they always say, and understand how to navigate the process for sure, even though at the time I was studying international affairs, I learned a great deal about political science and how the halls of Congress operate. How when you knock on door to door to door, trying to get a meeting with a member of Congress, that it doesn't always work, that they're not always going to meet with you, no matter how just your cause may be or you believe it to be. You learned that lesson the hard way. And you learn also that at the end of the day, you don't have the votes that you need in order to enact the change that you want. And that means you've got to go back to the drawing board every single session and you got to figure out, is there another path forward here or is there another way to success that we haven't thought about before?

Rodney Salinas [00:14:32] And then I think the most important lesson throughout all of this is just not to give up. You know, it would be easy for us to forget these veterans so easy and it would be easy for us to just accept that it's lost to history. And I think we would be remiss if we did that. I think we owe it to them to continue to fight for everything that they deserve and to not let history forget their sacrifices. I was here in Washington when we had the big ceremony, if you will, where we recognize I think it was well over one hundred one hundred fifty different veterans and gave them the medals themselves to each and every single family. So I was fortunate enough to be part of that ceremony and to see every one of those families get them.

Rodney Salinas [00:15:16] You know, the thing that touched me the most was the fact that I can't even say how many. But many of those families were representing their grandfather because they were no longer here. And so, you know, you see these families come up and accept on behalf of their loved one, this Medal of Honor. It's so moving. It's so touching. And they were just so thankful that finally they're being recognized. So it was quite a touching ceremony, to say the least. I hope it doesn't get lost in everything that they're doing today. You know, I almost feel like back in the 90s when we were demonstrating and, you know, galvanizing our efforts together, it felt like maybe a little bit more of a stronger effort than it does feel today. I'm a little bit biased and I'm definitely far removed from college students today, but I felt like back at the time it was top of mind for so many of us, not just in Washington, D.C., but nationwide, to the point where when we traveled to other Filipino college student conferences nationwide, it was on the agenda as a discussion, as a topic of discussion so that we can all share our thoughts, the history behind it and everything. And now I don't hear that buzz. I don't hear that that same clamor for justice. It's almost like it's just been forgotten about. And I think these kinds of efforts that we do through Filaret are so important because that's part of the education that we'll continue on for generations to come. I don't know if there's anything off the top of my mind right now that I can think of where there's a particular community that has been forgotten about Persay that speaks to me personally more than this particular issue.

Rodney Salinas [00:17:11] I just hope that the generations that are able to vote now, the millennials persay, are have enough of an attention span to pay attention to this issue, to be able to feel like they're still connected to that issue. I often feel like younger generations just feel a little bit disconnected because they've got all this technology at their disposal. And so the news is about today. It's about right now. I just saw that tweet and that news is about what happened right now, not what happened seventy five, eighty years ago. And it's almost like they could care less in some cases. And what I'm hoping is that we can continue to raise that flag for them to make sure that they are continuing to be aware of that history so that, again, it's not lost. I would love for them to meet the veterans, the ones that are still left, right. When you meet these men and you listen to their stories and you see their statesmanlike, you know, look, when they wear full dress and they're wearing their military dress, they're just so proud of who they are and what they did on behalf of the United States. And I think that in just a brief conversation with a veteran, you would be able to get that sense that they're there fighting for what they were promised. And it is our duty to give them what we promised them to fulfill that promise on their behalf before they all leave this earth. It's it's pretty basic. I don't think that there's anybody who is in their right mind that would disagree with the fact that we promised them something. We owe it to them. It's that simple.

Rodney Salinas [00:18:55] And I hope that the young people that, you know, that are college age now have that opportunity before it's all gone to us. I don't know the exact number of Filipino World War Two veterans that are still alive today, but I guarantee you it's not the same as it was a year ago. And if we don't take that opportunity to engage with them now, to hear their stories now before they pass, I'm telling you, it's going to be a big regret on our communities behalf. And I hate to see that happen. I'm a sales director, market leader for a tech company based in Chicago, Illinois. The the movement, if you will, certainly taught me a lot of lessons that I still carry on today. In the business world in particular, I'm not afraid to fight for what I think is right and just not whether I'm in a conference room or boardroom and a heated team meeting or whatever it is. If I feel like I've got a point to make and I feel like it's the right one and it's based on reason and

thoughts, I'm not afraid to advocate for it. The other thing it's definitely taught me is how to bring people together around this specific issue that I feel passionate about. I think that that's important and certainly carries on throughout your professional career. And perhaps the last thing that I say that I learn from it is just the idea that I can always turn back to my mentors and the people that have come before me. So seek advice on how to navigate through a particular issue or a particular concern that I'm working through. It's certainly something that we did when we were fighting back in the 90s and the 2000s on behalf of the Filipino veterans. It's just something that I continue to do today in the business world. Even after learning about this history about the Filipino World War two veterans and how the United States rescinded their benefits to them, that doesn't make me any less of a proud American. It really doesn't. On my bag outside there today, you'll see an American flag proudly displayed because. I believe in the promise of the United States, I believe in America. That's what my family came here for, is to live that American dream that you can follow not only just your dreams, but if you were promised something that you can you can get it OK. And through I'm hoping that, you know, we're not that's not going to disappear. And I want them to understand that I'm still I'm still a very proud American. And I want to be able to demonstrate that. I don't want people to feel like I'm, you know, disgruntled or I feel like I've been had had something taken away from me. I just feel like, you know, it's something that we need to continue to fight for.

Unidentified [00:21:36] I really do.