

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Jonathan Melegrito

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.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:00:05] I grew up in the Philippines. I was born in a town called Munoz, and whenever I see her in nineteen forty four, I'm a son of a veteran. My father was a World War Two soldier who was serving under the USA forces and was one of those who marched in the Bataan Death March. My mother was a teacher. They were both teachers. And after the war they continued on teaching and they immigrated to the United States in the 1960s. You know, I didn't really learn much about World War Two until I was already in college. And that was because in our history lessons, that wasn't much said about the war. So I didn't have much of an awareness of the atrocities, the suffering, the hardships until early on college, maybe because I was not intentionally interested in it, because it was not something that was motivated me was of all to to learn about.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:01:19] My father didn't talk much about it at home. And I tried to get his stories much, much later when it was too late because he couldn't possibly remember or either he was in denial and he was too painful to remember these. Experience that he went through, so and I regret it because I wish I'd learned much, much sooner about the history and know the whole situation in the Philippines. You know, during the war, I started college in the Philippines and I finished my senior year in college here. I've been in Missouri. So that's where I graduated college. There was a time when Filipinos wanted to go to America because that's the land of promise, the Philippines was under the United States for over 100 hundred years and we were always. Somehow encourage that in order to improve our lives, that a better life, we have to go to the states. So that was a dream to go to America and that's what my parents did. And, of course, being a veteran and one of the benefits, although he didn't avail of it, was the worst. She could be naturalized as an American citizen. But that happened much later. He actually came to further his studies as a teacher, but they both came as teachers, you know, took their postgraduate degrees and later became citizens.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:03:09] And we all moved here in the 1960s and settled here ever since. Because that bill came in later, like in the 1990s, and they came in the 1960s, so he wasn't really availing of those benefits. That's where we settled. I don't know why we settled in Missouri, because most Filipinos, when they immigrate to United States later or California or Hawaii or Washington state, but for some reason, we ended up in Missouri because of our connections to the United Methodist Church, where the missionaries and because my father was also an itinerant Methodist minister as part of his part time job. And we were able to get scholarships from the Methodist Church. And that's why I went to this small college called Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri. We were I think we were the only Filipinos. In fact, I was the only foreign student in that college in Missouri. I was the only for instance, as I said, most Filipinos immigrate to California. And Missouri

was like the last place you would find Filipino. So I think we're probably the only Filipinos except for nurses in Columbia and some of the major cities.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:04:31] There were a number of Filipino nurses at that time in the 1960s and 70s. They started recruiting Filipino nurses to fill the hospitals in this country. So, in fact, my brother found his wife in one of the hospitals he was working. And so, yes, there were a few nurses and they increasing in number over the years. And today there's like Filipino nurses all over the country, like you can find him in any hospital in this country. My parents petitioned me. They were citizens first. So after I graduated from college, they petitioned me to become a U.S. citizen, as did my three other siblings for us. I wasn't really aware of what significance that was. I didn't really become a citizen until much later than that of my other siblings. And the reason for that is I became an activist in the 1970s. And there was a time when the Marcos dictatorship was ruling the country. And I happened to join this group of militant activists in in Washington, D.C. when I was removed. And because of my status, it was hard for me to change my citizenship because I felt at the time very loyal to the Philippines. I don't want to become an American citizen. I want to continue being a Filipino citizen because I didn't really feel a sense of belonging in the US, even if I was here. And that explains in a way why I was actively involved in the English nationalist movement to restore democracy in the Philippines.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:06:31] And I say that because my involvement in that movement in a way encouraged me to. Be conscious of the other civil rights issues that we're being addressed. You know, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement here that ended the movement. So in a way, I when I look back, I appreciate, you know, being involved in this movement because it raised my consciousness eventually about the equity and the justice struggle that the Filipino veterans were fighting for. In the beginning, it was just organizing the community to oppose the Marcos dictatorship, so he was generally, you know, just informing the community, holding rallies and demonstrations, leafleting and picketing and doing discussions. And it was a process of being consensus and consensus. You know, those are my consciousness was essentially educated and informed by my involvement in this grassroots efforts.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:07:43] And eventually, because the whole period of time, almost 20 years, that took all our energies into being focused towards this effort to end the dictatorship, I grew to become really very educated and informed not only about the issues in the Philippines, but also about the issues here. So I welcome those opportunities, he said, eventually taking on leadership positions in the national organization that I was really grateful for the chance to also make a difference in our community. It's really strange because it was only when it came to this country. That I began to feel a lot more passionately. Interested? In my homeland, in the country of my birth, because when I was there wasn't the history lessons that were taught us were about America, literature, science. Popular culture, the movies. And because we were a colonized country under America, we learned a lot about America and we fell in love a lot about American culture. We mimicked a lot of American celebrities. We were more than we were more than Americans in that sense, so that when we came to America, we were essentially Americanized. The American dream was something that everybody, you know, was looking forward to achieving. So that was my own mindset when it came here. But then when I get involved in the nationalist movement here.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:09:36] I began to realize what I was missing that I miss. Growing up, appreciating. My natural my natural heritage, my, my, my cultural roots, I miss reading about our literature. I miss singing her songs. I miss the stories. So that when I learn about

the Filipino veterans and what they endured during the war, I became even more passionately interested in our own history. I mean, why, why? Why were they fighting? Under the American flag to begin with, to defend America. All right, so I started to raise questions in my mind about why is this? Why is my father, who is a Filipino, fighting under the American flag? And I learned later on that, well, you know, that's what. Being under American colonial rule meant that you are subjected to the interests of your colonial master. So I got a lot of education from my involvement here in the civil rights organizations, the nationalist groups, and that's where I began to increasingly become very, very concerned about especially the injustice that Filipino veterans were suffering because of the 1946 Recission Act, which really was the reason why the two hundred sixty thousand soldiers of what felt like they were deprived, they were denied their rights and their status as veterans. And that was to me, a turning point in my becoming more deeply involved in the civil rights movement here in the U.S. When I came to Washington in nineteen sixty six to eight, six to nine after I graduated from college, I discovered that there were living veterans who were living in Washington, D.C. There were probably about two dozen of them. And I was really moved by the fact that these are veterans in their 60s, 70s. Marching the halls of Congress. Visiting their representatives, demonstrating under the noonday sun, even when it's raining or snowing, there were out there demonstrating. And then I thought about my father. He was standing in Washington and he was living in Biloxi, Mississippi. And I wrote him and said, look, dad, I need your comrades, you know, the veterans that you fought with in Corregidor and but they're here in Washington. And so he came to visit and he joined them in a rally in front of the White House. And ever since then, when I see this aging veterans and some of them in crutches, some of them in wheelchairs, you know, walking the halls of Congress. Lobbying for bills that they know were impossible to grant, and it was a it was a struggle that despite their age, they somehow managed to continue fighting for that really touched me. And it made me even more determined to be part of this movement to campaign to restore equity and justice to this Filipino veterans.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:13:17] The organization that organized this, aging veterans, the living veterans here in Washington, D.C., was called the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans. So it was basically a national group that the veterans themselves, they organized themselves. You know, they had some leaders who really were very good in organizing, coordinating, recruiting. So it was it became a very strong national organization of Filipino veterans. And they were the ones that I got to meet when I was here in Washington. I got to meet their leaders, get to know them personally. The Callender's stories went with them, joined them in pickets and demonstrations, invited them to our homes for dinner. So it became so like a family relationship that we developed and nurtured over the years and became very close to them. We treated them like our fathers, like our uncles and grandfathers. And, you know, when when when they were getting old and frail, we'd give them rides and pick them up, give them transportation, feed them. And of course, over the course of those years, some of them passed on, died. Until now. There's only four of them left. Starting with, you know, 30 or 40 at one time hearing this in Washington, D.C., anyway, where I lived, there's only four of them left and the oldest one is 102 years old. And we're still speaking out, you know, attending memorial events and the World War two memorial, you know, still speaking out against the injustice that this veterans were suffered. So it's a very inspiring experience to know that despite their age. Despite their physical handicaps, that they're still able to inspire that kind of participation in our community, too, so that we could look up to them and say, yeah, we want to do this for you. We want America to recognize you. And of course, finally, we did Congressional Gold Medal that was passed three years ago. They were finally recognized. But, you know, there was a small symbolic measure that restored some measure of dignity and honor to

them. But somehow, because the recession is still very much. You know, a law that has not been repealed continues to be a source of bitterness and pain among the living veterans. So you asked me earlier about the organizations I was involved with. So other than the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans, there's a local group called the Philippine American Heritage Federation, which also did, you know, some education, were mobilizing a petition gathering. And then in nineteen ninety seven, there's the National Federation of Filipino American Associations, which is a a national umbrella group, you know, for different Filipino organizations throughout the country.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:16:36] And then later on, there is the National Network for Filipino Veterans Equity. And that was also a co-chair of the there was the Filipino civil rights advocates, which also advocated for Filipino veterans rights, was based mainly in the West Coast. So there were other smaller organizations affiliated with the national effort to secure justice and equity for Filipino veterans. So there were a lot of small organizations across the country that affiliated with the national effort to restore equity and justice and seek recognition for Filipino World War Two veterans. And then eventually, when General Taguba, um. Organize the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Network FilVetRep. That's when we started focusing in on getting the recognition that eluded them for more than 72 years. So over the years, in the span of 40 years, there's been a a growing and gradual acceleration of those efforts, which sometimes felt futile and impossible because we always got rebuffed. You know, and you ask me about what kind of bills or gains did they get? Well, very minimal. The one thing that stands out is burial benefits. And, you know, the joke among the veterans is, yeah, you know, they are more than happy to give us burial benefits. But what about our health benefits, our pension? So that was really the painful irony of the work that they did. Yeah, they they kept lobbying and visiting and all they got was burial benefits, which is true. I mean, there really were no other substantial.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:18:39] Benefits that they got despite all the hard work that they did now in 19 in 2009 when President Obama signed the stimulus bill, that was a writer called the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation. We're finally, finally Filipino veterans got a very small lump sum. Amount of fifteen thousand dollars, which is really peanuts, considering, you know, their sacrifice. But that's what they got, there was a one time lump sum payment with the condition that they shouldn't ask anymore. I mean, if that doesn't add insult to injury, I don't know what is right. So that was in 2009. We fought for that in all the organizations certainly are grateful, especially the senator, Illinois senator from Hawaii who championed this legislation. We are grateful to the other senators and representatives who supported this bill because they knew that they have to do something. And if something is better than nothing, so they did get that compensation. Some veterans use it to buy homes to support their families. But it was, of course, not enough to compensate for their sacrifices. And it wasn't until, you know, in twenty fifteen when when we started the campaign to secure recognition that we finally were able to get Congress to grant them the Congressional Gold Medal, which is one of the highest civilian honor given to a group of people who were considered providing distinguished service to this country. Of course, they are very grateful, you know, as I said, there are a few remaining living veterans in Washington, D.C. and when they receive the their medal in a ceremony, there was a very symbolic and very dignified. Their families were, of course, emotionally relieved in some way that there were some there's a thank you. I mean, all they really wanted was a thank you. It was not so much the money, you know, they were not really looking for. Monetary compensation, even if that certainly would have been helpful. What they really, really wanted was an official recognition by the United States government that they served under the US flag. That they exist, that they mattered, that they fought side by side with

American soldiers, and yet after the war was over, they were forgotten like us, if they never existed. Now, that was the most painful part for them, for their families, for us. You know, when I think about them now and when I think about my dad, you know, it's emotionally wrenching. I mean, what humiliation, what pain, what bitterness, what else could they possibly do to say, I fought in this war we honor? I served my country with dignity. I sacrificed like everybody else. Why were we singled out? Why were Filipinos singled out among the six to six nations? That were part of the allied forces, Filipinos were singled out. To be deprived of their rightful benefits, why? Why were they screwed, right? Now, if this doesn't anger you, you don't have to be related to a veteran, well, you have to do is this is a Filipino veteran. This is my people. They serve America. Why is America treating them this way? Like the little Brown brothers who will just acquiesce and accept and surrender. And suffering in silence. What happened to the sacrifices? So when you think about it and you absorb it. Then you cannot back stand up and say, yes, we will fight with you. For how long? As long as it takes. For now, if all that we can get is the symbolic recognition, we'll settle for it, of course, because while you're still alive, at least you know that before you died. This government that took away your rights, at least was able to say thank you, sir, thank you for your service. We appreciate it.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:23:48] But of course, it's never enough, because so long as that transition act is still there. Then the battle is never over, this dark chapter in American history is not over. With anger. With a sense of outrage. It goes back to being a colonial subject, and when you're colonial subject the colonial master. Can choose to do whatever it wants to do with you. As I mentioned earlier, there's this phrase, the little brown brother, and that has very, very negative connotations. It means I can treat you the way I like to because you're inferior to me. I don't have to give you what you deserve. You are less than human. You're second class citizens. He didn't deserve to be on the same level as. The white soldiers, even if they fought with you under the same flag. Now, that's the root of it. And so long as that. It's perpetrated so long as that is the narrative, so long as that's what drives American policy. That we are little brown brothers and we don't really deserve this benefits the status, the recognition. Because Filipinos were colonial subjects, and that's even if we're an independent, free people now. Somehow there's still that. Tens of. Racially motivated view. That these are less than human beings, I mean, it's. It's a blunt thing to say, but. He talked to this veterans, and that's that's what they tell you. Because they say, what what else do we need to do to prove that we equally serve, that we are equally as human as you are, that we are equally as capable? And since we're not being treated equally. But by virtue of the way you have treated us to your legislation, the recession and the depravity and deprivation of benefits, you're taking away all those rights, how else can you explain that? It was very. Encouraging to. Share my own personal story. Which really shows you how powerful personal stories are, because that's what smooth what move these students. When they learn that their grandparents or uncles, you know. We're treated this way. It became personal. There were no longer just numbers that they read in newspapers like two hundred sixty thousand veterans marched in a death march. Ninety thousand died. Those were statistics. And if you just learn them in school statistics. He doesn't move you. But when you begin to be confronted with the human dimensions. Of this, people, Filipinos who marched and dined and served and yet humiliated. Is getting close and personal. And I think that's what really, really got into their guts. And made them realize. It's a matter of honor. For us as well. That we either grandchildren should stand up and fight. Now, what was necessary, of course, other than the emotional expression of anger, was to learn the history. And of course, if you're a student of history, then you begin to see. What? The root of all this.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:28:06] For me, it all began white, just like my questions about why is it and because these are students, they naturally the first thing they did was to study more of the history of the war, US colonial history. You know, the period where an American scheme, I mean, even dating back to the Spaniards, so this whole history of being colonized has really a very adverse effect on the way we think of ourselves, that, in fact, it affected our sense of pride among ourselves, the sense of inferiority. It reinforced that sense of inferiority. But when you realize why that is, that this is not because you're a damaged culture or because you are naturally inferior, that there was a cost to this, then you begin to see the big picture and you begin to understand the dynamic that's causing all this discrimination, know all this injustice. And that's what happens to these students. They woke up. And you know, today, when you look at what's being studied in schools, there's hardly ever any mention of that dark part in history and it's all cosmetized, it's all made to look like, you know. America did this wonderful thing, liberated the Philippines from the Japanese. I mean, this is a nice narrative. So you're always constantly grateful to America because, hey, we were liberated. We are freed, but they never tell you the rest of the story, which is the real story. Now, that's what these students were able to grasp, and when you grasp that history, then you moved into action. You don't need convincing anymore. So they were among the first when we had that action of the death march in front of the White House in August of nineteen ninety seven, students from George Washington University marched and Mass. With the veterans to watch the White House and there was such a a very inspiring scene to see them chanting, waving banners, calling for justice and equity for the veterans, marching side by side with them, getting arrested with them.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:30:33] And that began a movement that then spilled over in other campuses all over the country. So that when we had our national conference in August, nineteen ninety seven in Washington, D.C., there were over close to a thousand, most of them young people who came because that was our number one rallying cry. Justice and equity for Filipino veterans. So I I'm humbled in a way by. My. Mentoring them by encouraging them, by sharing my story. All I did was I just said. Make them confront the reality that these are not just numbers reported in newspapers or in history books, these are your grandparents. These are your Filipino brothers and sisters who fought in the war. And that made a big difference when you humanize the soldiers who were otherwise being treated as just numbers. It started in bar. We were having drinks, um, you know, when you're working hard, you know, you try to relax and and, you know, we were just talking not so much about the issues that were pressing us or we just simply catching up on his other and don't Taguba gathered, you know, activists, people who work in Congress, people who are lawyers, people who work in government. It was just essentially chatting about where we are, uh, you know, exchanging stories, exchanging notes. And it started that we were just questioning the way the Veterans Administration and the U.S. Army were arbitrarily setting up. Procedures were veterans who don't have complete records can qualify for this compensation that I mentioned earlier, so we thought there were arbitrary, the fact that you cannot produce a record was somehow discriminatory. And so we're trying to figure out how to best address this, you know, through either some executive action by the White House and the administration. So they did eventually create a some kind of a interagency group to study this. So we're still continuing to actively address that issue of how. So many veterans who applied for this could have been a veterans equity compensation were denied simply because they did not satisfy the standard of eligibility that the Veterans Administration and the US Army established. We felt it was discriminatory, it was arbitrary, it was unfair. And a lot of veterans were denied that opportunity to get this benefit. So that's what prompted us to that. Then start looking at, OK, what else can we do? Since we're fighting on this front, you know, to ensure that those who whose claims were denied

can appeal. So what we're doing that and they're still appealing. Let's look at another possible ways to. Somehow lift, lift this veterans, lift their spirits, restore some dignity and honor, and that's when the idea of seeking for the Congressional Gold Medal came up and we said, well, it's about time and it's been over 70 years that they have not been recognized, like they don't really exist in official American history. They've been forgotten. So that began the discussion. And the more we talked about it, the more we say, let's definitely go for it.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:34:58] And so that began the formation of the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project, which the main goal is, of course, to obtain the Congressional Gold Medal and secure the recognition that they deserve. But also to establish a digital museum educational program so that their stories of bravery and courage can be preserved and somehow in a museum accessible to the classrooms so that America, American, the American generations that follow, you know, today's generations and tomorrow's generations will learn about. This veterans who fought under the American flag. So it was a two fold mission and we achieved the first one. So now we're doing this oral history project in order to complement this educational. Project that we're going to build to preserve that and enshrine that story in American history, basically. It's important because they are part of history. It's important to recognize that. There are this group, this group of people called Filipino World War Two that has played a very important role. Not only in the achievement of freedom and democracy in America, but also because they contributed to the prosperity of this country. They contribute to a better future for this country so their role cannot be dismissed or minimized. They played just as important role as anybody else who fought in the war in bringing about where America is today. For us to recognize that is also to instill in us a sense of pride, because that is important if we don't have a sense of pride. In anyone. Service people or military, whoever is serving this country, if we don't have a sense of pride in what they did and what they contributed, then it deprives us of the humanity and the dignity that we claim to have. So that's important to recognize that for our own sense of pride in our country, in our people. And then finally. If history does not mention. That part where a group of people played a role. And we go forward not forgetting them and not recognizing them, not acknowledging them. What does it say about this country? If if our values if you want to uphold our values, I think lucidity. If we want America to be known as this country that embraces everyone. Then we would be it would be a miscarriage of justice not to acknowledge and give the importance to the role, the service that this Filipino veterans played during the war. So it has a very fundamental significance.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:38:42] That just for us today, but for future generations. And be thankful that they were indeed part. Of making America great, I mean, I hate to use the phrase, but they do make America great. The grassroots efforts, the long years of. Fighting in the trenches, demonstrating, educating, organizing, mobilizing, visiting Congress. I think it illustrates the power of the people when they are committed to fight for what is right. They said to the minister what Congress did, but unless you put pressure on Congress, unless you are in your face and saying you do the right thing. They'll never do anything. But because of this swelling. The the the mass and critical movement of people who were dedicated. To ensure that justice is done for this veterans. Even if it took many years, it took almost 40 years, I mean, of at least actively fighting, it took that long. It shouldn't have taken that long. So I thank the people, the grassroots, the communities, I'm just I'm just talking about Filipinos, I'm talking about, you know, the American public basically finally to realize that they have as much a stake in it. This is not just a Filipino thing. This is actually an American story. This is not just a Filipino story of a bunch of brown men, you know, taking up guns to fight the Japanese. But that's the narrative that we've been told, so that's

why it was easy to dismiss them. But this is actually an American story. And it's important for the American people, and this is why they saw the dignity and honor that comes with participating and supporting these efforts, that they have as much at stake. That's Filipinos do in ensuring that this Filipino veterans, their story is enshrined in American history. And so in answer to your question, why did they pass it, the American people finally decided. It would be unjust not to do so. It would be wrong not to do so. This is the right thing to do and. It's late, but it's better late than never. And, you know,.

Jonathan Melegrito [00:41:25] Congress responds when the people tells them what to do. Sometimes they don't. But in this case, it took more than 40 years for for us, the people to move this otherwise, you know, cold and indifferent politicians to do something. And I think it's a lesson any time there is a cost that is worth fighting for, if you don't speak up, if you don't organize. And you don't let Congress know loud and clear that what they're doing is wrong, that nothing's ever going to happen and. We made it happen. When they look at that screen and they see the face of a Filipino soldier. And they hear the voice of a Filipino soldier. And they begin to soak in this story. Of why this Filipino soldier to begin with died for America, for the Philippines, for freedom and democracy. I want that viewer to be touched, not just informed, not just made aware, not just intellectually, but to be touching the heart. And say, I'm proud and proud that America did this. I'm proud that America is preserving the stories of these brave heroes because I owe it to them. I owe it to them.