

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Cirian Villavicencio

Please Note: Due to a machine-automated transcription process, there may be errors in this transcript.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:00:05] So my grandfather was from Iloilo and he was a Filipino scout, a mechanical engineer, in fact, and was a Bataan Death March survivor and of course, fought in World War Two. Unfortunately, I don't have that much information about his service, given that there was scant information that was never told and never passed down to the family. But what we do know of him was that he was there in Bataan at the time when the Japanese, of course, invaded the Philippines and he contracted several diseases as well. But he continued to persevere and help the Philippine constabulary and the US military with some broken vehicles during that period of time. He ultimately was captured and was one of those individuals who became prisoners in Corregidor and joined, of course, the 80, approximately 80,000 men and traversed, of course, in that horrible death march to the prison camps. And luckily, of course, he survived. Well, my family came to the United States in 1986. My father was petitioned by a Filipino import export food company, and he was the first one to come here to the United States. And he came here in 1985, and my mother and I shortly followed him. I was five years old when I came to the United States. He was asked to hold an administrative position for this company that he was petitioned to work for. He did graduate from one of the top private universities in the Philippines in Ateneo De La Salle University, and with his masters in business administration. And he ultimately was promised to do again administrative work for this company. But when he came to the United States, he had, I guess, to prove himself because he was given very menial tasks, including delivering Filipino foods to restaurants and Asian grocery markets, which he did.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:02:57] And ultimately he had to prove himself not just in the business, but in his leadership. And so his colleagues recognized his talents and skills, and he ultimately eventually climbed up the ladder in the company where ultimately he retired as a vice CEO of the company that he was petitioned to. And in fact, had an opportunity to save the company from going bankrupt during his ascension to his high levels within that company. My father worked a lot and he was really disappointed and upset that he wasn't given initial opportunities to succeed. But he, as I mentioned before, had to prove himself at every level where he had to show that he was capable of. Running a company independently. So I grew up, ultimately, my father was given more responsibility. And my family moved from Long Beach because that was our port of entry was Los Angeles. And we moved up to the Bay Area where he was given the opportunity to lead a separate sister company for the business. And he was put in charge of that particular business. So I grew up here in the Bay Area, a very diverse community. I lived in, we lived in South San Francisco, right adjacent, of course, to Daly City. And during, of course, the 1990s, there was a boom in the Filipino population in Daly City. Even the high school that I attended made up approximately 40% of the student population, were in fact, Filipinos. But interestingly enough, I was never taught about my history, nor was I taught about my culture. In the history books, there was rarely an opportunity to learn about the

contributions of Filipinos during World War Two and as well as Filipino Americans here. And it wasn't until I really got to college that I learned more about the role of Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders in general, and less about Filipinos, Filipino Americans.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:05:54] And so I was never taught about this history. When I was young, I never saw myself in the history books that I read. And so I felt it important that in my role, there was an urgency in my part to get myself involved more politically, to advocate again for not just Filipino-American issues, but AAPI issues in general. Even though we lived in a very diverse community, there was a lot of work to do to see more people who looked like me in leadership positions, whether it be in political positions and teaching positions as well as in other professional positions. There were multiple mentors and I've been, I was privileged and blessed to be mentored by a number of people. One person was my US honors teacher in high school who recognized that I had a knack about politics given I always ask questions about certain, you know, injustices that in that time people of color also faced. And so he recommended that I do an internship, and he connected me to my local congressman's district office. Congressman Tom Lantos, who represented the 12th Congressional District at the time, represented San Mateo. He himself was very unique individual, given that he was a Polish Hungarian Jew and was the only member of Congress to survive a Nazi concentration camp. He was very young when he was liberated. Interestingly enough, he was liberated by the Soviet Union, not the United States. But he found his way here and taught economics at U.C. Berkeley, San Francisco State, before running for Congress. And I had the opportunity to serve as an intern in his office. And that's where I worked for his office, helping with immigrant casework and helping, in fact, the Filipino American community in securing visas for visitors, as well as helping those who are undocumented at the time, who was seeking help from our congressional district office.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:08:40] So he was one who was very much an influence to me. Since I was a first generation immigrant, my parents never saved enough money for college, for me to go to college or university. My parents were not familiar with the higher education system here in the United States. And so I had a challenge in financing my college education. In fact, I graduated as salutatorian of my class. And when I asked my family that I would go directly to a university, they told me, Son, I'm sorry, we're not able to afford it, because we've never saved a substantial amount of money for your education. So if you want to go, you'll need to finance yourself. And so I served my internship with Congressman Lantos. The summer of my junior and senior years, and I decided to apply for the US Army ROTC scholarship knowing that my paternal grandfather served in World War Two and in a way to honor his legacy and to honor his service. I would do the same. Even though I didn't know too much about him, I decided to apply for the scholarship. And if you're unaware. In order to secure the scholarship, you needed a congressional letter of recommendation. And here I was serving with Congressman Tom Lantos, and he, I decided to request a letter of recommendation from him. And I thought, you know, that his staff would just write a template letter for me and send it off. And Congressman Lantos surprised me when he was back from Washington, D.C., he decided to call me, his 17, 18 year old intern at the time to his office. And he sat me down and he took the time to get to know me, about my family's history, about my family's challenges, about my grandfather.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:11:02] And I told him about his service during World War Two, at least the amount of information that I knew about him. He was impressed. And he ultimately wrote me a wonderful letter. And long story short, I did receive the U.S. Army

ROTC scholarship. I went to U.C. Davis on the backs of this scholarship. And without him, I would not have been able to fund at least my first year of college. So I did the U.S. Army ROTC program for a year. But once I got to UC Davis, there was opportunities to apply for other scholarships and grants. And of course, I applied and I was given and awarded the UC Regents Scholarship that paid for my entire tuition at that time. And I thought, wow, this is wonderful. I have the ROTC scholarship. I have the UC Davis Regents scholarship as well. I could use one for, you know, room, housing and board. But I was told that since both were public scholarships, I had to choose one. I was forced to choose between one or the other, and I chose the UC Regents Scholarship. It was really a difficult decision because there was a part of me that wanted to serve and continue on with the program. But in retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise because I graduated as part of the class of 2002 and of course, a year prior 9/11 happened. And so when I applied for the US Army ROTC scholarship, I would never have known that our country would be at war at that point in time. And so it was a blessing, because if I had, in fact, completed the program and was commissioned as a second lieutenant, I would have been sent to fight in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:13:29] There has been no doubt about that. I would have been part of the Signal Corps telling tanks where to fire. But that wasn't my destiny. And I think that's a great transition point, because since I was not fighting the war, there was something else, that there was something else for me to do. And that was, of course, following my passion for politics, following my passion for advocacy. And I think it's partly because at that time there was a large number of Filipino Americans where I was growing up, but I did not see Filipino leaders. And of course, things, of course, started to change, but I wanted to be part of that. How would I help empower people of our community to become more politically active and civically engaged? How was I supposed to do that? Because for a long time we were invisible. We were not seen. Our issues were never heard. I was always, there was a quotation that really inspired me, the saying of, If you're not at the table, you're part of the menu. And it is something that I share with my students all the time. That representation matters, that their voices matter, that if they don't participate, then other people will make decisions for them and for our community. And typically, they will not take into account, you know, their interests or their communities interests. And so it's an opportunity for me. And I've devoted a good number of years of my life in both the classroom and in my advocacy work within the California state legislature and nationally in my role as an AAPI state wide commissioner for the state of California, to be a spokesperson, to highlight, again, these important issues that our communities faces, everything from data disaggregation to identify, of course, the inequities that exist within our communities to, of course, Honoring our history, including, of course, awarding the Congressional Gold Medal for my grandfather and for the many thousands of Filipinos who fought so valiantly to protect the United States and to protect for the cause of freedom and safeguarding democracy. So I had the opportunity to be one of the very first supporters, of then Senator Obama. I was working, in fact, at the state capitol for the Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus. And interestingly enough, when even before he ran, we knew that Hillary Clinton would run for the nomination. And there were a number of people in the building who supported Hillary and Hillary Clinton's campaign. And then, of course, there was this very young, very charismatic senator from Illinois. That really sparked my interest because, as you recall, he gave the keynote address during the 2004 Democratic National Convention. And I remember watching that speech and was so inspired by it that I told my family who was around me, that if this person would run for president, I would support him and back him 100%. One, of course,

because he was a person of color. And again, President Obama or, then Senator Obama had, he was young. He was very, again, charismatic. And so I had the opportunity to, in fact, start the grassroots campaign for him here in Northern California. I was invited to, in fact, to fly to Chicago and to meet up with his initial staff. And I was told to come back here to California and to start raising money for him and his campaign. And so, long story short, that was a very successful campaign. With the work that I did in supporting his candidacy. I was elected as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 2008. And there I had the opportunity to advocate for Filipino World War Two veterans.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:18:29] That was the time when our veterans were still denied benefits, veterans benefits for their service. And I remember having the opportunity as one of those delegates to sit and converse with policymakers, including then Speaker Nancy Pelosi and others. We had access to these individuals. And so I started some very brief conversations with them and started talking about what we could do, given that they were afforded, I believe, citizenship a few years before. But they were not given the opportunity to receive benefits. So I felt that I did touch them. And ultimately, of course, in 2009, with that legislation of getting us out of the Great Recession, the American Reinvestment Act, part of that legislation did award, as you recall, benefits to living veterans who are U.S. citizens and benefits for those who are Philippine nationals. But it was very meager. Even though it was an accomplishment, one could argue it was too late. A good number of these men had already passed, but it was something. And so that was one of the things that I did in conjunction with President Obama's nomination during the Democratic National Convention, was also advocating for Filipino World War Two veterans. So it's interesting. I'd like to. It's an interesting story with my advocacy of helping get this man elected into office. The first person of color to the White House, President Obama. And, of course, one of his last acts as president was to sign the Filipino World War Two Congressional Gold Medal Act. And to me, those are bookends in my work as this individual who deeply cares about, you know, my family. And honoring my family. Honoring my community. Serving my community. That is just wonderful to see that circle and to have that happen is just amazing and being part of history.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:21:09] I was approached by General Taguba about this campaign back in 20, I believe it was early 2016, and I was the chair of the California Asian Pacific Islander American Affairs at the time as a gubernatorial appointee. And so here was an opportunity for me to advance this issue statewide, here in California, where, of course, the largest AAPI population in the United States reside. And it was clear to me that I should pursue this. This was personal to me. My grandfather was a Filipino World War Two veteran. Here was an opportunity that I can make a difference and spotlight this issue. And I helped with this campaign. General Taguba spoke with our fellow commissioners, got them on board, and we made this a priority. And so I had the opportunity to write numerous letters to members of Congress, including to President Obama, representing, again, the approximately 7 million AAPIs living in this great state. And, of course, as I mentioned, we passed it. I was given the opportunity to be invited by Speaker Ryan to attend the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony. And how unique an experience that was. I was going there to not only honor my grandfather, but also represent the AAPI population here in California. And I remember that day quite vividly. It was a joyous and momentous occasion because we all knew that this was going to be part of history. I took my seat where next of kin were given the opportunity to sit. And of course, the event began with the playing of the Philippine national anthem. And that really surprised me. And it touched me deeply because here was a country. Who have denied

these veterans for decades, the benefits that they deserved, having fought so valiantly, so heroically for not just the Philippines, but for the United States.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:23:51] And what a wonderful tribute it was to see that the Philippine national anthem was played first. And after it concluded, then they played the U.S. national anthem. And in that unity was, it resonated with me so much because it did show the respect that this country was now recognizing and honoring the service of these valiant men. And at the conclusion, I was in tears. It hit me to the very core because not only was speaker Ryan now recognizing the heroic, valiant sacrifice of these men. He was not only just speaking to me, he was speaking to my grandfather, who died, who I was representing there posthumously. I was standing there to represent the many generations of men who just fought, as well as their families, who sacrificed for the cause of democracy and freedom. And here was again, an opportunity. Here was a wonderful event that allowed members of Congress, ironically, the same Congress that passed the Rescission Act, that stripped away these benefits that was promised to them, of course, by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. That day was a form of a cleansing because they were now honoring the sacrifices of these men and giving them the due recognition that they deserved. And yes, that stain will never be forgiven. Understood. I understand that completely. But that act went a long way to finally put these men their sacrifice and the history, to be commemorated again by this country that finally recognized again them. And no longer were they treated at that point in my mind as second class veterans. I was shaking. I was really captured. I felt captured in that moment of history that I was witnessing. It was as if I was reborn.

Cirian Villavicencio [00:26:57] Not just for me, but for my grandfather and the generations again, who were being represented at that ceremony. And it wasn't just the people in that room that were being recognized. It was also the many people, again who have been, the many veterans who were in the Philippines and those, of course, who have passed. And so it was a momentous occasion. And I have just been so blessed to have experienced it and to be part of history for our communities is so deeply special for me and which I'll remember for the rest of my life. We finally got a seat at the table.