

# Duty to Country

## *Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project*

### **Interview Transcript: Luisa Antonio**

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

**Luisa Antonio** [00:00:05] The immigration story of my family started with, I would say, my grandfather's generation. What I know is that my grandfather came here as early as 1919 and he worked in the Hawaiian sugarcane plantation, and I believe it was in Ewa Beach in Hawaii. During that time, a lot of his relatives, his cousins, came with him to provide for their family. And at that time, in 1919, they probably were just newly married. My grandmother, Yuservia, and my grandfather Pedro. So they're starting a family. And that is when a lot of them decided to board the ship and they ended up in Hawaii and they worked in the sugarcane plantation. So that's the beginning of our immigration story in the United States. My family's military history, I would also say that my family's history is from the fields to the battlefield. I would like to summarize our immigration story from the fields to the battlefields, because my grandfather's cousins came to the United States and my grand uncle, Julian Miguel, I just found out, I would say, you know, two decades ago that he fought in World War One only because there's a photo of a headstone in one of the cemeteries in L.A. that says Julian Miguel, veteran, World War One. And I also have a grand uncle who's called Jeronimo Jeronimo Miguel, who is buried in the Arlington National Cemetery. And one of my first trips in Washington, D.C., just to check if it's really true, I went to the Arlington National Cemetery, and that's where he was buried. And there's another grand uncle who actually was deployed from Salinas, California. I was able to look at the archives, you know, records, and it says Salinas. So I would imagine that he was part of the first and second Infantry who went back to the Philippines in the Second World War.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:02:22] So I really do not know a lot about their story. They passed away before I was born, but there are bits and pieces that I am pursuing, you know, now that I have been involved in the Filipino World War Two veterans services and advocacy to find out more. But as far as our family coming here, it is either they work in the farms, they joined the military, and this same grand uncle who was deployed from Salinas also worked in the Alaskan cannery. That's, you know, as far as I know about them. I met one of them that's Uncle Max, but not, you know, those grand uncles who have passed on before I was born. Geronimo Miguel is one of my grandfather's cousin. We call him Uncle Imong or Lolo Imong. I know that he sometimes he even called himself Eme because I have postcards that he sent from the East Coast when my older siblings were receiving postcards from Lolo Imong. So what I know is that from the headstone. I don't know a lot about, you know, military acronyms. It's SQ photo map. So I'm not you know, I'm not too sure, you know, what he actually did. But that is as far as I know. But when he passed on, he sent a lot of his belongings to his brother. I don't know where those belongings are now. Like, if they have been distributed to relatives. But when I was young and I visited the house where he sent his belongings, their whole ground floor actually has, like a lot of his books. So you could tell that he was probably more educated than, you know, the other cousins. He read a lot and he had given, you know, books even to my father.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:04:43] So he calls you know, he calls my father, Ramon. Like, to my brother, Ramon, from Brother Imong. So those are, you know, very interesting stories. And as I've said, when I was much younger, like I was probably five or six years old. You're just a little kid, like in awe. You know, of all of these little things like spectacles, like books, little things. I don't remember if they had medals there. But that's, you know, as far as I know with my uncle or Lolo Imong. My father is Ramon, Ramon Antonio, and he was born in Laoag, Ilocos Norte. He and my mother were born about one year apart. My father would be the age of the veterans, but he never served in the military. But he has always done carpentry work, as far as I remember. He, when they were like building the Gabo airport that's now the Laoag International Airport. I heard, I wouldn't have any way of verifyin, I heard that he also did some carpentry work then. But my grandfather always probably, you know, into arts, like I heard he was a painter. When I was growing up, we had like, paintings in our house. And my mother would said, like, your dad painted that. So he was an artist. So after probably like trade school, my mother was an elementary school teacher. My father was a trade school teacher. Because at that time, you know, there's a lot of interest in woodworking. And that's what he taught. They went to Davao City and that's how, that's where they got married. I found out, I would say seven years ago, where they even got married in Davao City. But I heard that it was very difficult for them to find jobs, teaching jobs in Davao.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:06:54] So they had a friend who told them that if you go to Manila, there might be a job there available for you because there is a furniture company that's hiring. So my mother and my father ended up, you know, in Caloocan City, were they lived and that's where they had children. So all of you know, the children, there are four of us, were all born you know there. So my father's immigration story is a family reunification one where he was petitioned by a younger sibling to come to the United States. And it took not 20, but 10 years. He was petitioned in 1969, and he came here to the, United States, in 1979. And at that time, he got lucky because there was a furniture company that was hiring in San Francisco, and he immediately was able to get a job as a cabinetmaker. But he was not just a cabinetmaker because that's his title, because he was able to make furniture, so if there are like conference table orders from big companies such as Wells Fargo and the San Francisco Ballet, Foremost-McKesson, those were the companies they would give that to him to do. So that's how he supported us. I came in, well my mother was part of the petition. However, my mother died before she was able to come to the United States. Other siblings were already, you know, they got aged out, so they became 21 years old. And you cannot be a derivative. I was the only minor child. I came here when I was 16 years old, you know, in the eighties. And I finished two years of my high school here in San Francisco. But it's like my father was a single parent and that's how he supported me, I would say, as a cabinet maker, a cabinet maker for the company in San Francisco. When I was at San Francisco State, I was looking for internships because I wanted to figure out what I wanted to do.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:09:27] You know, that's what, you know, students do. And I have been trying to get an internship, perhaps like in the local government to learn more, you know, about ways for me to use my degree. And one of our professor said, studying political science, you don't have any cumulativeness because not a lot of you will become a political scientist. So, it was very interesting, it's through this manicurist that I found the community in San Francisco. So I was talking to this manicurist and she asked me if I'm familiar with the Filipino community in San Francisco. And I said, I'm only familiar with my community, you know, I live in the Bernal Heights. And she steered me to an organization called the Filipino Early Intervention Project. And the Filipino Early Intervention Project is a

nonprofit organization that provides services to youth at risk, they also had tobacco use intervention program, and they also had an employment program, and they are actually providing services to the Filipino community. So I was not really interested in any at risk youth program. But when I got there and I talked to the coordinator, they said that they already filled that, you know, position for an intern. But they said, we are looking for an intern for our Youth at risk prevention program. And the coordinator happens to be there. So I ended up interviewing. So, you know, the long and short of it is, I got hired and he said, come back on June 21st. And I showed up. But he said, you know, don't come here but go to the juvenile hall. I ended up at the juvenile hall, and it was the very first time I've been to the juvenile hall.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:11:39] You know, I go through the metal detectors and go through the doors and, you know, door slamming. And I ended up in the courts. I met three young Filipino kids and the rest is history. That's how I started, you know, in the Filipino community. So that was in 1991. But at that time, little by little, we see, you know, older men in the South of Market and people would say, oh, they are veterans. So they're saying like, okay, you know, they are veterans in the community. But I had a boss who would like, in the Filipino community, you're not just like working with the sector in the community that you are assigned to, you're working for the community as a whole. So maybe like few years after, I got deployed to, I say deploy, you know, because they will send me to the Filipino World War Two veterans, you know, meetings. And then my boss would say, you know, maybe you can take notes, maybe you can like, you know, make copies for them. And that's when I got, you know, to know more than, you know, the Filipino families in the South of Market. But little by little, I got to know, you know, the Filipino World War Two veterans, because there were a lot of them. So when I started in the community in 1991, it was also a year after the 1990 Immigration and Nationality Act was passed into law, and the Filipino World War Two veterans were given citizenship and they were able to come to the United States. A lot of them, I would say, came to California, only because there are a lot of support services that are already in place in California, both in Southern California, in Los Angeles and here in San Francisco.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:13:51] And the hub of those services in San Francisco are in the Tenderloin and in the South of Market. And that is when I started working in the South of Market, and that is when I started, you know, learning about the seniors. We didn't call them veterans, the seniors who were veterans, and they were the ones who were getting organized in the South of Market, you know for, it is very common for, you know, the Filipino veterans to get, you know, organized into groups and organizations. And one of the organizations in the South of Market is pretty much, you know, in close proximity to my office. And that's how my boss would deploy me to provide support to the veterans who were either in their meetings or like, making copies for them. And that's how I learned about their existence, number one. And little by little, what they have been advocating for or what they have been unhappy about, you know, during those times. When I learned about and got to know a lot of the veterans in the early nineties, I really didn't know or the community didn't really know how to provide, you know, services to them in an effective way. Sadly, not until 1997 when the Delta Hotel fire occurred. And Delta Hotel is actually the house of over 200 Filipino World War Two veterans. And it is in the heart of the South of Market, at the corner of Sixth and Mission. So, as you know a community service provider for many years, some of the people who know me and who even know my telephone number, they called me and they asked me if I would come because the Red Cross already opened up a shelter at the recreation center on Sixth and Folsom.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:16:00] What they needed are individuals who, number one, who have some casework experience, and number two, who could speak, you know, Tagalog. The Red Cross would deploy nurses, doctors and other medical professionals to do intake and to see what they need. But we are not sure if they could speak Tagalog. So I came in as early as 2 a.m. to make sure that, you know, they are number one, the people I know and a lot of them I know, are okay. And number two, when the team of the Red Cross volunteers are there, that I'm there. The other important thing also that we've done is when you have a shelter, what happens is they call organizations such as the Salvation Army and other nonprofits that are able to provide meals for them. And unfortunately, the Filipinos who got displaced by the fire are not the soup and sandwich, you know, kind of individuals. So they needed more. And that's one of the things that, you know, we had to look for, and we needed to look for Filipino restaurants who are able to provide them with the Filipino, the hot meals. It can just be the porridge or, you know, the lugaw. And that is, you know, first and foremost, because they wouldn't really eat a lot of American food. And then secondary would be to ensure that, a lot of them are already, you know, advanced in age and they already have like either, you know, chronic illnesses that require medication. So one of you know, one of the important things that we had to do is to ensure that medications that they left when they were in a rush, of course, to evacuate, you know, is replaced or refilled. So those were like, you know, the two main things.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:18:06] But there was also this eagerness to return to their building. And we were asking like, it's very dangerous, you know, you can't go there. But a lot of them insisted that we need to get our paperwork. We need to get our paperwork. And we're thinking like, what paperwork could be so important that you have to risk your life, you know, to get there and get it? And one of the things that they would say instantaneously would be, you know, our military records, you know, our discharge paper and those sort of things. And I was thinking like, a discharge paper. Okay. You know, so we were able to work out with the fire department and some of them were allowed to go in, but a lot of them already had, you know, their documents also. And one, I remember in one of the visits from an attorney, attorney Luton Sinco, who's been providing immigration legal services to them. Whenever she comes, they would not stop talking about a couple of things. One, when can my children come to the United States? And two, we received a denial letter again from the VA. Always, When can my children come? I received a denial letter. Because at that time, they kept applying for pension benefits that they are not eligible to receive because of the Rescission Act. But then there's really nothing we can do at that point. We can, you know, the attorneys will just answer, we need to work on that. That there's a whole, you know, policy change that need to happen. But we also, but, you know, the first thing that we need to do, is to make sure that you have a placement. You know, a housing placement.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:20:09] You cannot live in the shelter. And we need to make sure that you have permanent housing and other wraparound services. That is when we realize that we cannot, you know, go on, just like, with just seeing them and providing them with copies of their minutes of their meeting. A lot of us, there were a group of us who came together and said, perhaps we can open up a center for them. And that was the beginning of a discussion. So in 1998, we got together and put together a vision of what a center will look like. So we figured out what services they would need, and we came up with a mission to honor, to serve and advocate for the Filipino World War Two veterans. And that was the beginning of the Veterans Equity Center that was established, well we got our 501c3 in 1998. And we opened up our doors to the public in 1999, on November 11, which is Veterans Day, when we do a groundbreaking and opened up our center. It's the Veterans Equity Center because we were fighting for equity. That has always been

something that we heard from them. We need to fight for equity, to put them in equal footing with the veterans, with their fellow veterans who served during the war, to acknowledge that the services, the combat service that they have done in the Philippines is recognized, acknowledged, and therefore they should be receiving benefits. So that's where the equity, you know, come from. There are no accidents in life, only foundations for the future, you know, work that they will do. I always say, once a case manager, you are always a case manager. The work that I have done for the youth, how to manage cases, how to build linkages with services because as a case manager you don't necessarily provide services, you link them. Those are the things that you can put in your toolbox and you can employ them. The only thing that I really had to learn because I really didn't know a lot, is to understand the law as to why they are not eligible. I pretty much had to read and have a crash course, you know, from anyone who will be interested to teach me and to understand the structure of the benefits that they're eligible to receive. So I am able to tell them that these are the reasons why you are not eligible to go to the VA health clinic, because at that time, if you don't have a service connected disability, you are not eligible to go. And then the other thing will be understanding, you know, where the services are and where I can plug them in. Like the biggest thing after the fire, is housing. So building, you know, a wraparound service for the veterans is like, I would say I was never a senior service provider. And when asked, what will you do once all of the veterans are gone, are you going to close? And the answer is no, because I'm building an infrastructure to provide services to older adults in the community because that's what they are. But for the veterans, it's just, you know, pretty much understanding, where can you send them for services? There is the County Veterans Service Office, you need to know who they are. You need to be friends with some social workers at the V.A., you know, at Fort Miley. There's just like very specific knowledge that you need to have in providing services for the veterans, that you need to add to your toolbox of, you know, I would say case management that you have already done in the past. The veterans have felt that the center was their second home.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:24:46] One of the veterans actually, in one of our anniversaries said, it's a place called home to them. It's because, number one, we spoke their language. To them, it really means a lot that when they enter a center, they are either, you know, able to talk to them in Tagalog or their dialect. And because I speak Ilocano, that's also a plus because there are veterans who would come, and sometimes that connection of just being able to talk to someone is important to them. It's certainly important for their mental health. During that time, a lot of them, they didn't have any family members. We became their family. There are a couple of veterans that I remember, Major Demetrio Garino. He would come to the center, but he would ask my permission. He'll say, Luisa, can I come here? Because I just wanted to talk to you. And some of the stories would be not pretty much war stories, but pretty much reminiscing how it was to live at home. Because he said, You remind me so much of my sister, my sister that I didn't see after I left and joined, you know, the army. I never saw her after that. She probably died. I didn't have any connection anymore. But, you know, you remind me of her. The other one, Dr. Marya Lim, was a Bataan Death March survivor. And he would tell me Bataan stories. And those are the experiences that I treasure, because not a lot of people can talk about that experience. It is very traumatic. But Dr. Lim would come and would tell me stories of, like, how hard it was, how painful it was to see people killed, how painful it was to see, you know, people just like drinking water from the canal, you know, eating anything that they can eat on the side of the streets.

**Luisa Antonio** [00:26:51] And those are the things that I you know, take. It is not to me, it is not, I provide the services. It is you allowed me to be a part of your life and you allowed

me to, you know, to listen to your stories. And that's what you know, I pray that it meant, you know, a lot to them because it meant a lot to me that they're able to talk to me and share their stories. So that is like, that's what home is about. And if there's nobody to talk to at home, they come to the center and they get to talk to their apo, their sister, their any you know, it's like a part of their family. So, you have, you know, the veterans. They have their spouses. And one of the things that they will tell me when I would talk to them is that, you know, in Tagalog, "speaking Tagalog," when I'm gone, you take care of my family. And you take that to heart. And who are these family members? It's their widows. And at that time, you know, it's already, I would say 2018, 2019, a lot of the veterans are passing on, but their families from the Philippines are coming. And we also look at the ages of the children of the veterans. They are in their late fifties and sixties. So you have a whole group of new consumers of your services, but you cannot call it the Veterans Equity Center anymore because it would be a misnomer to your services. So what we have done is we got together as a board and we looked at how we can refine or redefine our mission and adjust our mission statement to make sure that we are able to expand our services, to make sure that we are responsive to the needs now of just older adults, the widows of the veterans and, you know, the children of the veterans who are also in their sixties.

**Luisa Antonio [00:29:05]** So that was when we changed our name from the Veterans Equity Center to the Bayanihan Equity Center. But the word bayanihan has a lot of beautiful words to it. We have the bayan, ani, which is harvest, anihan. And all of these things pretty much is, I would say, represented by this iconic nipa hut where people carry. And it takes, in the United States, what it means to us is a whole community moving our Filipino community forward. It is where, you know, we move. So we take the, and everything is when you say bayanihan spirit, it is a collective, inclusive, you know, community working together to uplift us, in this society where we're in as immigrants in the United States. So that is, you know, the bayanihan spirit that is now serving a bigger, you know, the wider population, I would say the Filipino community, because we serve the immigrant community, children of the veterans, the spouses, or immigrants and other groups, especially, you know, during this time. And it's just timely because of COVID response. We were able to expand food security programs and housing programs to ensure that we are still relevant in the community. Taking care of the veterans is like a big thing. And I'm going to borrow one of our founding members, Rick Rocamora, who is a documentary photographer. His commitment to the community or to the veterans community is, even if there's just one veteran around, we will still fight for you. I take that to heart because after learning their stories, after meeting, you know, a lot of them, it is more than just we say like, well, I'm a veteran, and your response is, thank you for your service.

**Luisa Antonio [00:31:30]** How do you thank the people who made so much sacrifice for this country? How do you thank them? And for me personally, it is the work that I do. If I can only make a little bit of, you know, contribution to make their lives a little easier in the United States. I know that the advocacy has not been perfect, but for me to be a part of the movement with people who've been advocating for the veterans. That is how I would fulfill that promise and I would, you know, work on what Rick Rocamora said. We will fight for you until the end, because they did. They fought for us until the end. So that's my commitment.