

Duty to Country

Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project

Interview Transcript: Rick Rocamora

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

Rick Rocamora [00:00:05] I left the Philippines in December five of 1972 after martial law was declared in September. I was lucky that my former wife was an American citizen teaching at the international school, so I was able to get my immigrant visa in three weeks. So I arrived in San Francisco, you know, with \$500 in my pocket. And immediately I was trying to look for a job, the same job I was working in the Philippines as a pharmaceutical rep. And luckily, after three weeks, I got a job selling pharmaceuticals, January of 1973. So I started my career in the industry. So I traveled, you know, my territory was the Bay Area up to Reno, Nevada. And then after six months, the company called us in L.A. And anybody who's not here is no longer working for the company. So what they did is they went through the lists of reps and at the middle. the one not performing, were terminated. So I was lucky. I was doing very good. In my first six months, I was doing number one or two. So I was kept in the payroll and just continued working. But I wasn't learning very much out of that company. So I liked to have more experience. So I decided after a year I moved to another company which became part of Dow Chemical. So I stayed there for 17 years, 16 years, and worked from local rep to a regional management position responsible for 10 million dollars of business every year and traveling all over with extra mileage program from the airlines and hotels and rent-a-cars. I never had a SLR camera when I arrived I was using an Instamatic. But when Marcos deported Ed Gerlach, who is a Maryknoll priest, he stayed with us here in California, and he said, I'm going to Hong Kong to speak about the issues of martial law.

Rick Rocamora [00:02:31] If you like, I'll buy you a camera. It's cheaper in Hong Kong. So when he came back, he brought me a camera and that started it. So I was still doing corporate work and started making pictures. And I traveled to Nicaragua, El Salvador, and still working for the company. And when I showed pictures to my coworkers, I said, Oh, that's in Mexico. But they did not know that I was traveling with the Sandinistas and documenting repression in the street in El Salvador. So after so many years, you know, thinking about quitting, I finally quit in December of 1990 because there was a company merger and there was an offer from the company for those who'd like to take a buyout. So I took the buyout and became a full time photographer, knowing for a fact that I would not be staying at the Ritz-Carlton. But even Motel 6 might be impossible. So, because my motivation is really to be able my develop skills in photography to work on issues related to human rights, civil liberties, discrimination. It's more of like advocacy work using my camera. I think it came from my early, growing up years. When I was going to school in a Catholic school in the Philippines, I will on my way home during lunch time I'll stop by the barber shop to read the daily newspaper and when I went home in the afternoon, I'll do the same thing. And I was really fascinated with political rallies in town. When the candidates come over, I'll stay up to the 2:00 in the morning hours and just listen to speeches and all those lies that the candidates were talking about. So when I was in the grade school, after finishing grade school, I applied for the Philippine Military Academy to be admitted.

Rick Rocamora [00:04:43] But I was very poor in math that I did not pass. Even in high school, I will protect people if they're being taken advantage of by the nuns or the priests. And I remember my graduation event in high school, while the valedictorian is delivering a speech. I am also delivering a speech in the back, talking about the problems of the Catholic Church and how the parish priest is handling our program. In fact, I organized a strike in high school and I represented the student body in front of the local mayor, listing all the problems being created by the Catholic priests. So right from the very young age I have this kind of advocacy and anything that's really a violation of human rights or, you know, discrimination. My heart is close to that. And even during corporate work, I will never allow myself to be treated unfairly. And I will raise my voice even to managers. So it was not difficult for me to transition from corporate work, selling pharmaceuticals and staying at Ritz-Carlton and doing all this travel that I had been doing. It's a spoiled job, and because you are important in the company, there are only 13 of us in that department responsible for billions of dollars. They will take care of you. So, but the transition to what I was doing in photography was a lot easier because my point of view and my perspective and my, I think what helped me with that work is because of my selling skills. I came from the selling world, that I could deal with people, I can understand and convince people to do something for me. And that really helps. And up to now, I would credit that as one of the abilities that I developed through the years.

Rick Rocamora [00:06:59] And it's helping me now even with my other work as a photographer. What helped me a lot is also I'm a quick learner in languages. I know how to call myself a fat man in different languages. So when I was in Africa, the soldier said, *speaking Zulu* And said, How come the Japanese speaks Zulu? You know, they call me Japanese. So the Japanese call me debo, Gordo and fei lou and in different languages. So that's my opening most of the time. My name is fei lou, Fat Man, and I look Chinese, too. So yeah, communication is, I think, is very important in terms of my work now, because there is a part where, my kind of work is not about me, but it's about my subject. It's about what I can do for you rather than what you can do for me. And I have to explain that, that if I'm doing this work, it has to be, it will benefit you or benefit your kind of people, because I'm trying to create a visual voice for the subject, and I always tell students and others, I've said, The only time you can really capture the essence of a person, when you start feeling how they feel about themselves, their situation in life, their surroundings, the abuses that they receive. Because no matter what, we cannot interpret that unless we really start to feel how your subject feels. And in photography and video and that work it's an important part of the work to do. My work basically is, I have to be close to the subject. In my early work in the book, the veterans book, I use a Leica in a 21 millimeter lens.

Rick Rocamora [00:09:10] And even now I, I don't have a long lens. My longest lens is 70 millimeters, 60 millimeters. I don't use flash, I don't use zoom lenses. So it's really you need to be close to your subject. So to be able to see and then be able to shoot without lifting your camera on your face, just like this. And because it's important in this kind of work, to capture the moments, make pictures showing the moments. And it's not about, you know, looking at the camera, but more of the action. You start looking for the verb on the picture rather than the adjective. So you have the action part of the book. So if you look at the book and my other work, the pictures are not set up. It's always you have to observe what's going on in front of you and try to capture those images and make pictures that show the relationship of the background to the person and whatever they're holding and all this kind of stuff. So there are pictures there that's specifically made to do that, to show something and one in particular, I think this couple who lives in San Francisco and in their background are small pictures of their family. And I know for a fact that the reason

that they had those small pictures is because that's the only thing that they can relate to it when they're here and all their children are in the Philippines. And the picture I took was, I asked them to hold their marriage picture, when they got married. And the background was this small, three by four, four by five color pictures of the members of their family. So wide angle is probably most of my work is like 80%, even now.

Rick Rocamora [00:11:15] Actually, what happened was, I found out that there are veterans arriving in December of 1990 at the Presidio. So my friends from the Examiner, the local photojournalist, told me about it. So I went there and made pictures for the first time. And then later on, I found out through the community that there are veterans arriving at the airport. One of them is Pablo Dumo, who's the cover of the book. And they arrive there and they don't know what to do, because in the Philippines, there are travel agencies that, you know, work with them, buy tickets. Some borrowed money for their tickets. And they were told, when you arrive in San Francisco, just tell them that you're a veteran, you'll be taken care of, they'll give you housing and all this kind of stuff. So a lot of them end up living in homeless shelters on their first day in America. Some arrive with \$50. Pablo Dumo was one of those. There was one veteran that was brought by a Filipino to San Francisco. And he said, You can stay underneath and sleep underneath the barber shop chair and you pay \$80 a month. Aside from when they arrive, veterans did not know that when they arrive here, it'll take a while to get benefits, veterans benefits. So they thought when they arrive here, they're going to get veterans pensions. So they're a group of people who brought them here, who took advantage of them. They were asked to sign a power of attorney statement, assigning these people to represent them for any claim against the U.S. government for benefits. There were people who, there was one who was looking for a phone number of a relative in Banahao, and he was charged \$1,000. And to get that at that time is 411 555 1212, and you get the number. There are people who took advantage of many of them, giving them housing but for a fee. So one of the cases is Catalino Daso, who I discovered in one of the events in San Francisco. There was a group, a mass swearing in ceremony at the Marriott in San Francisco. There's about probably at least 300 or 400 veterans who just arrived. Some of them came from the airport, to Marriott, and took their oath. And somehow in the, during the event, Alex Esclamado said, this is not from us. There was a flyer being distributed. We are not connected to this. And I tracked down that flyer and I found out it was Catalino Daso. So I got myself invited to North Richmond, where he is. And then on my way out, one of the veterans gave me a small piece of paper and said, Can you please call my wife? We're being abused here. So I found ways to be able to visit again. I'll bring used clothings. I'll say, I'll copy your paperwork and all this kind of stuff. So I was able to document the life of the veterans inside the housing operated by Daso. One of the victims is Magdaleno Duenas, who was responsible for helping U.S. soldiers escape from the Davao Penal Colony. And most of them became generals and officers of the military. So Magdaleno Duenas was fed with dog food, chained on the bedpost and abused by Catalino Daso. The veterans there were being fed with leftover food from the school district because the wife works for the school district. He asked the veterans to mount signs because he was selling real estate and there were clean up yards and all this kind of stuff. So I found out the abuse. So I organized a group of lawyers, Filipino lawyers, representative from sheriff department and representative from the SSS, and we rescued some of the veterans from them. And Daso said, confronted me, he said because of me, this is happening. And Daso filed a lawsuit against me and The Examiner. And I was lucky that the Examiner represented my case in a civil suit by Daso. But also we were able to file a civil case against Daso for the abuse of the veterans. And I had to testify with my pictures during the court hearing. Actually, in fact, in the court, I was threatened by Daso, outside the courtroom. Well, he said, you started all this. And because I was able to tell the court the abuses that he's committing. I

have the pictures of what's happening, the people who are being abused and how they live inside that apartment. They brought them to Disneyland but never went inside. They took pictures outside so they could send their families that they went to Disneyland. And I found out also later on, when Daso tried to escape in North Richmond, I made sure that somebody across the street, I told Mrs. Jackson that there's something going on across the street. Those Filipino veterans are being abused. So this is my phone number. Call me anytime. So at 2:00 in the morning, she called me and I found out that Daso rented a U-Haul truck and moving the veterans and all the refrigerators and properties in the house. So I tracked down that U-Haul truck and I found out that he moved to Fullerton because I need the address where he could be processed, served, with the lawsuit against him.

Rick Rocamora [00:17:47] And then the veterans when I called, the veterans for, to be able to talk to them. We have a signal on the phone. One, two. And then I will hang up. And then they know it was me calling. So that's the one who answered the phone. So it's, I enjoy that kind of work, investigative work. The last time I heard, there was somebody from Las Vegas who sent me a note about Daso. What I found out is from Fullerton, California, he moved to Las Vegas and doing something again with the veterans and other political staff. I also found out that he moved some veterans to Washington, D.C., and one of the veterans who argued with him on the road was left on the Virginia highway by himself, walking and was picked up by the highway patrol. So Daso has been around and I don't know what he's going now, where he is, but I know for a fact that if I ever at a time, if ever I see him again, I would go after and expose him. So there was also one case where, not involving Daso, but taking over, taking veterans to buy electric wheelchair, sleep clinic. There's a conduit with a nonprofit organization in San Francisco, and one of the workers there, they give the veterans \$50 and they're brought to San Jose to watch Filipino movies, eat Filipino food and just stay there. No, test is being done. But the company, that group of people, was charging them Medicare for their sleep clinic tests, electric wheelchair, special beds and even insure for nutrition. So it's really a scam. I find out later who the Filipino doctor that they're using.

Rick Rocamora [00:19:59] I went through a medical building and searched and finally I discovered who she was. And there was a case in L.A. where somebody got killed. A doctor who was involved also in the scam. And one of the people who was involved in inviting veterans had to go back to the Philippines because the FBI was in the case already and the leader of the nonprofit had to move to Seattle because his status here is really tainted. Part of the problem of the veterans when they arrive here is they received 600, 700 dollars a month, not as veterans benefits, but supplementary income for people who live in poverty. So that's how much they receive a month. So what they do, what they did is get into a housing situation where there would be like four or five of them living in one unit. And some of them sleep in the toilet, in the closet. Husband and wife if they're there, in the closet. Some sleep on top of balikbayan boxes and they go poor because what they are doing is saving money so they can send money to the Philippines. Because the idea is you go to America, you can send money to the Philippines. And they survived mostly on going to soup kitchens. The Glide Memorial Church for lunch and then some left over is for dinner. There are also, Saint Anthony's will give out food and groceries and things like that. They line up for that. One of the photographs in the book is at Saint Anthony's, where they were there very early in the morning because it's a day to have jackets and clothings and because Filipinos are very small, there are very few size 36, 38 jackets and pants. So they were there very early and some of them end up actually shipping this used clothing to the Philippines in balikbayan boxes for their relatives or to be sold or whatever.

Rick Rocamora [00:22:21] So there's a whole business side of their living here. And I found later also that when I had an exhibit in the Philippines on the 50th anniversary of MacArthur Landing. I had an exhibit in Manila. And some of the people watching the pictures were crying. And I asked one of them and said, we thought my grandfather is doing very good and sending us money. We didn't know that their life in America is like this. So that was the impact of the pictures. And I did this work, practically I became a, the fixer for anybody who would like to do a story about the veterans. L.A. Times, NPR, local publications. So they'll call me and I'll guide them where to go because I more or less know their names, how to get into the building. Because there are times when I have to, you know, they will ask me, said I lost my balikbayan box. Can you help me? There was one time I got arrested because I saw an accident happening on the Mission Street and I told the ambulance people I would like to go because I can interpret for them, this Filipino. So at the San Francisco General Hospital, I had my Leica on my chest and the nurse said no pictures, but I was there to make pictures. So I was sneaking my pictures and I got caught. So they called the police and luckily I was able to explain myself and I was not arrested. Well, I think personally it validates my goal of becoming a photographer because I've never seen myself doing photography to make money. It's always about talking to people, making pictures of them to represent their visual stories. And I think I did that with the Veterans Project and other projects that I've done through the years.

Rick Rocamora [00:24:39] And these projects did not happen just because of me. There are other people who have supported my projects. And one of them is Lordestin Sinco, who had established a legal clinic every Friday for about seven or eight years, helping veterans on their legal issues, applying petitions for their wives to be admitted here and their children. So the first project I did was in December of 1990, we organized a clothing giveaway at the law office because Filipinos do not have winter jackets. So we collected winter jackets from the community and gave them away. So that started the whole project helping the Filipino veterans. Lordestin Sinco was also responsible for organizing the lawyers who rescued the veterans from Catalino Daso. She was also responsible for the creation of the Veterans Equity Center. So what happens after we rescued the veterans from Daso, there was a community event and people were crying. I was crying and talking about, because the veterans were explaining their experiences. So from that, a group of people were organized to create a Veterans Equity Center, which main purpose is to help the transition of the veterans locally as a nonprofit organization. And I think the Veterans Equity Center still exists to this day. I became part of the board of directors and, you know, my work on the veterans for 18 years is probably a culmination of my goal of helping others through my work. I think also at one time I was thinking these veterans are the same age as my father. I never grew up with my father around. So in essence, I was helping my own father because at that time I found out also that my father used to work as a civilian employee in the U.S. Army. So that's the relationship. But also the memories of Pablo Dumo who's in the cover of the book. He was a member of the Hukbalahap and he was responsible for saving his comrades against the Japanese with the caliber 50 on the river by himself shooting the Japanese so the other Filipinos can escape. I think the veterans is a symbol on how America treats us. Because the Rescission Act of 1946 is still in the books. It's never been repealed. The equity bill that we were fighting for and the compensation happened because Senator Inouye inserted in the 2009 budget a compensation for the veterans, those who were living in the U.S. were given \$15,000 a year for their services and 9,000 for those living in the Philippines with the clause that they can no longer claim, further claim for any benefits from the US government. So that settled their claim for compensation. And the Rescission Act of 1946 is very clear in the discriminatory provisions because a Filipino veteran who received the Purple Heart, wounded the same as American veterans will only get \$0.50 to a dollar. So and up to now,

and part of the reason why I did this project is to make sure that Filipinos and Filipino Americans will remember how America treated our heroes.