

FAHSOH: Romel Dela Cruz Interview 11/10/2021

Filipino-American Historical Society of Hawai'i
Oral History Project
Interview #2

Romel Dela Cruz (R)

**Interview Conducted By:
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Honoka'a, Hawai'i

M: Okay, so, we'll start our second session. Today is November 10. I am with Romel Dela Cruz. And before we talk about the important midsection of your life from the 1960s to about 1990s, I think, I forgot to follow up on the work ethics that you developed, because I was thinking when you were in the barrio, Philippine barrio, you were sort of spoiled...supported by everyone. And I don't think...because you were young, you were not working hard to help the family, but once you got to Pa'auilo, I think maybe your life changed in terms of putting yourself to work or your family asking you to work. What happened there? Summertime, you were talking about working in the plantation and other things.

R: Yes. Let's go back to Darayday¹ when I was growing up. I remember, yes, I was just roaming all over the place, visiting with my cousins, see what they were doing, and I recall that the only task that I had that I remember growing up was with my grandma, Segunda Alonzo, and she was a betal nut chewer...

M: Betal nut.

R: ...betel nut...

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: We call that bua in Ilocano.²

M: Bua, B – U ...

R: B – U – A.

M: Bua, uh huh.

R: ...and my job was, you know, to go with her and bury the bua under the house in the

¹ Darayday is a barrio in Laoag, Ilocos Norte province in northern Luzon.

² In Ilocano, betel nut chewing it is known as *bua*, *maman* or *mama*. In Tagalog, it is colloquially known as *buyo*, *bunga*, *hitso*, or *nga nga* (which means "to chew").

ground where the wine...

M: Okay.

R: ...containers were. And she would dig a hole. She would...I would help her dig a hole in the ground and put the bua in it and then she would water it to keep it moist...

M: Oh, my goodness.

R: ...because you don't want that to dry, right? That's the coolest place in the house. And when she wanted it, she would send me down. She'd say, you know where it is. You go and get it.

M: Ha, ha.

R: And Melinda, I acquired a taste for bua, too!

M: What!

R: To this day, I chew. It's like my tea...

M: Uh, huh.

R: ...you know. It's...because it's bitter. But I recall that. And of course, just sometimes, when I feel like it, I would help my mother. She would send me to do things or run errands. Another job was bringing my grandpa's carabao³ to the river for water.

M: To the river, okay.

R: That was a task that I really love...

M: Oh.

R: ...I would climb the carabao. The carabao would kneel down, and I would crawl on top the head and then go up on its back.

M: Oh, small boy, as a small boy.

R: Yeah, as a small boy, yeah. I have great recollection of being at the river and letting the carabao just wallow in the river. And I'm just waiting and kinda just listening to the bamboos, singing, yeah...but anyway. When I got to Hawai'i, you know, when my sister Alice was born, a year later after we arrived, I was my mom's helper.

M: 1956...1955?

R: December of '55. I was kinda like the assistant, you know, changing diapers, getting

³ A carabao is a Philippine domesticated water buffalo.

things, you know, uh...

M: Helping your mom.

R: ...helping my mom. A big brother, holding and rocking her to sleep. And I was old enough...I was, you know, almost ten.

M: Ten, almost ten, yeah.

R: In fact, I was ten years old already.

M: That's right.

R: And so, but then, you know, it was just kind of a natural. My father and my uncle and another man formed this company, kompany⁴, they called it. They pooled their money and my uncle was the instigator, and he formed the Kalopa Packing Company to make bagoong.⁵

M: That's the bagoong company.

R: Yeah...

M: Uh, huh.

R: ...and you know, from age ten, eleven, twelve, you know, my uncle would get me to go to Hilo,⁶ ride with him to pick up the huge aku⁷ from the fishermen at the pier, and then we would bring it back to Kalopa.

M: Uh, huh.

R: And we would go to the warehouse where we would cut the fish up and my job was to feed the machine. We had a chopper, a crusher, we called it, kind of like a grinder. We would remove the head and the fish body...would...then, it's deposited in this big palanggana.⁸ But, and then, we had pigs, too. And I...my father would assign me to get a sickle and cut grass...if you're familiar with that Hawaiian grass called, honohono.⁹

M: Honohono?

⁴ Kompany (Ilokano) = company

⁵ Bagoong is a Philippine condiment made from fermented fish, krill or shrimp paste and salt. Kalopa refers to an area mauka (mountainside) between Pa'auilo and Honoka'a on the northeastern side of Hawai'i island.

⁶ Hilo is the main port town on east Hawai'i island and 34 miles south of Pa'auilo.

⁷ Aku (Hawaiian) = skipjack tuna

⁸ Palanggana (Ilocano) = basin.

⁹ Honohono (Hawaiian), short for honohono kukui, a creeping grass often found around kukui trees.

R: It crawls on the ground. It's kind of succulent. You chop it up and mix it with the slop that we collected all over town. I didn't really enjoy it but my father kinda forced me to do it. I would be playing with my friends at the park and he would come with the pick-up truck, with the 200 gallon slop truck. He would park under a tree, and I would look, and there he is, waiting for me.

M: How old were...?

R: Well, I was 7th, 8th grade, 9th grade. And so, I'd go, I had no choice, but I could invite my friends to come along, and they ended up helping me.

M: They helped you?

R: Yeah. But, one of the great things we had was, we had this huge mango tree near the piggery. And boy, we loved the mangoes fruits called pake¹⁰ or Chinese mango. You peel it and you just eat it. It's so sweet. Besides wanting mango fruit one of the games that we played was swinging from branch to branch just like Tarzan in the movies at the movie house in Pa'auilo.

M: In Pa'auilo?

R: Yeah, sixteen cents, you know. And we watched two kind of movies, Filipino movies on Tuesdays only. And...but we would watch Tarzan, and we would like play Tarzan in the trees, jump from one tree to another.

M: And who were your friends at this time?

R: They were kinda of a mix...

M: Mix.

R: I had some part Hawaiian friends and some Filipinos. So, and then after ninth grade, first year in high school, the plantation would hire guys like us.

M: All right.

R: Hire the schoolboys to work in the plantations.

M: Summertime?

R: Summertime only...

M: Oh, summertime.

R: ...summertime only. And either you hoe...you know, go in the fields or you cut cane along

¹⁰ Pake (Hawaiian) = Chinese

with the workers, which were mainly Filipinos, but this was not to cut the cane for sugar products...mainly to cut the cane for seeds.

M: Oh, okay.

R: You would cut it to a certain length like this, because they would then use that to plant, you know, horizontally under the ground. So that, and then, as we progressed to high school, they would make us carry this forty, fifty pound herbicide tanks on our back. And you go to the fields and they called us the sabidong¹¹ gang or the poison or herbicide gang.

M: Sabidong?

R: Sabidong is poison, eh?

M: Sabidong?

R: Sabidong...

M: Sabidong...spell? S – A – ...

R: S – A – B – E – D – N – G.¹² At least, I...

M: Sabidong, okay.

R: That's herbicide we hardly any protection at all. You just go through the fields.

M: Barefooted?

R: No, well, you were given boots. You have hats. And if you're familiar with sugar cane, that thing is sharp. And you know, you make your own masks out of wire, you know. And you go through, you know, sometimes those cane row you know, they'd go on for a mile, you know. You just walk down and, you know, some of the more rascal guys would, once they reached the gulch which, usually, where the line ended, dump their poison. Ha, ha, ha....

M: How much were you paid?

R: I remember it was dollar-ten, dollar fifteen.

M: An hour?

R: Yeah...

¹¹ Sabidong (Ilokano) = toxic, poison

¹² Should be: "sabidong."

M: Uh...

R: ...and then...

M: Did you have to do that? Or your family said you have to do that?

R: Well, we all did it. It was kind of like an expectation...

M: Expectation.

R: ...for all of us. We were happy. It was kinda like it's a job.

M: Okay.

R: And I remember getting my pay the first month...

M: Uh, huh.

R: ...so, you got a brown envelope about that big, and it's all in cash. It's all in cash.

M: And then what did you do with your money?

R: Well, the first paycheck I had, I told my mother. See, I was always interested in music, you know, ever since my mother enrolled me in violin class, but I never pursued because I chose the bicycle.

And there was a Filipino man that kinda lived above us, kind of up the hill, Tata¹³ Ambrosio Innocencio. And he was a musician. As I understand later, he had his own band. But he had a trumpet. And he would sit in his porch and would play "Cherry Pink And Apple Blossom Wist...dara ra dara dara." I told my mom, oh, I'd like to get one. She...

M: Trumpet.

R: ...said get my father's opinion and my mother wouldn't say anything. My father said that if you ever became a musician, that would be it.

M: Oh, no money.

R: You would, you know, you'd go to dances, you'd play music, you'd get girlfriends and make babies and that would be it, you know. So, I never, they never...

M: Encouraged that, ohh.

R: ...said they would never get me one. So, my first paycheck, I said I'll buy me a trumpet.

¹³ "Tata" (Ilokano, Tagalog) = literally, "father," but can be used as an honorific for a male of one's father's generation.

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: They finally agreed. After all, it was my money.

M: Did you buy?

R: I wanted one. And we went to the store. There's a Filipino store here still selling music in Hilo. Agasa Store, if you go downtown, Agasa Music Store and Tata Agasa the owner was a musician.¹⁴

M: In Hilo?

R: Yeah.

M: Okay.

R: And I bought the trumpet there.

M: You did buy it.

R: I did bought it.

M: And did you play it?

R: I learned to play it by myself.

M: Goodness!

R: Pretty soon, I was playing Tata Ambrosio's "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White."

M: Ha, ha, ha

R: Ha, ha, ha.

M: Okay.

R: But anyway, yeah, so, that...that, you know...kinda, so yeah, so we all worked...I mean a most of us. And usually, they would assign many to spraying herbicide or poison on weeds between the end rows. You know, the thing about the tank is, you know, it weighted 40 pound, you know...

M: For the spraying.

R: ...strapped on your back. And there's this truck, which the bed was converted into a big huge tank. You know, the truck, they put a tank over a huge truck. And they fill it, you know, a couple of hundred gallons of herbicide mixed with water. And then we just

¹⁴ Currently (2024), Agasa Furniture and Music Store, 30 Ponahawai Street, Hilo.

position ourselves in the back like that with the tank and the guy load you up. You go, all day long. And once in a while, when we were in the middle of the field, the plantation would also use airplanes to drop fertilizer. They would drop it on us, you know, while we were out in the fields, yeah.

M: You didn't know it was banned.

R: We know because the load would be dropped on you and then come...it would come back again, right...

M: Yeah.

R: ...and it would spread. But one thing like I told you earlier, I said, there were some old Filipino men sometime mixed with us, some of these old timers, believe me, they were carrying the tanks like us, and they kept with us young boys, you know, sometimes more productive than us.

M: Yeah, yeah.

R: And they would...and there's this story about everybody sitting together and eating lunch...

M: Correct.

R: You've heard about that...

M: Correct, yeah...

R: ...take out the kau kau tin¹⁵...

M: Kau kau tin...

R: ...and everybody sharing and supposedly a democratic society. I think that's kind of stereotyped.

M: That's romanticized, romanticized version.

R: A lot of us, because some guys brought better food than others, you know. Some guys just brought a can of Vienna sausage and that was it with rice. For me, I mean, you know, we didn't have any elaborate food, my mother gave me what was available from dinner, you know. When my father and I worked the day shift, he would prepare our lunch together for our kau kau tins.

I remember, you know, sitting with those old guys. And like I told you, they always told

¹⁵ "Kaukau" is most likely Hawaiianized term for Chinese pidgin English "chow-chow" (food). "Kaukau tins" were containers, sometimes stacked, of prepared food prepared before work and taken to the fields for lunch.

me, said, “Son, barok¹⁶,” he says, “you don’t want to do this for the rest of your life, right.” That stuck in my mind, that yeah, I’m doing it now to earn some money so that...

M: Correct.

R: ...you know, well, after the trumpet, by the way, I gave most of my money, all of my money to my mother...

M: To your Mom.

R: ...and I only kept, you know, things for what I thought I wanted, a couple of bucks.

M: What was your mom doing? Working?

R: Well, she wasn’t, while I was in elementary and kind of high school, there was no opportunity for them.

M: So, she was at home.

R: She just stayed home. And it wasn’t until I was, I think, my second year in college that Mauna Kea Beach Hotel opened in 1965. And women from all over the Hāmākua coast, and Kohala started to work at Mauna Kea Beach. And that’s when my mother became interested in learning how to drive. But when learning how to drive, she banged the car many times...but she learned. I got my license earlier than her.

M: Oh really, oh.

R: When I was in tenth grade, I already had my license at 15...

M: Okay.

R: ...yeah, but, yeah, for the most part, yeah, most of us sons...plantation boys...workers worked, except the manager’s son.

M: Manager’s son did not work?

R: They didn’t work with us, but they went to school with us. I mean, that manager, at that time, when I was in the upper intermediate, is Larsen family...

M: Larsen.

R: Larsen. You’re familiar with Dr. Nils Larsen, the physician...

M: The physician, no.

¹⁶ “Barok” (Philippine) refers language spoken in broken or non-fluent manner, e.g., by a non-native speaker or child, and can be used as endearment term for a child.

R: ...who kinda did a lot of medical research including...

M: Including.

R: ...you know, birth control, condoms...

M: Birth control?

R: ...for plantation workers.

M: Okay.

R: It's quietly known t¹⁷ but you know, I've read things about t , you know, that, the birth control that they wanted to put in the plantation. But they were related to that family, I think.

M: Ah, I think Alcantara¹⁸ mentioned that in one article. I never followed up.

R: Nils Larsen, look up that, look up.

M: About...

R: Yeah.

M: ...even trying to control birth control, the birth, and sort of mess around.

R: I think that was really in the early twenties and thirties. By the time my mother and I arrived, with the sakadas¹⁹ and the forty-sixers²⁰ bringing their wives and their family, the plantation...and with the union watching over those kind of issues, I think was discontinued.

M: But just, maybe someday, sort of exploring what they did...

R: Yes, yes, yes.

M: ...to sort of. Yeah, some surgeries, I read in one of Ruben Alcantara's manuscripts. So, the general feeling is it was very hard work. And the young people in the plantation, it was

¹⁷ Sterilization? Powers, Janine A. (2003) "From Medicine to Art: Nils Paul Larsen (1890-1964)." PhD dissertation submitted to University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (American Studies).

¹⁸ Ruben Alcantara, author of *Sakada: Filipino Adaptation in Hawaii* (1981).
<http://www.efilarchives.org/publications/books.htm>

¹⁹ "Sakada" (orig, Visayan) refers to migrant contract workers, in this case, Hawaii's Filipino sugar plantation workers.

²⁰ "Forty-sixers" refers to the last group of sakadas recruited to Hawaii in 1946, coinciding with the transition of the Philippines from a U.S. commonwealth and Japan WWII colony to an independent nation. Filipinos would continue to come to Hawaii to work on sugar and/or pineapple plantations, but their migrant status would be different.

very hard for them, but for you, it was hard work and it was good experience, it seems.

R: Good experience in a way to get some money, not knowing really what we're gonna use it for, but the anticipation, of course, is, you know, you might need it if you went to school, which was always in the mind of all these old guys and my father and his supervisors always telling my dad you gotta send your boy to school.

M: Going college, okay.

R: He's doing good, I mean. Being in a small community and having our own school...

M: Yeah.

R: ...it allowed you to have those kind of conversation and support...

M: ...Correct, correct.

R: ...yeah, and so, like I said, this Japanese family, Mr. Toyama and our principal really kinda like, I think. Of course, it was always my mother, not my dad. My dad, you know, didn't go to PTA meetings with my mother...

M: Uh, huh.

R: ...but my father

M: Did not.

R: ...never.

M: Why? He felt a little bit...

R A little bit perhaps It always amazes me how, what motivated him to come to Hawai'i, not even thinking he would ever get here and then getting up one day and saying I'm going to go and see my compadre and try to get his papers so that I could go to Hawai'i, but...and I think, although he was kind of like, ah, he was very, uh, let me say, intellectually, he could carry on a conversation in Ilokano, but, he had, I think and felt that he wasn't good enough, low self-esteem kind of guy...

M: Correct, correct, it happens.

R: My mother was the other way...

M: Okay.

R: ...because she went all the way up to third year or something. She had more of a...you know, the push

M: Push.

R: ...and she's the one that, you know, carried conversations and interacted with people regardless of status.

M: And with a father like that, your grandfather?

R: And my grandfather, right, right.

M: Push in the family. It's interesting what upbringing you have, yeah. Okay, so, I think yesterday, we stopped. You graduated from Honoka'a²¹, and you tried to apply to UH-Mānoa.

R: Yeah. I figure that was in, right, I mean, it was the only school. We had UH-Hilo but it wasn't called UH-Hilo then. It was like a college, UH college, but it, they only had a couple of buildings and there was really nothing. I figure, oh, I'm gonna go to Honolulu. So, I applied.

M: Who encouraged you to go to college...in the first place?

R: Well, there was an expectation from my mother that I would go. I mean there was never a question about that...

M: Okay.

R: My parents, you know, said I was going to go beyond high school.

M: All right, and not go back to the plantation.

R: I'm not...no girlfriend, nothing, no fool around, no music...

M: Go college.

R: You gonna go. And with all the encouragement from all the people in the community that, I...you know.

M: Oh, you're going, oh.

R: But to tell you the truth, the only two boys out of that class of twenty-seven that went to college, I mean that went to college from my school, and that was me and this Okinawan boy, Thompson Toyama, that I told you about, just the two of us. He went to Oregon State and [???]. And thinking I was going to UH, but I, I was turned down.

M: Uh huh. So, what happened?

²¹ Honoka'a High School, a public high school (est. 1889) serving the Hāmākua coast of Hawai'i island.

R: Like I said, so, last minute, and I didn't have the gumption enough to go and see the counselor and say, hey, what should I do now?

M: Yeah.

R: On my own, I just said okay. I applied to Chaminade.²²

M: And how did you learn about Chaminade?

R: I can't recall how I did it, but, you know

M: That's Plan B.

R: Yeah, and so, at that time, they were accepting most anybody, right. I mean Chaminade was just starting out. In fact, when I got there, this was in the summer...autumn of '63 and, uh...

M: That's how Ernie Libarios²³ got started, too, at Chaminade.

R: ...and we were the first ones to occupy a dormitory, Hale Aloha there. They just built this dormitory, you know, so, that's how I got there. And boy, I, it was a reckoning. It was a reckoning for me.

M: From the Big Island to Honolulu at this time?

R: How I thought...I thought I was doing okay, but whoa, you know, it was a reckoning...especially in English Composition, you know, English 101 and Voice and Diction.

M: What happened?

R: Well would, you know, in Voice and Diction, we'd give a speech in class, right. My pidgin English was so bad, so bad. And my writing, although I could express myself, it was poor grammar.

You know, my English teacher, who I told you, was, kinda I thought, had some racist beliefs, never really focused on saying you gotta get your grammar right, you know, and learn all the rules of grammar. I'd write. I could express myself, but my first several compositions were so bad I said, "Oh what am I doing wrong?" In Voice and Diction, Dr. Judson Newcomb, who was the speech teacher, man, he would critique me like heck.

²² Chaminade (University) was founded, in 1955, under the guidance of the Society of Mary (Marianists) as a private, two-year college as St. Louis Junior College with thirty men in its inaugural class. Two years later, the school had expanded to a four-year, co-educational institution and changed its name to Chaminade College in honor of Father William Joseph Chaminade (Society of Mary founder). In 1977, the college added graduate programs to become Chaminade University of Honolulu.

²³ An oral history of Ernie Libarios is available: http://www.efilarchives.org/collections/libarios_ernie_index.htm

Oh, in English Composition, when I finally realized what I was doing wrong, and I was writing about things that I really didn't know anything about. Then, I wrote about Pa'auilo which I knew a lot about. The professor kinda read part of my paper because it showed, you know, my passion for being plantation, being from Pa'auilo. And, she said, you gotta write, learn to write about things that you believe in and that you know about. You don't write about things that you don't know and try to fake it kind of stuff.

M: She said?

R: Yeah, she said that. And in Speech, at the end of the semester, the professor, Dr. Newcomb had this long phonetic critique of me, you know, mixing my t's and f's and all that kind of stuff, oh. And in the end, you know, he wrote, you know, Romel, he said, you can fool others with your speech, but you can't fool God.

M: He said that?

R: Yeah, in paper. And then, he said, you know, the speech pattern that you have, if you choose not to change, he said, the Filipino community will lose a person who could really help them, he said in the last sentence. I kept that paper. I still have it...

M: Wow.

R: ...I still have it, and I kept it in my mind. But I remember that last sentence, he said, you know, the community, the Filipino community will be losing a good leader unless you decide to change your pattern of speech.

M: To change, not to have another language...

R: No, it just...

M: ...you could retain your pidgin but...

R: Yes, pidgin, well, you know, so I said okay, but I took that with a grain of salt with reservations.

M: He wanted you to improve.

R: I said I'll show you, basically...

M: Oh, okay.

R: ...and you know, couple two years ago, I got a contact from this person. He said that there was this gal in the same class, Japanese gal from Japan. Chaminade...

M: Chaminade.

R: ...and said that, uh, I don't know how he found me but somehow a connection was made with Dr. Newcomb.

M: Oh, uh huh.

R: He was now in Florida. And we communicated. And I said...and I contacted him. I said, "Dr. Newcomb, do you remember, do you remember me?" He said, then, he's in his 80's now or 90's, "I don't know." He said, "Are you that brown boy that sat in the front seat, you know, that kinda..." I said that was me. He said what have you done with your life? And I said...oh, man, he was so proud. I said, do you remember what you said. He said, can you send me a copy of that? I sent it to him.

M: Oh, wow.

R: He said, oh, you know. But, you know, he's living in Florida in retirement, but...

M: I guess he did a favor by insulting you – or something like that.

R: Oh, he did. He did. He did. He did. He insulted me.

M: But you learned from it.

R: Well, I learned from it...

M: Gee.

R: ...and I said, but it was more like, I'll show you. I don't think I have to change everything, you know. As long as I can, I can connect sentences, correctly...

M: Correct, correct.

R: ...yes, I would be...

M: So, what did you do to improve or to change? Wow.

R: Well, I didn't really make any drastic. I think the longer I stayed with these guys, instead of talking to each other in simple pidgin, we started conversing and being around

M: Standard English.

R: ...yeah, and at Chaminade, I was a very pious religious Catholic boy at that time.

M: Okay.

R: But, but...

M: Did you have other supporting teachers, supportive teachers?

R: Yeah, well, the dorm counselor was Brother Hammond. He was the dorm counselor...

M: Uh, huh.

R: ...the guy was a boxer...

M: Boxer, uh, huh.

R: He knew I needed, you know, money. So, he said, you wanna job? I said yeah. You wanna be the janitor? So, I was a janitor for two years cleaning up all my classmates' room, you know.

M: You really worked hard.

R: We had this...you know at Chaminade, at first you have a toilet in the middle and two units, two guys to a room, two-story building. And so we, uh, you know, but one thing I found out is that history was my bag.

M: You majored in history, in...uh.

R: I don't know. It's just kind of automatic. I thought political science would be more of my thing, but then history became my interest. I don't know when you change from one environment to another.

And having come from Darayday and ending up in Hawai'i...these changes. You become an observer of things around you. You preserve those things that are important to you. And that's how I saw, I think, history...that I was, I said, I had this belief, inclination that what happens to you in the past has a determinate factor on what your life will be.

M: Was there a history professor who encouraged you or...?

R: Really, not really.

M: No?

R: It was a matter of memorizing facts.

M: Oh, it wasn't. It was the old style history.

R: It was kinda like, yeah, you know. I had a Greek professor trying to tell us that, you know, the war between the Turkeys in the Greek, the guys were so stupid that the Turkeys had to put straw on one foot to tell them left or right.

I said, are you kidding me? Ha, ha, ha, you mean. And I said, oh...but I soon mastered it enough. I...that's the only class that I got A's in because I could memorize facts. And so, I figure well, maybe I should continue.

M: So, you stayed there for four years?

R: Two years.

M: Two years.

R: I said well it's was time to move on.

M: So two years.

R: Two years at Chaminade and, then, I transferred to Loyola.²⁴

M: Loyola.

R: In Los Angeles.

M: Okay, now funding. How did you manage to support yourself financially in Chaminade and Loyola?

R: I don't know, I don't know how my parents did it, you know, Melinda...

M: Oh boy.

R: ...but it was this, you know, and my parents never questioned, until maybe my, I think maybe my last, first semester of my senior year at Loyola when I didn't pay my tuition on time, and I was called by the business office to, you know, where's the money?

This is one of those things I had this negative feeling about Loyola after that. But my parents scrimped. My mother started working at Mauna Kea Beach...

M: Okay.

R: ...to supplement the income...

M: Wow.

R: ...my father was driving truck for the plantation. And that's how no financial aid whatsoever.

M: No scholarship.

R: Nothing, nothing, nothing.

M: And why did you choose, what's the name of the school, Lo...?

R: Loyola University. It was quite famous...

²⁴ Today, Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles) is a private, Jesuit university.

M: Loyola.

R: ...on the west coast.

M: Okay. That's run by the Jesuits?

R: Jesuit. It's a Jesuit school. And actually, I applied for Gonzaga too in Spokane, accepted and transferred to Loyola. And, but Loyola because there was a guy from Hilo High School who went to St. Joseph High School here...

M: Okay.

R: ...who became a basketball star at Loyola. He became all American and so I figure, oh...

M: Oh, I gotta go there.

R: ...I know somebody there.

M: Oh.

R: And so that's how I ended up at Loyola, which was still a man school at that time, it was only...

M: And what's the full name of the university?

R: Loyola University at that time...

M: Loyola University.

R: ...but it later, when I left two years later, it became Loyola Marymount, which became co-educational. Previously, it was just guys...guys like me.

M: Boys, guys, okay. So, you went there for two years?

R: For two years

M: And stayed in the dorm?

R: I stayed in the dorm, roomed with one of the local boys that came a very prominent family here in Honolulu, the Felix family. You've heard of Henry Felix, Judge Felix. Well, they all go to St. Louis, you know.

M: And by that time, your English is already okay?

R: Must have...

M: Yeah.

R: ...yeah, yeah, it must have...

M: Yeah.

R: ...and, uh, you know, uh...

M: Was the application hard or you just send off your application?

R: Well, I just transferred. It was a transfer at this point. Yeah, application you still had to send, but it was a transfer, and my gpa was close to B...

M: All right.

R: ...you know, cumulative, so...

M: Did someone at Chaminade help you transfer? No? Okay, you were on your own again.

R: Just on my own and just went there. But one thing I should mention is and I think it was very common to a lot of us who came from the plantations and ended up in college, is that you were on your own.

M: Uh, huh, yeah.

R: There is nothing that you would get from your parents, my parents especially because they never experienced...

M: Correct.

R: ...going to college.

M: To college.

R: So, morally and psychologically, basically it was yours, your. That's how I felt. And they were not in a position, and I never asked simply because, I, well I knew that, you know, if I tell them, they wouldn't understand me, 'cuz...and I think a lot of Filipino families. Basically, my parents believed that if the money is there, there's no reason why you can't get a college education. Today, I question that. It's not just money, you know. But when I was there, to them, it was money. And that we have, we'll scrimp and save and support you, but you have to do your share and that is to get your degree and get...

M: And then earn.

R: ...a better life, that kind of an attitude. And I think a lot of plantation boys were like that. Although a lot of other guys never had even that, that their parents never saved enough, never had any means. And they had to do it on their own. And I don't know what you heard from Ernie and from even Alex Cadang who also went to Chaminade.

M: Ernie got a lot of support from the parents but especially from the mother...

R: Yeah.

M: ...and the grandma. The women seems to be very strong pushed for their children.

R: Yeah, my father, too, yeah, but to him, he was the carabao, right. He earned the money and his expectation is that there's no ifs and buts about it, you're gonna go. And I remember leaving for the mainland, I mean, for college the first time from Honoka'a. At that time, Waimea, Kamuela, the airplanes would fly over there...

M: That's right.

R: ...instead of Hilo. And I remember getting on that first flight and leaving home for the first time...

M: It's hard.

R: ...I could hear the sounds of my sister crying and all that kind of stuff, as a...you know, but, uh, you know, but like I said, that was it. There was an expectation that you will, you know, get the education regardless of what. The money is there. I mean, we'll help you. You know, we'll send you the tuition.

M: Do everything. So, what happened, your folks, your parents sent you money for the tuition?

R: Yeah.

M: For the dorm?

R: For the dorm.

M: Pocket money.

R: You know, pocket money.

M: Did you have to work in L.A.?

R: At Loyola, I did not. I...I...it was, you know, that campus is so isolated. But today it is not. But it was so isolated. If you don't have a car, you're stuck...

M: Oh, okay.

R: ...so, you had had to make friends. And I had friends mainly from Hong Kong and Singapore.

M: Chinese guys, yeah, foreign students.

R: Chinese guys, yeah. There was one Filipino kid I remember, only one in the whole school.

M: But the atmosphere in general, the professors, were they sort of supportive of you and the minorities? Or, how was the situation?

R: Ah, my guess is that I was just a student among them.

M: In general, okay.

R: It seems like it was a lot of uppity up guys over there.

M: Rich guys?

R: Rich, kinda of ah, you're talking about.

M: The tuition must be high. It's a Jesuit school.

R: You're talking about, you know, Catholics, who probably...and Mexicans who, you know, who were kind of up there, you know, because a lot of them did end up. I hardly saw any blacks other than basketball team, you know. But, a lot of 'em were whites and uh, you know.

But I gravitated toward history, and it was kind of eye-opening for me. I took a class, thinking that, uh, you know, diplomacy, and that kind of stuff. I realized American interest was a dominating factor. I remember writing about the sovereignty of Hawai'i. It's the first time I ever realized...

M: Uh huh.

R: ...and there was nothing in the library that I could really get my hands on. There was nothing. You're talking about the sixties. There was nothing then.

M: Nothing yet, uh huh, yeah.

R: But I made that conclusion, that, you know, American interest in Hawai'i is what got Hawai'i involved, and it was all greed, and it was...you know...

M: Yeah.

R: ...sugar and all that.

M: All that greed.

R: I remember that professor questioning me. I remember another old history questioning. You know we always think MacArthur was the hero of the Philippines, right. It was this

professor who thought otherwise, that you just wasting time coming back to Leyte. Instead he should have go directly to Japan, you know, that kind of stuff, that kind of attitude.

But I remember in my senior year. Oh, by the way, my social life there was barren.

M: Barren.

R: It was totally barren...

M: Ohh.

R: ...and maybe that's why...be, what motivated me to do your thing and get outta here as fast as you can. I remember my senior year and you know, I'm deciding what am I going to do now? We were in the middle of the Vietnam War, you know. This is 1967.

M: Sixty-seven, yeah.

R: Everybody, you know, remember that song, "Are you going to San Jose?" We were all singing that song. And I said to myself, well, if I gotta go, I'll go, but I'll take my initiative, and I'll make my first move. I'm gonna decide what I want to do.

If you don't draft me now, I'll apply for, you know, so, I thought. So, the Peace Corps came into my mind. But you know, going back in high school, when Peace Corps first started in sixty-two, I was very conscious that it was John Kennedy's project.

M: Okay, you were conscious already.

R: Oh, I was very conscious in my senior year in high school. And I, in Mrs. Hasegawa's history class, and I said that's something that I would like to do. I didn't think about the Philippines or anything, but I said, you know, giving back, that, ask what your country can do.

M: Correct.

R: Remember, I just won the Voice of Democracy contest I was talking about.

M: Yeah.

R: And so, see, in my mind, I would, you know, as graduation approached, I said, you know, what am I going to do, so I decided to put in my papers and apply for the Peace Corps.

M: This is 1967?

R: '67 in my senior year, the last before graduation.

M: Did you consult anyone? Did you tell your mom or your dad?

R: No.

M: Okay.

R: I just told my...one of my profs, my priest counselor.

M: Your counselor.

R: You know, one of my religious instructors, you know, when you go Catholic school, you know, you gotta take one, you gotta take a religion class...

M: Spiritual.

R: ...every semester, one unit or two units.

M: Spiritual advisor.

R: So, that's why, by that time, by the way, I'd become, kind like questioned my faith, my Catholic faith.

M: Okay.

R: I was still going to mass, but uh...

M: Of course, everybody have to go, you know.

R: Father Hillsdale.

M: Father...

R: Hillsdale, Paul Hillsdale...

M: Hillsdale, Paul Hillsdale...

R: ...in fact...

M: ...what did he say?

R: In fact, I have to share you one story while, you know, while I was in class, in one of his class, afternoon classes. And, you know, from the second floor of one of the halls, you can see the airplanes landing at the Los Angeles airport. I'm just woozy, you know, I'm sleepy. It's 2 pm. He jumps on my table. He jumps up on the table and he says, Dela Cruz, you think, what do you, how you think God is, you know, like you think he's up there and crawling over you all the time like that?

M: He said that?

R: He said, “You think God is like that, that he’s out there?”

M: Oh, oh wow.

R: He jumps on the table.

M: To wake you up?

R: Yeah, and I’m kind of woozy enough, and I woke up and he says, “He’s not like that.” You know, kinda trying to tell you that, you know.

M: Oh.

R: And then that story about morality, about, you know, there’s this thing about being a Catholic and you always end up in hell if...you know, that kind of stuff.

But he made me think that there’s some Judgment, you know, depends on if you’ve always been that. He questioned that idea, you know, of...if you’re a sinner, you’re gonna go to hell, that kind of stuff. But he was one that also encouraged me, instead of go to Mexico to do community work, because they had projects like that to go to Tijuana to do things.

And I never did. In fact, one summer...oh, by the way, every summer, I would go back to Pa’auilo to work in the plantation when I had summertime.

M: From L.A.?

R: Yeah, from L.A., I’d go back. And by that time, the plantations started not sending me to the field. They said, oh, he’s a college boy. Maybe we should make him work...

M: In the office.

R: ...in the garage and do inventory. They were full time sheet and mill. So, I have this experience. So, that was the one of the benefits of being a college boy. Once I got to college, they started doing that.

M: You can push the pen now.

R: Yeah. I gotta push the...

M: Ha, ha, ohh.

R: ...but anyway, this thing of service was, you know. So, Father Hillsdale said, “Why don’t you go to Mexico? Better yet, why don’t you go, you know, up north to Delano²⁵ and

²⁵ On September 8, 1965, over 800 Filipino farmworkers affiliated with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) struck ten grape vineyards around Delano, California. Two veteran organizers, Larry

work?”

M: And work, farm workers, Chavez.

R: Remember the strikes was happening. The huelga²⁶ was going on.

M: Yeah.

R: You could see all the wine bottles. I felt so guilty because Loyola Brothers owned Christian Brothers²⁷, you know, Christian Wines, so...

M: Mmm.

R: Maybe I should have. I have some regrets. I thought it would have been great to do that, you know, but I decided, man, by the time I graduated, I had all my application in with Peace Corps. And I had my, in fact, I was already, you know, I, they give me my first assignment was to go to the Philippines.

M: Wow, let's see, when you applied, you did not, you said you did not talk to anyone.

R: No, I did not specify. No, except over there. I did tell my parents.

M: In L.A., there's a kind of office, Peace Corps office.

R: Well, they come and recruit.

M: They come and recruit.

R: Yeah, yeah, to the campus.

M: They come to your campus and recruit?

R: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

M: Oh.

R: And I applied. And my rationale was, if you're not going to, if Uncle Sam is not going to get me now, I'll go for this. And if you want me, then you can always get me wherever I

Itliong and Ben Gines, led the strike. On September 16, 1965 (Mexican Independence Day), the Mexican and Mexican American National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) membership met at Our Lady of Guadalupe church in Delano and voted overwhelmingly to join the strike. Within a few days, NFWA was picketing ten additional vineyards, in addition to the sites already targeted by AWOC.

²⁶ Huelga (Spanish) = “strike”

²⁷ At this time the Christian Brothers Winery had already relocated (1932) from Martinez to the Napa Valley, during prohibition. They were permitted to produce wine for sacramental religious purposes during this time, but continued afterward until the sale of the winery in 1989. It is not clear if the Delano labor strikes on grape vineyards affected those in Napa Valley, whose grapes were grown for wine production instead of direct consumption.

am. But I figure then I'll do that. So, I came home...

M: Okay, uh, huh.

R: ...I came home, and uh...

M: After graduation. When did you graduate?

R: 1967.

M: '67, all right, around March, yeah?

R: June.

M: June, okay.

R: My parents came.

M: To the graduation.

R: My parents, Alice, my mother and father, first ever, they ever came to the mainland. They came to my graduation...

M: Wow.

R: They were so proud. We had some relatives that they stayed with. And in fact, my mother convinced this old relative that came in 1921, took 'em along with them. This lady would never have gone unless my mother would have. So, she came.

M: And she was living in Pa'auilo, too?

R: No, in Paukaa²⁸ right outside the outskirts of Hilo, one of our relatives from the Philippines.

M: Alonzo side or?

R: Baraoidan

M: Baraoidan side

R: Baraoidan side. And she came, she came.

M: She came, oh wow.

R: And her daughter was one of those young gals that you know, ah, frequented my parents' house. And my mother was very close to her mother. She was in Gardena, which was the gathering point for a lot of Hawaiians in California and...

²⁸ Probably referring to Pā'ūla.

M: Gardena.

R: ...she would pick me up on weekends sometimes, you know, when I was there as well as another cousin, and I would spend time with them, you know, kind of holidays. I never came home during the holidays. It's just...

M: So, there were cousins in California?

R: Yeah, second, third cousins...

M: Second...

R: ...from Pa'auilo.

M: From Pa'auilo, my goodness.

R: That Pa'auilo store I told you about, Baraoidan.

M: Yes, Baraoidan's.

R: You can read her story in the book, too.

M: All right, okay.

R: But yeah, so, they kinda, you know...and they know I was the first one in the family that was in...went to college yet. They all knew. So, they wanted to help and so they would bring me home on weekends to eat Filipino food and sometimes maybe babysit their kids, so...

M: Yeah, uh huh. So, you were not at all isolated in L.A.?

R: Well, like I said, socially there was one girlfriend that came to Pa'auilo one time as a friend of somebody. And we got to know each other. I used to see her once in a while. She used to come visit at Loyola, but other than that...

M: Nothing.

R: ...there was nothing, you know. But so, I came home, and I told my parents what, uh, you know.

M: Did you come home with them after the graduation ceremony?

R: No, no. I, uh...they came home because my mother had to go back to work...

M: All right.

R: ...I just had to pack up everything and then...

M: You had to stay, yeah, uh huh, okay.

R: ...and so, I came home and just waited for us to be called together.

M: The papers.

R: For training. No, we were training. I was already accepted.

M: Oh, you knew you were approved already, accepted.

R: I was already approved. So, it was just a matter of...just kind of. So, the superintendent²⁹ was this haole³⁰, this old haole man that I used to work with at the garage. He was the superintendent, kind of a very outgoing haole man. He'd tell me, Romel, he says, what are you gonna do?

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: I said well, because he says, uh, he tried to encourage me too. He says, what are you going to do now? I said, oh, I've decided to join the Peace Corps. He was shocked. This was at the post office at Pa'auilo. He says, "Poho." You know what poho means, right?

M: What's poho?

R: Hawaiian word...waste time.

M: Huh, waste time, poho.

R: You're wasting your time, poho...

M: Poho.

R: ...poho. He says poho, you...

M: Is this a haole guy or Hawaiian kine?

R: Yeah, Hawaiian, no, haole man.

M: Haole local?

R: He was from the mainland, but...

M: Post office?

R: He was the head of the...uh, no, the garage section of the plantation.

²⁹ [In Pa'auilo]

³⁰ Haole (Hawaiian) = Originally, "white" or "foreign," especially white person. For socio-historical evolution of the term, see Rohrer, Judy (2010). *Race and Ethnicity in Hawai'i: Haoles in Hawai'i*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

M: Okay, all right, poho, poho.

R: I always used to listen to him dealing with his stocks over the phone. And his wife was an educator, writer of children's books in Pa'auilo. And she published, in fact.

M: What's the name?

R: Thompson.

M: Thompson.

R: Lillian Thompson.

M: Okay.

R: But he told me that, he says, "You're wasting your time."

M: And what did you say?

R: What could I say? What could I say? So, I said. In fact, he says, you know, and I know that, in fact when I was still working...he would...what they did was, when they see some Filipino kid or some local kid with promise, they'd put you in this management training program, you know, so.

M: Did he want to put you there? Recruit you, suggest it?

R: Yeah, he kind of intimated that a few times.

M: Yeah.

R: No, I'll think about it, that kind of stuff. I couldn't. And I know somebody who went through that thing. He was much earlier than I did. But he became...I don't know if you know, what was his name, but anyway he became later the first and only Filipino manager on the plantation.

M: Okay.

R: I thought that was. But I remember that, when he said, "Poho" – waste time.

M: But you did not change your mind.

R: I think, then I told my parents. And I said, Philippines then. I guess my father spoke to someone, another one of his Filipino friends who was a mechanic and kinda told him, oh I don't know if that's a good idea, you know, so. But they didn't say, they didn't say, don't do it, you know. So, I joined. And we gathered here at the old hospital by the Rainbow Falls...

M: That's right.

R: That's where the gathering.

M: Yeah, you told me that's the headquarters.

R: That was Group 21. We were a couple of hundreds of us. We gathered over there for the first night, and then we were dispersed throughout the island to train. Kohala, Pepe'ekeo, Pāhala, here in Hilo. We ended up in Kohala at the Bond Estate.³¹

M: Oh, okay, the Bond estate, yeah, uh huh, yeah.

R: There were about maybe 35...40 of us up there at the Bond Estate. We had to clean up the place. It was...it was nothing, but, uh, we had to wash the floor. And we all slept there, with the family there. That's where I met Precy...

M: Espiritu, yes, uh huh.

R: ...Terry...

M: Terry, yeah.

R: I don't know if you remember....

M: I don't, uh huh.

R: That's where I met all them. They were not assigned to Kohala, but they would visit. They were supervising the local staff of Filipinos.

M: Is that for the language section?

R: For the language.

M: What did you...what kind of training did you get?

R: You do cultural stuff. You do language primarily.

M: But you knew Ilokano already.

R: Yeah, so they said, well, Ilokano. Do your Tagalog, okay? And so language. Then the later month, you did some practice teaching, you know, so. And so, we did end up in Kohala. And then, about two months later, we departed for the Philippines, landed in Manila.

³¹ The Bond Estate, located in North Kohala, was established by missionaries Elias and Ellen Bond. It was comprised of a homestead, church and school. From 1862 to 1973 the mission grew, processed and sold sugar cane to support the missions in Kohala and elsewhere.

And remember I was there about twelve years earlier, right, when I was 9 years.

M: Yeah, correct.

R: And so, uh, we all gathered at the embassy, all of us, everybody you know, and the ambassador gives his speech, and then I remember the country director was this guy called Purcell, who later became ambassador, I think, I don't recall. And there were other people from the Philippines who'd become famous, you know a guy like. Boylan was in the Philippines too, you know.

M: Dan Boylan, Peace Corps, too.

R: Yeah, his wife...

M: Filipina.

R: Remember there was one of the assistants of.... In fact, he's working for Schatz right now. He's kinda like, in the Philippines. But anyway, we arrive and right away, I know I was different from any Peace Corps, you know, unlike...

M: In what way?

R: In what way?

M: In what way? In what way?

R: It became a joke after a while. You would be walking down the street in Manila you know.

M: Okay.

R: "Hey, Americano, you know, you want a good time?" I'm walking with these guys, right. They think I'm the guide, I think. They never ask me.

M: You were the guide or the driver.

R: Yeah, so, I had fun. So, I mentioned this at the...at one of these meetings at the embassy. I said, you know, I never get propositioned. What's going on? It's discrimination. Everybody's laughing away, you know. But then when it was time to, when it was time to move on to our assignment...

M: Okay.

R: ...they, I was supposed to go to Tarlac...

M: Okay.

R: ...Conception...

M: Okay.

R: ...Tarlac, the hometown of Benigno Aquino.

M: Aquino, yeah. What happened?

R: Last minute change. We huddled. Staff huddled. They said, you can't go there.

M: Why?

R: We can't send you there. And I said, "Why not?" I said, I can get by with Tagalog now. I speak Ilokano. He said, "That's the problem. There's too many Ilokanos there and your relatives will come and visit you from Laoag"...like that.

M: It's a good point.

R: Yeah, I didn't think about it much at that time. So they said, you're gonna go to Iligan.³²

M: Mindanao?

R: Lanao del Norte. Iligan. I said, but I don't speak Cebuano or Visayan. Never mind.

M: Never mind the training.

R: Yeah. Just go...

M: Ohh.

R: So, I ended up, you know. The regional office in Cagayan de Oro³³...

M: Okay.

R: Mindanao office in Cagayan de Oro. So you stay there for a week to try to get all, you know, kinda the lay of the land.

M: Okay.

R: I have to share with you some more unique experiences that, my first week over there in Cagayan de Oro.

M: In Cagayan de Oro, okay.

³² Iligan (City of Iligan), Lanao del Norte, Mindanao was and continues to be an industrial city. In the 1960s Iligan experienced a large population increase of migrants, predominantly Christians, from other provinces leading to conflicts with local Muslims. The City of Iligan is about 23 miles from Marawi City, the Philippines' spiritual center of Islam.

³³ Cagayan de Oro, Misamis Oriental, Mindanao is about 55 miles east along the coast from City of Iligan.

R: So, there was this Black guy from Ohio named Ernie Shell, bald-headed Black.

M: Ernie Show?

R: S – H – E – L – L. Ernie, I called him, Ernie. I said, “Ernie, we were gonna go someplace.” And uh, so, we’re sitting on the jeepney, you know Ernie here, me in the middle, and this old Visayan lady. So, we’re riding away and the Visayan lady look at me and said...started talking to me in Cebuano. I didn’t understand a single word she was saying. She was rattling off. So, I turned to Ernie, “What did she say?” I don’t know what that lady thought about me or whatever, but that was my first introduction to...to, ah, you know.

M: She just assumed, yeah, yeah.

R: She just assumed that I was, you know, one of them, you know, so...we get to, finally, you know, you take a one, two hour drive from Cagayan de Oro to Iligan City and all the road is dirt of course, you know.

M: Yeah, that’s a long time ago, too.

R: Oh boy, but I marveled at the sight because from Cagayan de Oro, it’s all beach country.

M: It’s pretty.

R: You drive along the ocean...

M: Yeah.

R: ...beautiful just kinda like white sand.

M: Yeah.

R: Then, as you enter the outskirts of Iligan, you start seeing some industrial stuff, you know...cement factories, battery, then there was this humongous Iligan steel mill company at, you know, that Maria Cristina Falls. This was a different place. But we get to meet the superintendent of schools. And the guy’s Ilokano. Mrs. Serveces.

M: You’re at home.

R: Yeah, at home. And all the heads of departments are mainly Ilokanos, you know.

M: Because they have migrated to Mindanao some time ago.

R: Yeah, and they have seniority. Education is a national program. So, I get to my, they assign me to this school called Tambo...

M: Tambo.

R: Tambo RISEC.

M: T – A – M – B – O.

R: Tambo is the name of the...

M: Town.

R: ...the barrio, I guess.

M: T – A – M – B – O.

R: T – A – M – B – O...Tambo

R: RISEC, the regional in-service regional center for the province.

M: Oh, okay, ooh, at Iligan?

R: RISEC. It's called Tambo RISEC. It was a demonstration school...

M: Oh, okay.

R: ...and it's where...

M: It's a barrio school?

R: ...uh, it was like their lead school in the province.

M: Uh, in the town or in the barrio?

R: Right in, well in outskirts of Iligan City.

M: Outskirts, okay.

R: In some ways, it was a barrio.

M: All right.

R: And that's why they called it Tambo RISEC.

M: So, it's not remote, remote.

R: It was not really remote. It's just in the outskirts. I was issued a bicycle, so I bicycled to work, you know...

M: All right.

R: ...about two miles.

M: So, what did you do in Tambo?

R: Well in Tambo, we were assigned to co-teach and provide in-service classes.

M: Tambo, okay.

R: See, they brought in teachers from the province to be in-service by Peace Corps volunteers, you know, with the new technique. No, no, we knew modern technique, the modern technique of teaching elementary science for me.

M: Oh, okay, all right.

R: Jodean, my wife to be was in another school and arrived a few months earlier than I did. There were ten...

M: Okay.

R: ...ten Peace Corps volunteers, all living in apartments rather than living isolated. So, we were in a city bigger than Hilo It was a hundred thousand people there.

M: Okay.

R: So, you know, they brought all the young teachers from the province, usually young teachers to be demonstrators, but then they brought in the other teachers for training.

M: All right, okay.

R: And so, my job was...in elementary science, was to do that.

M: Elementary.

R: Elementary.

M: Science.

R: 1 to 6, yeah, elementary science.

M: Elementary

R: Elementary science.

M: Science, how come, from history to science?

R: Yeah, I know

M: So you had to.

R: But that's how Peace Corps did in the early days, bachelor's degree, they train you.

M: So, you had to train yourself again?

R: Well, we were, that's what training was in Hawai'i did. We were supposed to teach all this progressive way of educating, you know, teaching teachers rather than the rote system of memory. It was more like, you know, observation and things like that.

M: Thinking.

R: Yeah, thinking.

M: Okay.

R: Well, I was befriended by the librarian. She was an older woman, unmarried, in her early, late '40s...Puring Zarate.

M: She was interested in you?

R: Well, she was a librarian, so usually, that's where I reported first. You could see there was a table there and I could sit and kind of plan, so. First couple of days in the school and, she says, "Romel," she says in English, "what's going on here?" She said, "Where're you're from?" Oh, I'm from Hawai'i, but my parents are from the Ilocos and I was born in the Ilocos.

She said, "It's not enough that we have a lot of teachers who are Ilocanos and a superintendent for the district, you know, are all Ilocanos. Now, they send us a Peace Corps volunteer who's a GI." And I said what do you mean, GI? I said I'm not a military. "Genuine Ilocano!"

M: GI.

R: But she was my sounding board (M: oh, okay) a lot of time in the school and , you know. Puring , we called her Puring, taught me how to speak, you know, better Cebuano.

M: So, did you learn Cebuano?

R: Yeah, I could get by, you know, till this day. I learned all the songs and one time, I was assigned to this older teacher, Mrs. Daroy. She was the 6th grade science teacher. She was the topnotch science teacher, so, my job was to work with her.

M: Work with her?

R: Work with her. And see, but our job was not to replace them and teach their class.

M: Just assist.

R: Yeah, just assist and, you know, once in a while fill in. But she wanted me to take over

her class. And I said, nope. So, our relationship was really bad. So, I went to Puring and I said, “Puring, man, I’m having a hard time with her.” And, for some reason, I think she interceded on my behalf. And, things got better, but when I...I said...she decided that we should talk to each other, and Mrs. Daroy told me, I found out, she said, “I don’t think you’re Filipino enough.” I said, “Of course not.”

And so, I had unique experiences, throughout my two years stint you know. And that is kinda the description of my experience in the Philippines, that...

M: They don’t.

R: ...they couldn’t figure me out.

M: They couldn’t figure you out.

R: When I wanted to be more American, I was always hanging around with the white people, you know. And then, so...but, you know, things got better. I found out later when I went back to Iligan in 2014 and I managed...and I got to see some of my old teachers, I found out the lady science teacher that I worked with died when she was trying to cross the street and got run over by a jeep.

And, of course, there were all the young good looking teachers. There was this one gal...all of us, all the other male Peace Corps volunteers were attracted to her. Her name was Lenny. She was so pretty.

M: Filipina?

R: Filipina. And we all kinda tried to get her attention.

M: Filipina from the Philippines?

R: Oh, she was Cebuano...beautiful, really good-looking.

M: What was she doing there?

R: She was one of the better and seasoned teachers.

M: Aah, okay.

R: There are permanent teachers who taught classes on a regular basis.

M: All right.

R: And then, when they brought in the teachers and we used these teachers as role models and demonstrator. I was tempted to say, I want to know you better, interested...but never did because you had to be careful, right, what you did out there.

I found out that she died later when she went to Manila for in-service, and, on her return, got onto ship that exploded by Muslim insurgents in the harbor, and she died. When they told me, oh, Lenny died, I said, what a loss.

M: Wow.

M: And you were still there in Tambo.

M: She never married?

R: She did. She got married when we were there.

M: All right. Broke every heart.

R: I remember my first couple of days, my principal, Mr. Librado, thought he'd orient me to the social life of Iligan City. So, he and a bunch of teachers brought me to a section of the Market Place. We drink San Miguel. This is in the middle of the day, you know...

M: Okay.

R: He keep looking in the room, and there was a gal in there. He kept prodding me, I figure. But, there was this one guy, from one who was Ilocano. He's said he's trying to push you into the room so I will help you drink your beer. Because if you get drunk and became involved with the women, you could be in trouble. So, you know, I got out of a potential trouble.

M: Soon.

R: We knew that we were being watched, all the time about what we were doing. And I remember one of the radio programs in the morning there was this one announcer,. Good morning, neighbors, he said, "I saw some Peace Corps volunteers intending to use their equipment and flashlights the other day" and basically accused us of fraternizing in the red districts of Iligan City. We just kept quiet.

M: Did you notice any sort of Muslim, anti-Muslim attitude?

R: Oh. They were in to town. But, you know, back in the sixties, I mean, you know, it was pretty normal...they would come to town with their bodyguards, of course. In fact, some attended the Catholic college in town.

You know, they have the address. You know, I have a first cousin who taught school in Marawi.³⁴ And there I went to visit her in Marawi by bus. On the way up wearing my white Keds shoes this kid was eating betel nuts and spitted the red substance right on my

³⁴ Marawi (City), the Islamic spiritual center of the Philippines, is approximately 24 miles inland from the City of Iligan.

shoes.

M: All red.

R: What am I going to say, right? I said nothing. I don't know whether he was trying to provoke me like a teenager, right. So, I just said, ok and let it go. Looking for my cousin over there. There was only one street to Marawi City at that time. And it wasn't even paved. It was all mud, if you've been there in the rainy season. And she was teaching up there.

M: In Marawi City?

R: In Marawi City.

M: Oh, what was she teaching?

R: Elementary school.

M: Elementary school, my goodness. It's a long way, okay.

R: She was, she was the second of the Dela Cruz family to move to Mindanao to work and teach. Later on, at least four more would follow that...

M: Goodness.

R: And then, my cousin on my maternal side, because of my Peace Corps experience, before I left back for home in '69, I told her, when you get there, if you wanna get a job, because she couldn't get a job in Ilocos, I said, Marci, Marcelina, she was my first cousin on my mother side, which I had kept in touch all these years, I said, go to Iligan, mention my name and maybe you get a job. And she did. She ended up being a principal. She still lives there.

M: She still lives there in, uh?

R: Married a Cebuano.

M: Cebuano.

R: In fact, both cousins married. Another cousin married a Muslim...

M: Muslim.

R: ...and is now totally estranged from her Ilocano family.

R: But I need to tell you about one story. We went to Jolo.

M: Oh, wow, I've been there, uh huh, uh huh.

R: Jodean and I.

M: Oh, you haven't told me about meeting Jodean, but anyway continue.

R: Well, anyway, well we can start with Jodean first

M: Oh, okay, all right, okay.

R: So, when I get to Iligan I was brought over to meet all the other volunteers. But the first one to arrive, I guess, is Jodean. She's sizing me up, you know, if you ask her. I mean, I think you should ask her.

M: Yeah, she told me one story about you.

R: She says, you know, who's this guy? He's acting like he...

M: Was she the only haole there?

R: No, all of them are haole. There were ten of us. I'm the Filipino. We have one Chinese, one black.

M: And the rest?

R: Two Jews, and the others

M: All right, okay.

R: My roommate was a Jew from Brooklyn.

But anyway, so, you know, she was very friendly and started asking me all kind of questions. I said, oh, this person is a nuisance here (clap). But, you know, she was living with an attorney, female...

M: Female.

R: ...attorney. And this female attorney was trying to introduce her to all the young single men in town.

M: Okay.

R: She was taken out to dinner regularly, you know. And she finally decided that social life wasn't for her. She started living with the other volunteers. Meanwhile, I was living with this guy from Brooklyn, but anyway...she was teaching. We had four districts – north, south, east and west. I was east at Tambo.

M: And Jodean?

R: So, east central, south central, north central, you know, all that, you know how they divide schools over there. So, that's how we met. But, anyway, we, you know, during holidays, we would try to go and visit other parts of the country, you know. So, that first Christmas, I think it was. Well the first Christmas was '68, no, '67...

M: '67.

R: I said, you wanna us, Ray and I? You wanna, yeah, yeah, yeah. She wants to go. I had not returned home to visit my relatives yet. I didn't go until three months later. Christmas, I couldn't. I couldn't just...

M: Okay.

R: I had to go to my assignment and then so that first Christmas of '67, I went all the way to Laoag...

M: Laoag.

R: ...yeah, and Jodean came with another friend.

M: Oh, three of you.

R: Yeah, but she already had a volunteer friend in Laoag. She did not train with me in Peace Corps. They trained in San Jose. I trained in Hawai'i. So, she had a friend that trained in San Jose with her in Laoag.

M: Okay.

R: So, she said yeah, I'll come along. So, you know, we went and when we arrived at night, one evening, I said...oh, funny story, when we get there...so, this white friend of mine, Jodean, and me.

So, we check in at this hotel, I don't know which hotel was that, but next to the Filipino Rabbit Bus station anyway. So, we check in, and Ray said, "Oh, we would like two rooms, please." And the guys, the manager says, tells Ray, my friend from Detroit, and says, "No need sir, the boy can sleep on the mat." I can sleep on the mat...

M: Save money.

R: ...save money. No, no, the room is for two men and then the lady. Anyway, that was one story.

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: And then, you know, I said to Jodean, I said, you know, I'll go and. I'll go to Darayday now and...

M: The barrio.

R: ...set up the visit, you know. So, she stayed and I went and took a pedicab. So, I went to Darayday.

M: Oh, she did not go with you to Darayday?

R: No, not the first time. And so, I get to Darayday in a pedicab. I looked for a pedicab that had the name and barrio number forty-nine. This is twelve years late so I wasn't sure where my grandparents was located anymore.

M: Your grandparents still alive then?

R: Yeah, they were still alive. We drove and stop in the middle of the roadway. I get out of the pedicab. And there's this man. They were renovating a house...

M: Wow.

R: ...kinda piling garbage. And I said, "Excuse me, Tata, you know..." I said, "do you know where my grandfather's house is, Guillermo Alonzo?" not knowing he was my uncle and my mother's brother. He grabbed me and said how come you didn't tell us you were coming. They knew I was in Mindanao, but they didn't know when I was gonna come. So, that was my uncle, my mother's brother.

M: You left as a little boy.

R: Yeah. And so, he's there, you know. And he says oh. So, he grabbed me and he shouted, "Look who's here!" You know, so...

M: Wow.

R: My grandfather was still alive, Melinda. My grandmother was still alive.

M: It's good that you were able to...

R: But Grandma was totally Alzheimer's already...

M: Correct.

R: You know...

M: Correct.

R: ...how old people in the Philippines is very sad.

M: Yeah.

R: They put her in a little room and lock it, right. And she stayed there unattended and checked how often I don't know.

M: But your grandpa was okay?

R: My grandpa was, oh man, he was still sharp. He was still sharp.

M: Wow, that's pretty good.

R: But my grandma, she knew I was there, but you know. But my grandpa, we still carried dialogue. And then, Jodean and Ray came later. And so she came and met my relatives, my grandpa, she got a chance to meet my grandfather, and they spoke to each other in broken English and whatever.

M: That's really nice.

R: And so, whenever I speak of my grandpa, she knows who I'm talking about. My grandma died the following year.

M: he following year

R: '68, and, uh...

M: Okay, and she got to see her.

R: And then my mother and Alice. Alice, for the first time, came to the Philippines to attend the funeral of my grandma.

M: Okay, all right.

R: We buried her in our family tomb. but my grandpa was still alive. And when I asked him, I said, "You know, grandpa, would you like to come back to America with me, to Hawai'i?" He said, "No, son." He says, "You know, I'm gonna die soon and you don't have to come."

M: Getting old.

R: He said, "Because it's too much money."

M: Right.

R: Of course he was right. I didn't have money to spend, right? But Jodean got to spend that Christmas, stayed my cousin house. Yeah, she got to know everybody in the barrio. And they always ask, whenever I went back through the years...when I show pictures, "Oh, she's so fat." You know how that is, right?

M: ___ payat, ooh payat.

R: In Iligan, it's tambok, ___.

M: ___.

R: Yeah, so, that was it. But I was telling you about, then, this one Christmas, I think it was, must have been '68. We decided to go to Jolo, Jodean and two others. And from Zamboanga, you take this old WW2 minesweeper boat converted into passenger boat. I remember that night, we were, you know, ___ at night and you are given a little cot, right? Everybody's on the top deck, right. I don't know, maybe late night, 2 or 3, 1 am in the morning, that boat was taking in water.

M Oh.

R: I went down to the deck. These Muslims were on the floor.

M: Praying?

R: Praying, banana shifting all over the place. I thought this was it. We're goners. And I said, this might be it, you know.

So, I go up and to find Jodean and the others. I said, "You know, water is coming in through the port hole in the bottom." I said, "If you look around, everybody, there's a PC³⁵ and his family. And you know, those PCs, they can go and travel home with their weapons, right? The guy was traveling with his family back home to ___ I guess. So, he's scanning the place. I said there ain't no way we're going to have enough lifeboats, it ain't going to matter, right? We're not gonna, but, you know, we made it.

M: You made it? How?

R: We made it.

M: Even though.

R: It got into port.

M: With all this water coming in, wow.

R: But it was a rough voyage, you know. And so...and the reason why I went was that I'm looking for my cousin

³⁵ The Philippine Constabulary (PC) was originally formed, in 1901, by the United States occupation government as a military police force to "maintain peace, order and law" within the Philippines. After WWII the PC became one branch of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) functioning as a national police force. By 1991 the PC was dissolved as the civilian National Police Force took over its functions.

M: Your cousin?.

R: My first cousin who was in the PC...Philippine Constabulary, my cousin, Edong.

M: __ oh my goodness!

R: They were fighting over there. So, I go out. I thought I'd go to the fort. So, I go to the fort.

M: Alone?

R: Alone.

M: Uh huh.

R: I go to the fort and, uh, I ask at the entrance. I said, would you guys know so and so. A woman comes to me? She's family, his wife. They were running a __ or sari sari store right on the outskirts of the fort. She said, "Oh...", she said, "Oh, they're up in the hills...fighting."

M: Fighting the Muslims.

R: Yeah, yeah. So, I never got to see him. But I got to meet his family, you know.

M: Okay. And what language did you use?

R: They speak Cebuano.

M: Cebuano

R: Well, the wife is Cebuana.

M: Okay.

R: You know, so, you know, so we got to go back. Jodean and one companion says, "Well, I don't wanna go back by boat." So, what are we gonna do? We check out. There was, there's an airport there. They said, "Well, there's a small airplane that comes in here, you know, every day or two."

M: Go back every day?

R: No, just to Zamboanga³⁶. The next flight is this. If you guys are willing to wait. So, there was an airplane right near the airport. So, we waited for that single propeller airplane to come in.

And it was New Year's, and when New Year's Eve came, oh, Melinda, fireworks started.

³⁶ Zamboanga is a port city on the western edge of Mindanao.

They started firing guns in the air. The bullets were striking the roof of the hotel. You could see like you were in the war zone. And Jodean in her pjs, hiding under the bed.

But my friend, the Chinese friend...

M: Yeah.

R: ...Harvey, Harvey Lee decided he wanted to go to Tawi-Tawi.³⁷

M: Oh, no.

R: He said, "You're not coming with me?" I said, "No way, man." He said, "How do you have to go?" So, he made arrangement. He wanted to go. He wanted to buy mats, you know, the real soft colorful mats.

M: The beautiful mats.

R: Yeah. So, I said, "Well, I can come to the pier, say goodbye to you just in case I never see you again." I still remember kinda waving goodbye on this long boat. I don't know who was taking him. But he came back. And I...and we went back on the plane but, boy, what an adventure.

M: What did Jodean think about the whole experience?

R: Well, she...when on the boat, I decided to just kinda go and lie down, and they said there's nothing we can do. We can just kinda relax here.

M: Attitude.

R: I don't know how agitated she was. You know, you can ask her. She was probably thinking, oh, I look at him and he's so calm. I wasn't calm. I was just saying, I mean, this might be it, right, you know.

M: So, how was the...I assume you proposed or she proposed and there was a wedding.

R: No, we did not. We did not. I did not. I figured oh this is just ... no, we weren't really a couple. We were just happy being together with others and traveling. She just tagged along every time I went someplace.

M: Oh, and when did it happen, the wedding and all, you and Jodean?

R: I remember one Valentine's Day in '69, I think, and we went. We were invited to the school. You know, Sharon Wagner and Jodean and another. And here I was dancing with

³⁷ Tawi-Tawi is the most southwestern island group in the Sulu Archipelago between Mindanao and Sabah, Borneo (Malaysia). Armed conflicts in Sulu between local Muslim groups and the Philippine government started in 1968 and escalated when Pres. Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972.

all the white girls, right?

M: That's why the locals did not know how to place you.

R: I saw these bunch of guys. One came over and asked me, can we? I was wondering how they saw this situation...they asked my permission to dance with her. I said, yeah. Nah, but you know, that kind of experiences like that was not common.

One of the things that was really interesting. This is one of our companions. It might be good to record it for history, but we were, uh, on a weekend, playing volleyball at one of our...outside the city. We were playing volleyball over there. Somebody brought her down because she was going with this Filipino guy and spend the night together. And this one disgruntled worker came to see her boyfriend and killed him.

M: What!

R: Killed him. And she was hysterical. She came down.

M: What?

R: What am I gonna do? You can't be caught with knowing. By the way, the name of that guy, famous Filipino filmmaker named Nepomuceno. You're familiar with that name? Nepomuceno. He was a film director back in the twenties that made some famous films.

M: Okay.

R: He was a relative, I mean, nephew from, you know.

M: So, he was dating this haole Peace Corps girl, haole lady?

R: Yes and got killed.

M: He got killed? The Filipino? Who killed?

R: The boyfriend died right while she was sleeping in his house.

M: Wait a minute, uh, who got killed?

R: The boyfriend.

M: The boyfriend of?

R: Was killed by one of his workers and the friend of our co-Peace Corps volunteers. She was staying the night with him, and the worker guy came in the morning to talk to him, and they got into a fight. And he was stabbed to death.

M: And the boyfriend of this haole girl is this haole boy?

R: No, he's Nepomuceno.

M: Nepomuceno. So, that's the one.

R: So, she. You know, that was a kind of a traumatic kind of experience for everybody. But, yeah, so that was one of the kind of interesting things that happen. By the way, I started a ukulele club.

M: Where, in Iligan?

R: In Iligan. We had all these kids, "Sir, we want to learn how to play the ukulele." But they already knew how to play the ukulele, right. So, they all just took out their ukulele. We had about 50 kids.

M: What did you buy – the ukulele?

R: Well, they all had their own or had access to one. They could get it really cheap, you know. In the Visayans, it's nothing to get some because Cebu manufactures a lot. So, we had this ukulele club and Christmas time, we would go and serenade and go to the radio station and I thought that was kind of one proud legacy that I...

M: You spent 2 years...

R: ...2 years...

M: ...with the Peace Corps, so sixty?

R:q '67 to '69.

M: '67 to '69.

M: And when did you and Jodean get married? What year?

R: We got married in '72.

M: '72.

R: We went back. On the return, you know, we decided to travel together through Asia...

M: All right.

R: ...and kind of see. And so she came along with me, roomed together. We had some unique experiences. We went to, uh...

M: She really followed you.

R: Yeah. We went to Indonesia, ended up in Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, Korea, Hong

Kong.

M: Did your parents know you were going with Jodean? And how was that?

R: Yeah. My mother...when my mother and Alice came for my grandma's funeral in '68, I said, "Why don't you guys come down to Iligan from Laoag?" So, they came.

M: They met her.

R: And so, uh, they got to meet her then, and meet all my Peace Corps friends too. And so, yeah, so, and then they went back home. But after our world or Southeast Asian tour, she's...

M: This is '69. You are pau, finish with the Peace Corps.

R: ...'69, by the end of October, we were back and she came to Pa'auilo with me and met my father for the first time and stayed at our plantation house and got to know the people in the community and then...

M: It's getting serous.

R: ...and she went back home.

M: Went back home to?

R: Michigan...

M: Michigan.

R: ...and got a teaching job at Battle Creek.

M: Okay and you?

R: Meanwhile, I...you know, first semester of...

M: '69?

R: '60, it would be '70 right, 1970.

M: okay.

R: So I took the GRE while we were in Philippines.

M: Grad school

R: Grad school. UH finally accepted me into the School of Southeast Asian Studies.

M: Southeast Asian studies.

R: Yeah.

M: Not Public Health?

R: Southeast Asian studies.

M: Goodness.

R: And I don't know if Ben was there, but but I worked at Sinclair Library to make some money. I was working at Sinclair Library checking out at weekends and nights. And I enrolled in Southeast Asian studies. I got to...I started taking classes kind of regularly. Van Niel...

M: Robert Van Niel.

R: ...with Dr. Wella.

M: Wella, Walter Wella. Yeah, uh huh.

R: He introduced me to Cambodia.

M: Yeah, so, you had a master's degree in Southeast Asian history?

R: I could have.

M: You could have?

R: I did all the requirements I did everything

M: Yeah.

R: ...including my oral but I never wrote my paper.

M: Why? What was your paper about?

R: I introduced, this was...

M: Master's thesis.

R: Dr. Wella and my advisors to our friend, what's his name, Ben Lightener, in Kalihi Valley.

M: Ben Lightener, Kalihi Valley.

R: Yeah, the...my God, I can't think of his name, you know, Hilario Moncado.

M: Hilario Moncado.

R: I took them out and I did my orals right in their church right in Kalihi at the corner of Houghtailing.

M: You researched Hilario Moncado?

R: There is. You didn't know that?

M: You did research on Moncado?

R: Yeah, no, that's what I did. I brought my team there and I did my orals there. They allowed me to do it, to meet some of their staff right in their church, right on, you know, they had an apartment building on Houghtailing.

M: That's near where Amy lives, yeah.

R: Yeah, on Houghtailing and I did...but I never wrote the paper.

M: Why?

R: I just didn't. You know, it was after my orals, I figure, I should have. I had a rough sketch and everything but I never completed it. And when it was graduation time, they listed me as having graduated, you know.

M: So you graduated officially?

R: It's on the book (claps).

M: Whatever...

R: It's recorded that I graduated, but I don't want to tell you...I got it because...not like Precy teaching Ilocano and doesn't have a PhD.

M: That's right.

R: That was a revelation to me, by the way.

M: Oh, I knew that.

R: You knew that? So, I didn't know that. So, I tell Jodean now she was an impostor all this time. I thought she was from the Ilocos, I said, and I thought she...

M: She did not want or could not finish writing it. But she did other things. It's all right.

R: See that's what happened. The book shows. The graduation list shows that I graduated.

M: But all along I thought you had, you went to School of Public Health in the light of your other careers here. You went working for hospital administrators.

R: Oh, you see, that's another story. That's another story. I can go into that now. But so, and I said, well, I don't. I felt that if I wanted to really further my career. Oh, by the way,

Terry Ramos was still thinking teaching Tagalog yet. It was this guy, PeBenito.

M: PeBenito? Mr. PeBenito?

R: I took Tagalog class. I needed the language right. So, oh yeah.

M: Okay. So, School of Public Health knows.

R: So, later on, I figure, what am I gonna do with my masters? Am I'm gonna teach? I have to get my PhD. I figure, I said, ah, maybe it's not, so kinda. And the longer I got away from writing my paper, you know, it's expired, right, so?

So, meanwhile I kinda started working. That's where I met Ethel Ward. There was a guy named Bill Fraser...somebody teaching at Dole. And Jodean was back, came to Hawai'i in 1970.

M: Bill Williams?

R: 1970... '71.

M: And Jodean came back to Hawai'i?

R: She came back. After one year, teaching in Battle Creek, she wanted to come back.

M: To see you.

R: In fact, well, she had this grant at East West Center...

M: East West Center.

R: ...for the semester and then interviewed for a job and hired her like that at Dole, you know?

M: Dole Elementary? Intermediate?

R: Intermediate, yeah.

M: She was there!

R: Yeah. so, she got. She was right in the thick when things were really...

M: Is it Jodean, what's the maiden name of Jodean?

R: Schneider.

M: Schneider.

R: Schneider.

M: Okay, so okay, what happened to you? Did you figure it out?

R: I was figuring out. I was doing certain things, certain job. I got a job with the Model Cities.

M: Oh, you were sort of...

R: As a community organizer.

M: Okay, that's where you met Amy Agbayani?

R: No. I met all the...lot of the activists like Pete Thompson.

M: Yeah, Pete Thompson.

R: All those guys. And then, I met her too.

M: And in UH, were you in Operation Manong too?

R: Yeah, well, that was, that's afterwards.

M: All right.

R: Then...I got, I was helping at Dole, with Bill, this guy Bill who was a good friend of Ethel Ward.

M: Bill Williams?

R: I actually kinda introduced him more to the Filipino community...

M: Ohh.

R: ...because he didn't know what the heck. He was just there at Dole, but he wanted the Filipino contact.

M: Ethel Ward

R: So, he hired me.

R: And then, I was doing Model Cities. And then, you know, Jodean was teaching at Dole.

M: At Dole?

R: Yeah. Dole Intermediate.

M: And were you at Susannah Wesley³⁸, too?

³⁸ Originally a Methodist mission servicing Japanese and Korean women in Waipahu, Susannah Wesley Community Center evolved into a home for girls who were orphaned, abandoned or whose parents were unable to care for them and then, by the 1950s, into a multi-purpose agency serving the needs of the Kalihi community.

R: That was after.

M: Oh, okay.

R: And when I...I was also working, you know, earning money. While I was doing my Asian Studies.

By the way, I was living at the prison, at the halfway house, the conditional release center where those prisoners are ready to go out into the community. And we would sleep at night, kind of watch...

M: You were like a counselor?

R: We were kinda resident counselor...

M: Counselor.

R: ...but you know, and we stayed there, so free room and board, right, so? But, ah, and Jodean was teaching. So, we finally got married in '72. I finally said okay. I guess we should.

M: '72, oh okay.

R: In fact, we would have made our 50th anniversary, 50th next year.

M: Yeah, we should celebrate together. Ben and I will be 50 years too.

R: You guys come here. We'll celebrate.

M: Yeah.

R: We'll work out something.

M: Okay, so '72, okay.

R: In March of '72. And that's the biggest event that we have, like. I told my parents. I said Dad, Mom, I think I'm going to get married next week.

My mom said, what? She said, I wanna collect all the gifts. I give all, for almost forty years. I said, well, if you don't come, you're going to miss it.

M: Wow, and how did, okay...

R: And so my mom and my dad, Alice and this single man that lived with us for many years, for the first time in his life, he finally get off Hawai'i from the time he arrived in 1921. Tata Sato came.

M: And where did you get married?

R: And we went to the judicial office right by Kamehameha building.

M: All right.

R: You know, that statue. Judge Hawkins, we figure that's the fastest way to do it.

M: Yes.

R: I commandeered my Filipino friend and this Filipino girl to be a witness, and we go in there and the judge says, he says, "And where's the ring?"

M: You forgot.

R: "It's invisible, judge," I said, "it's forever and ever. It's there." He said, "Smart man. So, we don't have a ring."

I said to Jodean, anytime you want me to get you a ring, I'll get you a ring. But we never got a ring.

M: Did her family come?

R: No.

M: From Michigan?

R: But they came before when we announced that we wanted to get married.

M: Was there any objection at that side?

R: My mother-in-law, my future mother-in-law came, my father-in-law. And my mother, at the time, was working at the Mauna Kea Hotel at the kitchen. And, when, but, you know, they were here for vacation so I told Jodean, I said, you should tell mom to get a kinda of, get a dinner at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, gather and bring your parents. There was an aunt and some cousins, I think. So, we all had. I wasn't even prepared. I, you know, at the time, Mauna Kea insisted that you have a jacket to get you in. But we could get you one. So, that's when I announced it.

M: But in 1972, when you were married.

R: Yeah.

M: I find that, ah, you actually don't have a steady job.

R: It's all part-time job, kinda like. Well, Model Cities was, was a full-time job but it was all in addition to all the other stuff.

M: It's interesting yeah, what you got into, wow.

R: But when we got married, I said well, maybe I should get something more steady. So I went to work for Susannah Wesley.

M: all right

R: And Nobu Yonamine.

M: Nobu Yonamine.

R: Nobu was a street worker in Cleveland, social worker, youth organizer. So, he calls me and he says, so what do you want me to do? I said I don't know. He says there's an office, there's a, we have a program out there. It's called Hui Kokua, you know, it's called, and it's based at KPT.³⁹

M: KPT, yeah.

R: So, KPT, is, you know, that 15 stories.

M: Yeah. Kuhio Park Terrace.

R: Right, Kuhio Park Terrace and there was an office at the bottom of one of the buildings and, you know, Building B. And, he says, you go in there, you check it out. You tell me do what we need to do.

M: You became a counselor?

R: No, I ran the program. He said do whatever you want to do.

M: For the youth there?

R: Whatever. It was, the program was known as Pastoral Services. The concept was, if you bring spiritual ministers over there and they would have a place to counsel and hold programs. But it never really got off the ground.

So, Nobu says, I don't know. You do what you think you need to do. I said, you sure? Yeah, whatever. And so, I get there and there was this old haole lady who was very spiritual, a retired nun living upstairs. But the nun, Sister Jean, was a real liberal minded.

M: So, what did you do?

R: Well, I just kinda watched everything what was going on...

M: Uh huh, uh huh.

³⁹ KPT or Kuhio Park Terrace was a highrise public housing development which opened in 1965.

R: ...and so what needed to be done. So, it became a drop-in center for the first couple of months.

M: Okay, for the youth?

R: Yeah, for the youth

M: For the youth.

R: Once you get the youth, the parents come, right?

M: That's right, yeah.

R: And so, that's when things evolved.

M: Oh.

R: The kids would bring their parents.

M: Was there a tutorial for the kids?

R: Yeah, we had tutorial. We brought teachers. We had, you know, but mainly as a place to hang out for the kids. Then soon enough, so you know, we, the whole focus changed. In fact, one of the happiest moments I had. I said, you guys wanna go? Some never ventured out of Kuhio Park Terrace anyway, right? I said, you guys wanna to go to the Big Island?

M: Oh.

R: And they said, yeah. Well, we gotta raise some money. So you know what they did with their food stamps? They would buy their food stamps, they would buy bulk food.

M: And then?

R: And make lunch for...usually Friday.

M: Okay.

R: And then all the state employees that worked there would come and eat lunch. And they would charge 'em. We never told anybody, you know. Pretty soon, they had enough.

We had a whole group come here to the Big Island and stayed at the Hukilau⁴⁰ here and at the Honokaa Club in Honoka'a. And then I had my parents prepare a meal in our garage at the plantation home. They thought that was something.

M: Why, these kids are from troubled families?

⁴⁰ In 1956 Richard Wassman Kimi built the 30-room Hotel Hukilau in Hilo. The small hotel was one of the first along Banyan Drive and catered to the budget-conscious and local residents.

R: Their parents came too!

M: Their parents too!

R: It was kind of a family thing...and Kona, and then went back home. But, it was such a lasting experience for them.

M: Yeah.

R: I still have contact.

M: To them.

R: To show you my trust in them and how things evolved, well, when my first son was born, Rene.

M: Rene.

R: We couldn't get a sitter. No, I think, well, Violet⁴¹ and her mother kinda took care of Rene for a couple of months. But then they couldn't do it, so...but then, when he got older, maybe a year, he, kinda a year and Jodean was at Dole and I...one of the mothers over at KPT said, "I'll babysit Rene."

M: Wow.

R: So, he was there all day and the daughters would bring him to my office, kind of sitting. Nobody ever touched my car.

M: How long did you have that job at KPT?

R: I was there from, uh, at least two years, and then, one of the things that...

M: Two years. That's a long time.

R: You know, I helped out the Immigration Services there.

M: Okay.

R: And then, you know, some other stuff.

M: Were you paid by the state?

R: No, Susannah Wesley.

M: Susannah Wesley. They assigned you.

R: Yeah, oh, they got grants.

⁴¹ [a cousin]

M: So, who's running it now? An ex-OM,⁴² too.

R: Right, right. And so, the trust was there. And, you know uh, one of the things that happened every summertime...

M: I didn't know that.

R: ...was the school, UH school would send students to me...

M: Okay.

R: ...to give them, you know, field experience. One year, I had ten from the School of Social Work.

M: Oh.

R: The second year, several Public Health. So, this guy from Public Health comes over, Eric Tash, who later became the top health educator for the University of Hawai'i. He comes over. He works with me and we became really friends. "And Romel," he says, "why don't you come back to school? Why don't you come back to school?" This was in '75.

M: Uh huh, okay.

R: Was it '75? Yeah he says, come back. "There's a lot of stipend monies coming in now," he said, "you know, you should come, you should."

M: My goodness. What's his name again?

R: Eric Tash.

M: Spell.

R: T – A – S – H.

M: Okay.

R: He's retired now.

M: All right.

R: So, Eric...so I kinda started the trend to go to the School of Public Health, you know. That's when Charlene and Bernie, they followed that, too. Arnold and I were there together.⁴³

M: My goodness, that's very good to know.

⁴² "Operation Manong" – an outreach and affirmative action program of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

⁴³ Charlene Cuaresma, Bernie Ledesma and Arnold Manangan.

R: Arnold and I were there. And I told Jodean, I think this is a fine time to do it. Our son is, you know, he's just a year old. And I can, you know, and she took leave, yeah, for almost a year or several months anyway.

M: To get your master's.

R: Just had the income, right. But I had some stipend, you know. So, that's when I explored going to work for you guys and get some extra from Operation Manong.

M: Oh, we were in Washington DC. That's why we didn't see you, okay.

R: Yeah, in fact, my last semester.

M: My goodness.

R: I couldn't find...you know⁴⁴, while I was in school. I would...I had this VW wagon with a back seat, and I know several times that I had to bring him⁴⁵ because I had to be in class, and he would sleep in there. And I would park at St. Francis.

M: In the back. It's closed now. They sold it.

R: I closed all the VW bus and leave him in there sleeping, you know, kinda run out and check.

M: But he was okay?

R: But he was okay.

M: And Jodean was working

R: Working at Dole.

M: Hah, it's really important. So, this is a big decision now, School of Public Health. And you got a degree there.

R: Yeah, I got a degree. We, Arnold and I, graduated in '76. December of '76, a year and a half program. And I did my internship over at the Hawai'i Health Services Council or something, trying to organize care home operators and long term care health planning.

M: Okay.

R: And so, you know, I graduated.

I don't know, weren't around you there when I threw a big party when his first birthday

⁴⁴ Parking.

⁴⁵ Son (Rene).

in 1977? One year. And I said, it might be a good time to have a birthday party and gather all my classmates and say, we're still looking for jobs? How many of us were looking for jobs? So, we had a one year birthday. You know, I had Filipino customers.

M: Correct.

R: Some of them parents. That's my first grandson. You gotta do it. So, we had a party at, now it's called the Plaza. It used to be the freeway at the airport, Ramada.

M: Okay. Ramada Inn

R: That's where we had a party. In fact, I invited all my profs, and all the guys, Milli and who else, what's her name, Vicky.

M: Vicky.

R: Vicky sang a song, danced. She danced.

M: Vicky Ramil?

R: All my professors and you know, John Hayakawa.

M: Yes, John Hayakawa.

R: Jon...I gotta tell you one experience. The experience I had to my best recollection, what was there. My team, my advisor team, was John Hayakawa, Gerald Grossman, and Michael Chun. Remember Michael Chun?

M: Michael Chun?

R: Michael Chun, the president of Kam.⁴⁶

M: Okay.

R: He was a professor of environmental health at the School of Public Health. I remember that first December. I was kind of, I thought I wasn't learning anything. I was learning nothing. I mean, I thought all the students were a bunch of cry babies. They were all crying.

M: They were young.

R: We were in groups. You know when you're in groups. They did a lot of group interaction.

M: Yeah.

⁴⁶ Kamehameha School, a private, Christian school established, in 1884, by Ke Ali'i Bernice Pauahi Bishop to improve the capability and well-being of people of Hawaiian ancestry.

R: Everyone started attacking each other. And I was notorious for saying, “so what?” You, see, since I came out from the community, I said, so...

M: What’s the point?

R: So, what’s your point? What are you trying to say, just get up there, and so that kind of attitude.

We were game changers, we were, you know, game changer. So I remember getting my thesis. And I told my advisors, I said shucks, you know, I don’t think I’m going anywhere here. I’m not learning anything, I told them.

Hayakawa told me, he says, what? He said, do you think we’re gonna get you a black bag to walk outta here, like a black bag like a physician. I said, well, I need something.

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: That stuck to my mind all the time, that’s kinda like my thing for my, how I was to approach my work.

M: Uh, huh.

R: The point he was making was that, you know, first of all, you gotta know yourself.

M: Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh.

R: You gotta know who you are, where you came from, and what you want to do and what values you own, the value you have, if, you know, you believe in the philosophy of public health.

Public health is *public* health. And you will not be able to do any project at all in the community if the public health concept of *community wellness* is rather scary. You know, just address to the community, and they believe you.

M: They believe you.

R: And if you can’t do that, that’s what public health is, you know, the public health is the *public interest*. The public health and what more can you get. It is their life that you’re dealing with. And if you don’t know yourself, and you don’t know how to convince them.

He says, we’ll give you the tool to get you there, to how to work there. But a lot of it, it’s just ideas. You have to be the one to implement it kind of a stuff. And so that’s always kind of been my philosophy. And that’s what he told me. And to this day, he’s my guru, you know.

M: Ohh.

R: His wife died and he reached out, and he saw my article that I wrote about sakadas that I wrote a couple of months ago.

M: Yes.

R: He tells me about his own life, you know, he was in an internment camp when he was young, during the war...

M: He was...

R: Yeah, he was...in Arizona, yeah. So, that's what he said. So, that's when I said okay, I guess I'm ready to go.

There's a picture of my class. Everybody had a card. We're a group, a small group of about 40. Arnold is in there. I had my chance and so what. So, don't be offended when I say to you "so what?" you know. All I'm saying is, "Yes, so where do we go from here?"

M: Yeah, where do we go, uh huh, uh huh, instead of just talking about things, do something.

R: Yeah. So, that's kinda like how I got into public health, I mean.

M: I think, I guess tomorrow we should start on the implementation of your public health philosophy and then we'll start with your hospital administration, yeah, and from there, go to your community involvements, retirement and community involvements. That's two main topics tomorrow.

R: Making sense?

M: Yeah. It's very good. Thank you. Very good.