

Filipino-American Historical Society of Hawai‘i
Oral History Project
Interview #3

Romel Dela Cruz (R)

**Interview Conducted By:
Melinda Tria Kerkvliet (M)**

November 11, 2021
Honoka‘a, Hawai‘i

M: Okay, today is November 11 and I’m here with Romel Dela Cruz, and we will have our third interview with Romel. Yesterday, we ended with you graduating with your master’s in public health. You graduated December 1976?

R: Yes. Yes, yes.

M: So, now we explore your life and experiences after you got your master’s in public health. So, what did you do after graduation?

R: Well, I think we touched a little bit about celebrating Rene’s first birthday. And I invited all my classmates at the School of Public Health who were in health education to come to the birthday party along with my professors...

M: Okay.

R: ...and to kinda share stories as to who got jobs and who did not.

M: Ha, ha.

R: It was kind of a celebration to see where we are and network, right? So, that was basically, you know, the first couple of months, kind of just...kind of exploring, you know, what I’ll be doing. I don’t recall that, maybe I should mention to you that I did work at the legislature.

M: You did?

R: Yeah, Ben Junasa...

M: Yes, Ben Junasa.

R: ...says “you doing anything?” And I don’t know whether it was right after graduation from the School of Public Health,¹ and he says, “Ted Mina...Representative Mina from

¹ At the time Romel Dela Cruz studied for a masters in public health, the School of Public Health was a self-administered school in the University of Hawai‘i system. Since 2016 the School of Public Health became the Office of Public Health within the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Myron Thompson School of Social

Kalihi Valley who needed somebody to kinda like...his legislative analyst.” He told me to go and talk to Rick Labez who was working in the Office of Governor John Burns. I went to see him and after I was done talking to him I went to work for Rep. Ted Mina. So, that was one experience after I graduated from graduate school.

The other, experience I should also mention was when...when I just got back from Peace Corps. One of the first jobs I got, kinda of a part-time, was with Hawai‘i Planned Parenthood. In ‘69 to ‘70 it was a seminal point in the history of Hawai‘i because the legalization of abortion. And I was hired...me, as a driver, drive the mobile clinic van as well as the health educator, spreading the word about birth control. I mention it because it because I’m very proud of that experience. It gave me an inside view of what was happening and how Hawai‘i was implementing the law.

We had a mobile clinic and I would drive the van to a housing project and then we would set up shop, which I think really gave me a full picture. Many people didn’t think that was a good idea at all, you know, especially with people who did not believe in abortion, and those that came to the van clinic for reproductive services.

At Kuhio Park Terrace one would be observing from the 15th floor clinic of KPT and wondering whatever, Who’s getting an abortion or reproductive services?

Anyway, I remember one event that kinda created a morality issue for me. There was this Filipina woman who was married to an older Filipino man, and they already had four kids, older ones. And I think the clinic director wanted me to talk to her because she was considering getting an abortion. And the lady asked me, what do you think, ading², you know, you think God will punish me for it?

Oh, I...I...I...I agonized over that. Later on in my career in public health, this experience would always bring me back to the question who gives me the authority to tell people what to do, or it’s...that’s okay or whatsoever.

So, going back, I thought I’d share that...

M: Yeah, yeah.

R: ...because it was a good background experience, one of the reasons I went into and finally ended up in public health services. And also, I should also mention that when I was in training with Peace Corps in 1967 and we were asked about future careers...but it’s just amazing and maybe...it’s also a precursor of what was down the road for me. You know what I said? I said I probably will end up being involved in health care services and working specially with the elderly.

Work and Public Health.

² Ading (Tagalog) = affectionate name for a younger sibling (brother / sister).

M: Ha.

R: It's recorded in my Peace Corps training manual in '67. But I did not work on that until that student of mine, when I was still working at Susannah Wesley, convinced me to return to school and go to the School of Public Health. So, you know, I don't know whether, you know. For all the things I accomplished or did later on, I think it was a matter of living or being part of what the Ilocanos called your fate, your gasat.

M: Gasat.

R: Gasat is the word. In my family, my parents, my grandparents, always said, that its your fate, gasat. And I always wondered whether you are predestined in life to do certain things, but maybe we can touch on that in the end, but...I wanna let you know this because whatever I accomplished later, it was a matter of being at the right place at the right time, also luck. And I really believe, I think there's certain things that you're predestined and with your environment, by your genetics, or effort, there is an interaction of all these things that happened in your life and make you who you are.

On looking for a job after graduation in 1976...

M: Correct, correct, yeah.

R: 1977, finally...

M: Okay, '76 okay.

R: ...my son is almost a year old. He was just a year old.

M: And this is Rene or Jason?

R: Rene...Rene. He was born January 21, 1976. So, he was a year old.

M: Almost your birthday, a month.

R: Almost birthday...

M: Okay, okay.

R: In fact, he was old enough to come to my oral presentation at UH, you know. So, Jodean and him were sitting in front of the class. And when I started talking, he started, "Dada, dada," and it's recorded on a tape, the presentation. I don't know whether he was doing his presentation too, but he said, "Dada, dada". He was a year old. But anyway, I, I...

M: Okay, so you were thinking, "Where I go now?"

R: Yeah, "Where I go now?" You know. And for a while, we took him, you know, to my cousin Violet's house for babysitting. And I and Jodean would wake up early in the

morning to fight the traffic. We were living in Āliamanu, and she would drive to Moanalua, detour and fighting the traffic, waking him up so early in the morning, then dropping him off at Violet's house, and then going to Dole³ to teach.

M: Going to Dole to teach.

R: So we said, "This is not the atmosphere we want our kids to..."

M: You and Jodean? Talked about that.

R: Yeah, talked about that. She always loved the Big Island. So, I was looking for openings on the Big Island. Nothing, you know. So, waited and waited. Finally, because I did my internship with the Hawai'i Services Council in health planning on O'ahu, more toward Leeward and the North Shore well, Hale'iwa, Waialua, Kahuku, that area. So, I kinda concentrated on health planning and health education.

And so, ah, there was an opening in Maui I heard for a health planner position with the State Health Planning & Development Agency (SHPDA). The health planner was going to retire or she's quitting. Would you be interested because I did my internship with the community agency that was closely associated with SPHDA.

M: Okay, links there.

R: Yeah, links. So, I said, "Well, what is it?" Emergency hire. You get hired for 30 days, then renewed, renewed. So, I think it was, maybe, May or June '77

M: That's a gamble. That's a gamble.

R: It's a gamble, I told Jodean. And said, "Well, it's one step to the Big Island. We take one step." At least we can live outside on the neighbor island, you know, and then when things open up on the Big Island, we'll go live there.

So, I went first, not knowing what it held for me. Jodean and Rene stayed back. Luckily, it was almost summer, so she didn't have to teach. I got to Maui. Thirty days I was living in a hotel in 'Īao Valley and being renewed every 30 days, you know.

M: Okay, that's quite a...

R: And then we decided. She says, well, you know. Then, I think I got a provisional appointment which meant a longer term appointment and some benefits.

M: In Kahului?

R: In 'Īao Valley. There was a kinda small hotel there, kind of like a bread and breakfast place. So, I said well, at least I'm not emergency hire, this provisional appointment. I

³ Sanford B. Dole Middle School, about five miles from Āliamanu area.

don't know what it was, but at least, I said, "Well, if you guys wanna come, you come."
So, she figure she was going to quit her job at Dole. No job. So, she comes over to Maui.
We couldn't find housing. That's when Maui was really...

M: So, where were you, where in Maui, what place?

R: Well, Maui was really booming. I was living in in 'Īao/Wailuku, and we tried looking for place there and nearby Kahului and no luck. Nothing in Kahului, nothing in Wailuku

M: Okay.

R: So, finally, I said, "Where can we find?" So, Kīhei.

M: Kīhei, oh okay, Kīhei.

R: Kīhei, in Kīhei right near the beach. So, I was working. So, Jodean and Rene and I packed and made the big move. One of the poignant scenes I can recall about that move, you know, every time I came home and visited from Maui, Rene was always hanging on me and crying. When we were leaving and closing the house, Jodean told me that she was going to put the blanket away, and Rene started crying as if that was the last piece of property that he liked in the house. I was touched.

But, anyway, we get to Maui, we finally found a condominium in Kīhei, of all places, you know. So, I said, "Well, at least it's a home."

M: Correct, correct.

R: So, we lived in Kīhei for couple of months. Believe me, in Maui at that time, if you check the newspaper, you would look for rentals, by the time you get the paper in the afternoon it was gone. So it was suggested that I should go to the Maui News office right at lunchtime, take my lunch break and go to the Maui news office and get a copy of the paper.

M: Ahead.

R: Yeah ahead, so I could get the paper right away and call.

M: Oh, uh huh. uh huh.

R: So, we lived, I don't know how long we lived in Kīhei but we got to, just like living in a resort area, you know, we never did but now we were living near the beach and Jodean and Rene went there every day.

M: Nice place.

R: So, and then, we found out that the best way to get a place was by word of mouth from

people at the Department of Health where my office was located. I was working at the State Health Planning & Development Agency. I was commuting between Kīhei and Wailuku. Then we found a house in Kahului. At the same time, Jodean went to the DOE⁴ office and asked, “You got any opening?” And there was.

M: Lucky!

R: They did...

M: Lucky.

R: ...they did. The position was in upcountry, up in Makawao.⁵

M: Makawao.

R: Well, she’s a math and science teacher. So, she accepted it. And then we had to find a babysitter. Finally, we had a Filipino babysitter and, boy, you know, we got that house in Kahului and started beginning to kinda fall in place you know.

M: So you are working the Tri-Isle.⁶ And what were you doing?

R: Health planning and resource development for Maui, Moloka‘i, and Lāna‘i.

M: Health planning...meaning?

R: What we did was we annual review of and updates of a health plan for the state and the counties. That’s the first time that we tried to develop comprehensive health plans for the state. And we implemented what, we called, was a certificate of need where anyone that wanted to spend money to buy equipment or build new buildings you had to go to a review process with community involvement.

M: So, assessing the needs of the community.

R: Yeah, assessing the needs, writing the plan and everything. But Maui is separate because we had three islands. You gotta go to Molokai, you gotta go to Lanai and make sure those people got involved. So, I did that from 1977 almost to what, about ’83.

M: That’s a long time.

R: Yeah, in fact, we were battling for that position.

M: Six years.

⁴ Department of Education (Maui).

⁵ “Upcountry” on Maui refers to areas on the slope of Haleakulā.

⁶ Maui county (“Tri Isle”) includes the islands of Maui, Moloka‘i and Lāna‘i.

R: I know Arnold Managan graduated the same time and he wanted a similar position...

M: Arnold, okay.

R: ...and he tried to get something on O‘ahu. But he realized and he told me, he said, “Ah, shucks, Romel,” he says, “they already have one Filipino so they aren’t going to hire another Filipino, I think.” He said, “You lucky son of a gun.”

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: So, you know, that’s why he went to the mainland. He couldn’t get anything in health here.

M: Okay.

R: So he ended up there. And I, you know, to this day, I said, you know, we don’t know who got the more interesting experience. You got to live on the mainland.

M: Correct.

R: Different experience.

M: Correct.

R: You know, you take what you can get. Anyway, I did that. And when Ronald Reagan became president, they didn’t believe in health planning. They didn’t believe in that kind of stuff, right? So, they started cutting funds to health planning throughout the country

M: Ohh...

R: So, now, I was.... They decided to consolidate and delete some of the positions. My position was eliminated.

M: Oh, okay...gee.

R: So they told me. They called that RIF, reduction in force.

M: After six years?

R: Yeah. Reduction in force.

M: Reduction in force.

R: But they said, “You know, if you wanna stay with the Department of Health and you can’t find anything in Maui, you gotta come back to Honolulu.” I said, “I ain’t going to do that. I’m not going back.”

M: Yeah, aha, hmm.

R: So, stalled and stalled. And finally they said, “You know, we’ll make you one offer. If we have something that meets your qualifications, you meet the criteria for it, we’ll refer you to that, and if you decide not to accept the position, you’re done. We’re gonna cut ties with you and you’re on your own, out of the Department of Health.”

M: Were you the only one, or were there others?

R: Well, there’s only one planner for each of the counties.

M: My goodness.

R: Maui, Kaua‘i, Big Island...O‘ahu had five because they divided the island into five different regions. So, in Maui, so, I think it was about ‘84, ‘85 sometime, they said, “Well, we have an office manager position for you in the Department of Transportation.”

M: Transportation, huh?

R: Highways Division.

M: Ha, ha, ha.

R: I said “Well...,” Jodean and I discussed it. I guess, “Well,” I said, “I wanna stand on my own.” We’ve been there since 1977, right? So, it’s now 1984.

M: That’s a long time, uh huh, okay.

R: I said, “Well, I’ll take it.”

M: You’ll take it. Why not?

R: I’ll learn to do time sheets, industrial workmen’s comp and union bargaining and all that kind of stuff. Meanwhile, in the process, by the way, this is when we decide, my mom suffered a stroke, and we persuaded her to retire. And my father was also retired. He already had 34 years. He managed to prove he was actually sixty-five years old. Got his social security papers.

M: Good.

R: They were living in Pa‘auilo.⁷ They had their own house and everything. I said why don’t you come to Maui? And by this time, we already had Jason. He was born in ‘78 at Maui Memorial.

M: All right.

R: So, we had these two little tykes, you know, two boys. And, of course, my father, two boys, that’s to him, that’s his pride, you know.

⁷ Pa‘auilo is a community on the northeast side of Hawai‘i island.

M: Yes.

R: And I really thought he would never agree.

M: Uh, huh.

R: But he did.

M: He did?

R: They moved.

M: To leave Pa‘auilo.

R: Pa‘auilo. Pack up all their things, gave up their house.

M: My God!

R: Which the plantation would later give to all the employees who were still working when the plantation closed down, so they lost opportunity for that. But, they decided. They came to Maui.

M: To come?

R: To come.

M: Wow.

R: And, Melinda, that was my greatest experience. And my feeling was God, it allowed my wife and I to kind of really concentrate on our professions.

M: Correct.

R: And they took the kids to school, picked them up, took them to soccer and all that kind of stuff. And Pukalani School was close by. We were living in Pukalani.⁸ And so they did that and they were a part of my kids’ life...

M: Sure.

R: ...for...until they were in intermediate school. And in fact, one of the most poignant moments, I think, was my father and my kids...my father, who never spent a day in the hospital in his life was diagnosed with blockages in his arteries.

M: Angina?

R: Yeah. He needed angioplasty or the procedure to removed the blockages.

M: Yeah, angioplasty.

⁸ Pukalani is another upcountry community on Maui.

R: After two times – two times! You know, you’re talking about this man who never went in the hospital...and he gets two angioplasties. And Alice⁹ is working at Straub.¹⁰ They insert this thin wire into his veins and clean the arteries. So, he had two of those. The third time, the doctor told him on Maui. He says, “He’s not going to believe me anymore.”

I’m still working at the Highways Division by the way. I’m a highway man now. I’m learning all these methods in asphalt paving, and curves and speed limits and all that kind of stuff.

M: Graphics.

R: He’s got this blockage. He needs to have open heart surgery.

M: Oh, okay.

R: So, he calls me in. He says, “Son, I’ve lived long enough. This is it. I don’t need it.”

M: The surgery, the open heart.

R: Yeah, yeah, the open heart surgery. So, I go outside. The two boys and Jodean are outside. And I tell the two boys, “You guys go and tell Grandpa that, don’t you want to see us graduate from high school? Gotta go, grandpa.”

So, they go in. And he calls me and he says, “Let’s go. Let’s go.” So, I get into the air ambulance with him. So, I took him, accompanied him to Straub. And Alice is there waiting for him.

M: This is still in Maui?

R: Yeah, this is still in Maui. We’re on Maui.

M: There’s a Straub Clinic there?

R: Yeah. No, gotta go to Honolulu.

M: Emergency? You flew? Okay.

R: All that angioplasty – two angioplasty and, then, the open heart. And the man lived until 2015, and he was just 31 days short of being 102.

M: Okay.

R: But I wanted to share this story because that’s so...you know. For a man who never really got sick. And that prolonged his life...

⁹ Alice is Romel’s sister.

¹⁰ Straub Clinic, now Straub Benihoff Medical Center, is a comprehensive general hospital in Honolulu.

M: Correct.

R: ...for another 15-20 years.

M: And you can understand why he was scared, yeah.

R: Yeah, scared but at the same time, he wanted to see his grandsons...

M That's right.

R: ...graduate, especially they always had this vision of me being a lawyer, right?

M: Yeah, oh, oh.

R: So, I think that's probably one motivation why Rene went. Again, that notion came from my grandfather because he figured I was going to be the one to do it. But he, Rene, did it with ease. But anyway, while on Maui, so I'm doing this office manager of the highways division. I got to know all the engineers...

M: Yeah.

R: ...got to know all the guys at the highways division. So, you know, when there was that... one of the guys that I usually talk on the phone with? You know that guy that they named the tunnel after? You know, H-3. It was named for a Japanese man over there...

M: Hmm, no.

R: ...and he was the division chief for highways for forty years almost. What was his name already anyway?

M: Okay.

R: He's the one named after tunnel. When Ben Cayetano became governor, he didn't like the name because I think the man was the one that reviewed his application and denied him the appointment. Of course, they put it back to his name when Cayetano left office. If you go up H-3...Harano. It's on the...Harano Tunnel.¹¹ That's my suspicion...

M: Okay.

R: ...that he was turned down and that kind of changed Ben's career forever. He wasn't going to stay in Hawai'i. So, he went to Los Angeles to go to school, right, after that, because he was a draftsman before he went to UCLA and, then, Loyola law school, yeah. He graduated from Loyola law school.

¹¹ The Tetsuo Harano Tunnels are named after Tetsuo Harano, who worked for the State Department of Transportation for 52 years and was DOT administrator during the tunnel's construction. After being dedicated as the Harano Tunnels in 1994, Governor Ben Cayetano renamed the tunnels for Governor John Burns in 2001. However, protests from segments of the community led to the return of the original name.

But anyway, if you go up the H-3, look at the tunnel. It says Harano. Old man...he worked for the department of Hawai'i for 50 years. I think, something like a record. And I dealt with him a lot, you know, a lot of the funding and problems with highways.

M: What was your title at the time?

R: Office manager, office manager.

M: With a School of Public Health certificate!

R: Yeah, office manager.

M: Okay, okay, office manager.

R: But I tell you what. That was probably the most important job in my career than later on in the hospital because I got to see administration in its application and mis-application. I was involved directly in office support, operations, to engineers and road maintenance workers...

M: How it works.

R: ...you did all the paperwork, all the processing of labor, payroll, industrial accident, you know, things like that. I learned all that. I would never have learned that if I stayed in health planning. All you did was planning, you know. You didn't really do the mechanics.

So, I'm just merrily rolling along. But luckily, what happens when you transfer you are paid the same rate. So what I was getting with SHPDA, State Health Planning Development Agency, I was paid the same, the office manager position, and what I would get as a planner. So I didn't really lose anything. So, I said, "Okay, I just gonna roll with it."

M: How long were you there?

R: I think it was...

M: 1984?

R: I think it was 1986...or was it? I think, because we tried to, yeah, about '86. I, ah, meanwhile, this was where all the community involvement become important. Well, '86 was, ah, John Waihe'e¹² ran for lieutenant governor. And John Waihe'e and I go back to Honoka'a High School.

M: You know each other from Honoka'a?

¹² John Waihe'e III served one term as a Democratic member of the Hawai'i State House of Representatives from 1981 to 1983. he was later elected lieutenant governor of Hawaii under Governor George Ariyoshi, serving in that capacity until 1986, after which Waihe'e served two terms as governor until 1994.

R: Yeah, yeah. I was in 10th grade, and he was a year below me in 9th grade. Once in a while, he and I would sit on the bank overlooking the football field. Suddenly in my 11th grade year, he was gone. The rumor is that, you know, that he was getting into trouble so they sent him to the Adventist high school in Honolulu when I was a junior, but I knew him. So, when he ran for office, he put a call out to anybody who knows him because nobody knew much about him.

Were you here already?

M: Yeah.

R: Yeah, I also knew him working with the Model Cities Program¹³ in Kalihi. By the way, not only that, when Jodean and I just got married, we were living in Kalihi in an apartment right behind Kalākaua park, Kalākaua gym and John lived in the same apartment we did.

M: Oh, okay.

R: And every time I would see each other. I'd go to work at Model Cities and he was going to law school and was working, and he says, "Why don't you join us?" You know, I kind of toyed with the idea. Maybe I should go back, you know. By the way, I didn't have my public health at the time. But that's when he went to law school, opened at UH.

Anyway, he becomes Lieutenant Governor with the ragtag army we had, and all kinds of shenanigans took place. But anyway then, I kept tabs with what was happening with the Department of Health.

M: You did?

R: I did. So, I heard that there was the guy that was running Kula Hospital...Kula Sanitorium up on the mountain.¹⁴ Name was Pitsinger. There was a lot of problems. The Director of Health had to be called in. He was terminated.

I said, maybe I should try, I should put an application in. I should put in my connections to see if there's a possibility for that. Just so happens, Abelina Shaw was the deputy director of Health. You know how we can get deputy without any hospital experience, right?

M: Okay.

R: But I've never run a hospital either, right?

M: But you have a certificate.

¹³ The Model Cities Program was part of U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty.

¹⁴ Kula is another Maui upcountry community. Kula Sanitorium housed and treated tuberculosis patients.

- R: I have a public health degree, six years of health planning. I knew about Kula. I knew the rules, that kind of stuff...so, I put in my application. I put in the word for whoever had influence. There was competition, but you know, being that I knew who the governor's liaison was in Maui and working on the campaign helped, but I like to think that I also had the background and degree for the position.
- M: You got the job? My question is why did you have to do that? You have a good job as a transportation officer.
- R: But, I figure, it was dead end for me. I'm not an engineer.
- M: Right, okay.
- R: It wasn't...I'm gonna be an office manager and that's it. So, I said, "Oh, I'm going to see about it," You know, Abelina and I had a good conversation. In fact, later on, she tells me when I was working at Hilo Medical Center, she said, "Why don't you give me a job?" She was looking for a job.
- M: Payback.
- R: Anyway just joking because she always landed other positions along the way.
- M: Okay, so, you packed up and went from the Dept of Transportation/Highways to Kula San Hospital.
- R: Kula. Well, we were living upcountry anyway.
- M: But your parents are with you.
- R: But we were living in Pukalani. Pukalani is right, when you go up Haleakala toward the mountain, the first community up the hill, you know, when you go up the mountain, it's the community on your right. That's Pukalani. It's a hole in the sky.
- M: It's pretty there, all those flowers, wow.
- R: Pineapple fields. We were living in Pukalani at that time. So, Kula Sanitorium is six or seven miles, and a beautiful redwood forest above it. Kula Hospital was built 1937 with thick concrete foundation. Can you imagine the trucking cement up the highway at almost 3000 foot level? There was not a major and wide highway constructed then. It was also the place for the treatment of TB. Lots of Filipinos were committed there because of TB and many died and was buried...some unknown.
- M: Patricia Brown's book.¹⁵

¹⁵ Brown, Patricia. 2010. *Kula San, Maui's Healing Place: Celebrating 100 Years of Struggle and Triumph*. Honolulu, HI: DPA Productions.

R: But she didn't know I was there.

M: How come!

R: I was working. In fact, she called me after the book was complete. She said, oh, I thought Jack Lewin, MD was the administrator. I said, no, I was. I was his supervisor. The medical director reported to the Hospital Administrator. Of course, you know, in the doctor's eyes they gave care and directed the hospital but technically not.

M: Everybody moved there?

R: No, we still lived Pukalani. Well, we didn't have to move.

M: Where was Jodean teaching?

R: Jodean was teaching at Makawao. She was there at Makawao School and later on she transferred to Kalama Intermediate, a brand new school in Makawao also. Kula Hospital was the turning point of my professional career. I really enjoyed that, you know.

M: And when did you...?

R: And this is where, things for me, for my dad, it was the crowning point also for my Mom and Dad. They came and we built a cottage in the back of my house in Pukalani.

M: How do you spell Pukalani? Oh, puka. Do you want water? Also, if you want to stop and relax?

R: Okay.

[BREAK]

M: Okay, we can continue now, okay.

R: Okay, anyway, we were living in Pukalani...

M: Pukalani.

R: ...and we had a four bedroom house and but knowing my Mom and Dad who were use to their independence, we built a 500 square cottage with a little kitchen in the back of our house, so it was very convenient for all.

M: So, did you buy the house?

R: Yeah, we bought a house.

M: Oh, okay.

R: It was on a half an acre lot so we put a, you know, a cottage in the back and still there was

third of an acre in the back. Upon their arrival, my father was gardening and growing peas, basil and selling it to MEO, the Maui Economic Opportunity. So, he had a thing going. And then he had a little truck, and he was doing, you know, maintaining yards around the community.

M: Wow.

R: So that's when I was still doing office manager. Right, so when I got the Kula job and my father was taking care of these several yard maintenance jobs in Kula. He was working for this general who was during World War II. General H_ and he always talked to my father and there was also a Chinese lady, that he also took care of her yard, who gave him several...which she no longer needed because she was widow.

So anyway one day, when I just got appointed, this general was talking to my dad...so and so, "I heard they have a new boss over there at the hospital," which is just a mile from his house. So my father said, "Yeah, I heard he's Filipino." And the general said, "no can be, Benigno, no can be," he said.

And you know how I knew that? He came home. He says, "Oh, the general told, and talked to me. And this is what I told him." And he told me the story – "no can be." Melinda, that was the crowning point, I think, of what he strive for all his life...and general refused to believe it.

M: So, did your father say it, they got my son there?

R: Well, probably he finally know it because his wife was a member of the Hospital Auxiliary, a support group of ladies from the community for the hospital. According to my father he did not contradict the General and let it go.

M: He didn't say anything.

R: He didn't say anything but...

M: The wife.

R: ...the wife L_H_, who was very active with the Auxiliary and probably told him.

M: Oh.

M: And look at that. Your father did not correct him on the spot? Look at him, huh?

R: To him, that was a crowning point. He didn't have to. He knew, I think. He knew the guy would sooner or later know.

M: That's really nice.

R: Yeah, so, in fact, when Patricia Brown asked me to write that thing, I wrote that, but I wasn't sure whether the man was still alive. So I said to Patricia, take it out because I don't want to create any...

M: Trouble.

R: But that was one important event when I was at Kula. And then, when, you know, John Waihee became governor, he appointed Jack Lewin as his Director of Health, you recall.

M: Lewin.

R: So, Jack Lewin was living in a big house on the grounds of the hospital and cared for the residents of the hospital, and he also ran an outpatient clinic. He, uh, sometimes he wouldn't charge patients. Patients unable to pay for his services sometimes would exchange carpentry work for care provided, and she traded vegetables, sweets, construction and other stuff.

So, he says, "Why don't you come and live at our house and buy my hot tub?" He says, "Why don't you move to the big house and move to the grounds?" Because we were living still in Pukalani.

I said, "Nah, I don't think so at first." But later I thought, well, maybe we should. Maybe this would be kind of a signal to the community that, you know. In the past, the Filipinos were known only as ward boys.

M: Ward boys?

R: Ward boys. They called them ward boys who came to the hospitals who were in thirties and twenties and things. The method of treating TB was to bring them to Kula, isolate them expose them to lots of sun, fresh air, and medical therapy. And so when these guys got cured and so ended up being nurses' aides or they called them ward boys.

M: Ward boys.

R: So, in fact, I later found out that there was a cottage reserved for them on the grounds. There were several homes around the hospital. And so the Filipinos would live there and cook all their meals mostly Filipino food they were used to.

M: Community.

R: Yeah, yeah. And so I said to Jodean, I said, "Let's try it and show that Filipino could do the job as a symbolic thing."

M: Correct, correct.

R: And we did.

M: You did? So, you sold your Pukalani home?

R: No. So I told my parents, I said, “Why don’t you guys come and live at the hospital, too.” They said, “No way, we don’t want that.” They stayed in the cottage, and we rented out the front house while we lived on the grounds of the hospital. Oh man, this old house had the view of the valley towards the east and west end of Maui from the slopes of Haleakala at closed to 2,000 feet.

M: The boys were with you? You took the boys with you?

R: Yeah, well, our immediate family, Jodean and I. So, we had this experience of living in...

M: Luxury. Ha, ha, ha.

R: It’s like living in the medieval era. The hospital is like a castle because it’s four stories high. And it had view, and we have this elevator and it’s still working today...

M: Wow.

R: ...and a tennis court. The Sanatorium as it was called in the old days operated to be self-supporting and the patients actually did farm work. They had cattle, milk, eggs, chickens, vegetables. I later found out that the kitchen of the house was a foot button attached to a bell located under the dining room.

M: Yeah, what’s that?

R: I later found out what it was. The superintendent or hospital administrator was actually the highest paid guy...executive on the island. And that would be the push button to call the maid. When they wanted to call the...

M: For tea...for tea?

R: And these people were county employees. The superintendent actually had a driver chauffeuring him around town. And they had people, as housekeepers. The people in the hospital would take care of the home.

M: Like the lord.

R: Yeah, you press the button and the maid comes running out. But...so we lived in that house.

I remember I said to Jodean, “You know, let’s do the Filipino thing. Let’s have an open house...

M: Open house, okay

R: “Let’s do a lechon¹⁶ in the back.” And do you remember when I told you about my parents’ ninong and ninang¹⁷ in Manila where we used to go in the summer to work on our immigration papers? They were living now in Montreal.

M: Okay.

R: They were still alive...

M: And they moved

R: ...and one daughter. And I told them, “Grandpa, why don’t you. We’re going to have an open house at Kula...

M: Ha, ha.

R: ...and invite the high echelon of the county.” Kula had the reputation as the residence of white people. And so our Canadian relatives joined us. I don’t recall if Violet came...

M: Oh, maybe, ha ha.

R: They all stayed at the house because it was big enough to sleep everyone.

M: My goodness.

R: I don’t know if you remember...Mark Andrews. He was a member of the House of Representatives.

M: No.

R: His father was the physician administrator for the hospital during the ‘50s and ‘60s...and ‘70s, and he says, oh, he jokingly told me, “Do you sometimes hear something like somebody’s running up on the ceiling of the house?” He tells me, “That’s a three-legged rat.” Ha, ha, ha.

But that house had a lot of history. I later found out many interesting things from my kids when they explore all over the place. They had outside, a tennis court, then there’s a...they were exploring the vegetation outside and they find that there was this table constructed with cement block. I came to find out that it was actually a table where autopsy was performed on corpses.

Jack Lewin was very spiritual and knew a lot about the history of the place. He said, “Yes.” Later on further back the house was a cemeteries ground when some patient would die, they did not know who he was, unknown, unidentified. All they did was wrap ‘em up in a blanket and buried ‘em in the back.

¹⁶ Whole roasted pig.

¹⁷ Respectively, “godfather” and “godmother.”

M: Buried 'em.

R: You know, not only Filipinos but Chinese as well.

Another interesting fact in the book of Patricia Brown was when the tidal wave of April 1, 1946 struck Hilo.¹⁸ Pu'umaile Hospital, located in Keuakaha where TB patients were treated on the Big Island, was inundated and the patients needed to be relocated. The hospital was closed down and a lot of the patients were transferred to Kula.

M: Kula.

R: So that's why it was kind of interesting if you read some of the stories of Hilo patients. In Hilo, the Pumaile, the TB hospital, was moved near Rainbow Falls.

M: Yeah, I was flipping and you have an article there?

R: Yeah.

M: Okay, I did not see.

R: I talked about how we, you know.

M: I guess there's no index.

R: No

M: Oh, okay.

R: In Kula we ran a unit for young people with mental disability, and I was able to work with the parents of these patients. It was the only place in the state where individuals with mental retardation was treated.

M: Retardation?

R: ICF/MR, as it was called, or Intermediate Care Facility/Mental Retardation.

M: Even though it's only for...

R: Kula was primarily a facility for the care for the elderly – a little clinic and the ICF/MR unit.

M: Okay.

R: Kula Hospital is now a hospital run by Kaiser. Kaiser took over the whole complex of Kula, Maui Memorial and Lana'i Hospital. These facilities are still owned by the state.

¹⁸ The tsunami of April 1, 1946 reached Hawaii in about five hours following an earthquake in Alaska. The Hilo waterfront was destroyed with surges as tall as 45 feet pounded several coastal villages. The calamity killed 159 people in Hawaii.

By the way, the agency that I worked with when I was a planner was the Hawai'i SHPDA. But the hospitals would later become Hawai'i Health Systems Corporation or HHSC.

M: HSSC. So, you were a state employee?

R: Yeah, we are all state employees.

M: Because Kula is not a private hospital.

R: No. It was a county first. It was started as a private and then it converted to county. Then the county transferred all the hospitals that were owned by plantations and the county to the State back, I think, about 1970, somewhere around there.

M: It sounds very well-funded, well-funded.

R: Well, it is. Well, I mean, you know for the outer island, these facilities were the only place of care, you know. On Hawai'i island, with the exception of North Hawai'i, all run by the state.

So, one of the things that I'm really proud of, is that, well, two things, tried to settle down because my, you know, the guy that I replaced, was totally not in sync with the community. He was accused of sexual harassment, sexual, uh. And in fact, one of the things that I settled first when I got there was to pay off or agree to, to a settlement, you know, I think we probably wouldn't get a settlement if we didn't work out with this gal who had a real legitimate case and we paid her off for sexual harassment.

When things died down died down with the settlement, the auxiliary was very supportive of me. You know, you get all these elderly but influential ladies come to volunteer. They have a strong network in the community. So this is where my knowledge of work in the community was very helpful.

M: And this auxiliary...

R: Yeah, auxiliary.

M: ...is it a mixed, ah, mixed?

R: It's a volunteer group of people from the community who come and volunteer at the hospital.

M: But is this community mixed? White, Asian, the ethnic composition?

R: Oh, in Kula, it was maybe a few Hawaiians, Chinese, but mainly white people who were wealthy and had money to donate, and they were willing to work.

M: What about the Filipino ethnic group?

R: None. You go to any of the hospitals, even at the private sector, it's worse there. First of all, they don't appoint people to the Board of Directors, too. Yeah.

We had this mental retardation unit, the only one in the whole state. And it was being operated so badly before I got in that they de-certified the place. Before my arrival.

M: Oh, that bad.

R: Yeah, it wasn't getting funding, that kind of stuff. And so, one of the things that, you know...

M: All right.

R: ...I had to bring in a psychologist to kinda run the place to make sure that we could get it back up and paid for the care. And that for almost a year. And finally and it's still operating today, you know, but we saved it. The only one.

The other thing was, you know, when you go to Maui in those days, especially when the mayor who was known as Napoleon. You recall Elmer Carvalho, you heard of him?

M: Yes, uh huh.

R: Anybody that got an important job on Maui, you had to go through him.

M: Right.

R: In fact when I just arrived to work for SHPDA there was a question of how I got the job without the mayor and the Filipino not knowing about it. The Filipinos of Maui loved Mayor Elmer. Baxa, Ramil, all those guys, Luna. You've heard all those names?

I wasn't brought by him so they came to see me and they said, "How'd you get here, how did you get to Maui?" This was the son of one of a local Filipino politician who was a member of the State Legislature...Filipino who came to asks me, "How'd you get here?" I said, "Well, just got here."

M: Ha, ha.

R: Just so happens that the director of SHPDA, a guy named Jim Swanson. Have you ever heard of Jim Swanson? He was the director of SHPDA at that time. He says, "you wanna go to Maui." I said "I'll try." He said, "go ahead then, go." It was through my community organizing, Model Cities...

M: Correct, yeah.

R: ...working in Kalihi.

M: But then again, the Kula itself was recommended, suggested to you.

R: But this was SHPDA now. We're talking Kula. Abby was the...Abby and John.

M: Ah, okay, okay.

R: So, that's how.

M: So, you had the other connections, okay.

R: Yeah, yeah. But another experience was...

So we were kind of getting involved in politics out there. And nobody dared to challenge Elmer Carvalho. He was living right down the road not far from Kula Hospital. I even invited him to our open house. He came, checked it out. He had a hand in everything happening in the community. If you wanted a loan, he was on the board for Kula credit union. So, one year, in the election process, my group from Wailuku, all attorneys, were involved. The State Democratic Party convention was going to be held on Maui.

M: Okay.

R: ...in Lahaina, first time ever. We never ever had the convention outside of Oahu. We thought it would be good to have some representation at the precinct during the convention. So my job was to organize upcountry, Elmer's country. He sent the County Fire Chief to attend our meeting and, boy, what an interesting meeting of pressure politics.

M: Why?

R: We go to the precinct meeting. You know, usually precinct meeting, you have five, six people. You were happy if you even had three

M: Yeah.

R: There were a couple of hundred at the Kula School cafeteria. And when the elections for precincts was held, we lost every contest. I thought maybe I had six votes at least.. Elmer Carvalho sits on the front seat. He's kinda like checking out everything. He had a stew dinner for everybody, you know, free meal. Jodean and I. He's sitting down, scanning. They even didn't want to do secret ballot, you know. They all want to do just "aye or nay."

M: My goodness.

R: The only one that he allowed to be a delegate was Jodean.

M: Jodean?

R: After the meeting, you know he tells me? He said, why didn't you come and see me?

M: My god, that's really a lord's attitude.

R: Oh, he was. One of the guys that was supposed to support and was going to vote for me, he happened to be our groundskeeper at the hospital. He says, "I couldn't because he wasn't going to approve my car loan." I don't know if you're going to write all this down but...

M: Ha, ha. No, all these things, we will transcribe and you will edit. We won't. You will. This is for your personal record.

R: He was very influential and the Filipino community...its supported him, that's how the Filipinos are so progressive on the island of Maui, its because of him.

M: Could you explain the godfather?

R: Oh, he was the ninong and the ninang. He had guys from the Philippines staying at his house, taking care of his pigs and his farm.

M: But you were now getting involved in politics?

R: Oh, I was involved in the community. You know that the community center we have on Maui, I was involved in the initial committee to build, but by then Elmer was gone. He just up and quit. The thing is that he didn't give any advance message that he was leaving. So, it became a popularity contest.

And so you have ten guys running for mayor. And Hannibal Tavares, who was known for years as the front man for A&B – Alexander & Baldwin – for mayor and he won hands down, you know. Then, the Filipinos transferred to his camp, too. So you get Vince Bagoyo and he becomes the director of Department of.... Do you know, Vince, you've heard of Vince Bagoyo right?

M: No, no. So, you were getting involved.

R: Vince, yeah, I was getting involved with everybody and so he wants a Filipino community center. Built on Maui. This is even before Waipahu¹⁹ [Filipino Community Center], you know. So, he calls us in. He had about maybe ten, fifteen guys, says, " you know, the mayor, can get us an acre of land in town." Then, all we gotta do is to get the funding. So we formed a group called the One Thousand-One Thousand.

M: One thousand.

R: One thousand each, 1,000 gang...if you put a 1,000 dollars.

¹⁹ Groundbreaking of the Filipino Community Center in Waipahu, O'ahu took place on March 18, 2000, and formally opened on June 11, 2002.

M: 1,000 dollars.

R: If you get \$1,000, then you get a 1000 guys, then you get a million right?

M: Yeah, ooh, okay.

R: They said we'll do that. And so who's going to fund us if Filipinos were not willing to contribute? You can't go ask donors to fund such a project if the Filipino community is not willing to support it. You're lucky you live on O'ahu, because they were able to get State funding and private funding. When 1989 came in, I said to Jodean, I think it's time for us to get home now that I have my experience working at Kula. We should try for the Big Island.

M: Why did you decide that?

R: '89...it's now '89...

M: Okay.

R: ...and I've been there since '86.

M: Three years.

R: Yeah. John Waihee is governor. Jack Lewin is Director of Health. All I need is a transfer. I'm already in the system.

M: Oh, okay.

R: So, I put the word out. I said I want to go back home. I want to go to the Big Island, whatever opening there was. I found out there was an assistant administrative position at Hilo Medical Center.

M: Hilo Medical Center. What is this feeling when you said you wanted to go home?

R: Well, to the Big Island.

M: Why?

R: Well, all along. Remember what I said back in 1977. I said, well, it's one step at a time to go to the Big Island. We really wanted to raise our family on the Big Island, yeah.

M: That's the goal.

R: That's the goal.

M: That's interesting.

R: So we ended up twelve years in Maui.

M: Twelve years, yeah, well, okay.

R: I put the word out that I was interested in the vacancy at Hilo Medical Center.

M: Hilo Medical Center, okay.

R: Yeah. We were, you know, so, I remember when we would have meetings every month. Those were the days when you still didn't have videoconferencing, right? So I remember having a meeting in Honoka'a – the old Honoka'a hospital – that wooden building. Didn't have the new hospital yet.

And I remember, there was this rodeo event. We always have rodeo days in May in Honoka'a, so one of them. But I was at Kula. So Jack Lewin called and he says, "I heard you wanna go to the Big Island. You really serious about that? You want to do that?" I said, "Yup...I wanna go home."

M: You wanna go home.

R: I wanna go home. I want to go back to the Big Island

M: All right.

R: He said, "Okay." So I transferred to Hilo Medical Center in 1989.

M: '89 and your parents. They...

R: I asked my parents. I said, Dad, Mom, Dad, let's go home. It shocked me...they said, "You guys go." It's amazing, you know, Melinda, how old people can adapt. They were already in their '70s and 80's, and they said, "No, you just go ahead and..."

M: They wanna stay.

R: And they stayed there til 1995, from '89 to '95. They stayed on their own.

M: So you went 1989, the family. And your parents stayed back in Pukalani...

R: Pukalani.

M: ...because they were happy there.

R: They developed a network of new friends

M: Goodness.

R: And he, like I said, he was growing peas and basil in the back and they were bringing produce to sell and making pocket money. And they were happy. Of course they would come and visit us here. And we visited them too. But before that, see, one of the things that I should mention.

M: It's really interesting.

R: Unlike a lot of plantation families, my parents believed I higher education, and they they sent my sister and I to college with no scholarship, no assistance and they were able to build their own house when they were still living, you know, on a plantation home. They built a house in Hilo here near where I live now.

M: When they transferred in 19...

R: No, they built this in 1972 – seventies – which they never live in, but my sister lived in it when she was attending UH Hilo.

M: My goodness.

R: So, and they were able to buy a lot and build a house. The idea was they were going to retire in Hilo and like most plantation people along the coast, their dream always is, once we get old, we're going to build this home, Hick's Homes maybe, those prefab and we're gonna live there. But also in '72, they bought a lot in Kamuela in addition to the house, but they never live in the house. They came to live in Maui. So, how, it just amazes me how they had enough savings to do all that stuff and send us to college as well.

M: I know, they were frugal...

R: Yeah, frugal.

M: ...and they had a dream, they had a dream. That's amazing.

R: I don't know about others, but I think that's part of that.

M: Amazing.

R: Ilocano dream. It's this thing about land...

M: Yeah, yeah.

R: ...because there's such a scarcity of land in the Ilocos. The ownership of land is very important to the tribe.

M: Yeah, so when you save, you're buying a piece of land.

R: Yeah, buy a land. But it was my mother

M: Your Mom.

R: My father was kind of unsure, but my Mom, she kept the purse, like the stereotype. She kept the purse.

M: Controlled it.

R: Yeah, and then they had this house all these years. So, we rented it out while they were living in Maui. When we moved to Hilo we stayed in the house. We stayed in the house for couple of years or maybe a year until we bought our own house. So then I said to them you can come home now

M: Wow.

R: They said no. Not until 'till 1995.

M: It's amazing, isn't it?

R: Yeah, so, they stayed in Maui on their own. Again, I'll tell you about an Ilocano word that they always reminded me of, the word is gasat...

M: Gasat, fate.

R: ...and luck. So, they did it. So, they had this house. We lived in it for a year until we had our own house. So, I'm here at Hilo Medical Center from 1989...

M: To...

R: 1995.

M: Okay, 1989 to 1995. What's your position there?

R: Assistant administrator.

M: Assistant hospital administrator.

R: Yeah, in charge of the nursing home.

M: Okay.

R: ...and, in general, everything else. And so the word is out in the community, hey, you know. First, I venture to say I think I was the first Filipino to ever run a hospital in the state system...

M: In the state system.

R: ...at Kula or whatever. I do. Although Abelina was a deputy director, she headed and, technically, the hospital system only the administration end of it. But running a hospital is different, you know

M: Actual, okay.

R: I am the first, I believe, at Kula.

M: Okay...and were there other Filipinos there in higher positions?

R: Not really. Individuals department like in X-ray or radiology. The only one that I know was the x-ray tech, Ben. And you know what, in the early x-ray technicians, started on-the-job training...

M: Ha, ha.

R: ...because all they did was x-ray and then as the department got bigger one becomes a senior or supervisor over others. None of this fancy radiological equipment right?

M: Yeah, uh huh, uh huh.

R: So, a lot of them were grandfathered in and promoted as the technicians when they started and then more defined in future years. Some started as ward boys or nurses aides. And with experience they were transitioned into new positions but appropriate to their duties and retired with good benefits as government employees.

M: And the boys graduated in Hilo?

R: Oh, my boys...they grew up fast and they were good students.. They were at Pukalani, then we moved to Kula. They went to Kula Intermediate and, then, Rene the older one to the new intermediate school where Jodean was. So when we moved to the Big Island, they said, "When are we going to have our own school that we could stay in for a longer time?"

Rene was in intermediate school when he shared this complaint. He went to Hilo Intermediate and then Hilo High School. And Jason was at the Hilo Union. That's the elementary school. So, they said every 2 years we're moving schools

M: Ha, ha.

R: But they finally graduated from Hilo High School, both of them.

M: Both of them.

R: Rene graduated in '94 and I think Jason was '96.

M: So, in 1995 your parents moved back to Hilo.

R: Well, we finally...don't go ahead of the story...

M: Okay, okay, yeah.

R: Okay, so, we're living in Hilo. We have a big house. We just bought it brand new. We're the first one in this subdivision up the hills up above Hilo.

M: This is another house.

R: Another house. We moved from my parents' house. So, we rented out their house. And we moved. To our own. We still were renting out our property at Pukalani

M: Ha, ha, you made it.

M: And my parents were living back in the cottage. They were like my managers. Ha, ha.

M: Resident manager.

R: Resident manager.

M: Gee, you got it all made now.

R: All made. But not really. So, I'm at Hilo Medical Center as the Acting Hospital Administrator when our Administrator was promoted as Deputy running the entire hospital system. It was the real thing for me running a full service hospital. I mean, we're talking about a hospital was built in 1985 with acute care service as we as nursing home service.

M: What you call, the patients and...

R: Yeah, we had at Kula had 300 employees.

M: Three hundred employees, okay.

R: At Hilo Medical Center, when I just started there, we had about 1,300...1,400

M: That's big, yeah.

R: It's about 3,000 now. But anyway, at the same time, we became the Hawai'i Health Systems Corporation (HSSC). We were separated from the Department of Health and basically, it's an autonomous, but still, a state entity. We were able to do our own budgeting and we have our own human resources because that's always been the criticism that the Department of Health is so slow in doing anything that they could never do things fast enough.

So, when we became a Hawai'i Health Systems Corporation, things, you know more independent, you become more efficient. And I think it was '95 when the administrator left, you know, quit. This replacement guy came from a big time hospital from the mainland. My secretary called him "Hurricane John." He just came and go. And when the real hurricane came, Hurricane Iwa, that...

M: Destroy everything.

R: ...he was nowhere around. At the time, one of the big trouble we had over there was this incineration of the disposal of medical waste.

M: Oh, okay.

R: Another interesting development that I was kinda proud about is that how to get disposed of medical waste properly. When I got there, we were burning medical waste in the incinerator, plastics and body parts, and the smoke would drift across the road, the people...

M: That's right, yeah.

R: ...we needed to address the illegal burning and address public complaint.

M: That's right.

R: You know, we were on TV a lot of the time. One time when we...I don't know who was the reporter...came from KGMB or KHON. She came and Hurricane John was gone. He was in Honolulu. I was left to defend the system.

So, I just admitted. You know, we have a problem and I've been working on it, that kind of stuff. I got the okay to try to get something more acceptable...

M: Disposal.

R: ...disposal. So, later on, we kinda got contracts from Alabama and brought in a compactor, and...

M: Take care of it.

R: ...we got rid of it. But that was one of the best thing...but not long term solutions.

We also had 150 units long term unit beds for elderly care. No AC, no air conditioning in the unit, and Hilo is known for high humidity condition and heat especially during the summer months. When the feces and urine soaked clothings of the residents piled ups...

M: Poor thing.

R: ...during the day, the repulsive odor permeated just permeated the entire building.

M: That's poor management yeah.

R: Well, the Department of Health didn't have no money. We don't have money. I convinced the auxiliary to buy fans at least. You had four people in a room. Four, four beds. So, we had a fan in each one, but, it worked so well.

Again I knew my allies were always the old ladies that came from all over the community to volunteer care services or fund raising. But anyway, John left and...

M: The haole?

R: ...yeah, Westermann. So, since I'm one of two. I'm the only assistant administrator. I become the acting administrator of Hilo Medical. I'm running the whole place now.

M: They did not open it up?

R: Well, they're recruiting. This time we're doing national recruit. So, I said, "Well, I'll do it." But permanently, I wasn't sure. Personally, I didn't feel like I was ready to do it yet. But one year came. Two years came. The third year, I'm still acting.

M: My god.

R: They're paying me a measly salary. My counterpart today make almost 300 grand.

M: My goodness, so.

R: I didn't even reach a hundred.

M: My god.

R: You know pretty close, but...Melinda, I had enough. It wasn't the money. It was the joy of doing what I really thought I was happy to do. So, I did that for almost two and a half years.

M: As acting.

R: Acting...my title was acting administrator. We didn't even call 'em administrator. We changed the name from Hilo Hospital to Hilo Medical Center to reflect more it's a medical center now, that kind of stuff.

M: So, what happened? Did you change plans again?

R: Meanwhile, 1995...

M: Ha, ha, 1995, okay.

R: ...comes. I'm keeping an eye on Honoka'a.

M: Honoka'a.

R: Because we finally put money in – twenty million dollars – to put a brand new hospital. The Department of Health, Jack Lewin and John Waihe'e when they were in office, the communities, the two communities Kamuela and Honoka'a collaborated. Honoka'a had the hospital already, thirty-five beds. Kamuela had nothing. Richard Smart²⁰ was dangling it, says, "Oh, I'll give you free land. Then, all you gotta do is to build the hospital."

²⁰ Richard Palmer Kaleioku Smart (1913-1992) was descendent of John Palmer Parker (1790-1868) and the sole owner of the Parker Ranch, the largest private ranch in Hawaii. Smart was also a musical theater actor and singer.

And meanwhile, Honoka‘a, having this thirty-five year old building that’s been operating since 1950. That’s the only hospital in that area now, says, “Well, we want the hospital too.” So, they couldn’t decide for years until about 1992...‘93.

John Waihe‘e and I was at Hilo Medical. I went to a meeting. John Waihe‘e and Jack Lewin came and held a joint meeting for Kamuela and Honoka‘a and said, “You guys decide. If you guys can’t decide who’s going to get the hospital, where the hospital will gonna be built, that money will lapse.” So, heads up on the plan. Honoka‘a will get a 50-bed nursing home facility and Kamuela will get the acute hospital.

So, there’s this plan. The state gives both sides twenty million dollars. Twenty million to build a long term care facility, everything in it, equipped like a hospital, including a clinic and all kinds. And North Hawai‘i would be North Hawai‘i Community Hospital. It would be a regular acute hospital. So, that’s what’s happened. So I’m watching. I’m watching what’s happening. So ‘95 comes and recruitment for a new administrator started as the existing left for another a private facility.

Later on, I thought, maybe I should, since I’ve done temporary running Hilo Medical Center for almost three years. Maybe I should just...but by then, I didn’t submit. So they were in the process of doing recruitment nationally, having head hunters all over the place, bringing new. So I said to myself. I said to...meanwhile, my administrator that I worked under initially was the deputy director of health in charge of, ah...I told him I think I wanted to go to Honoka‘a...

M: Honoka‘a this time.

R: ...to open up the place...

M: Your old high school.

R: ...to a brand new building, I don’t have to worry about construction. It would be a brand new building.

M: Oh, okay.

R: Fifty bed...everything in it. So, December of 1995, I take over Honoka‘a.

M: Was that as easy as that? How did you get the position? You just told them?

R: Transfer.

M: Just transfer?

R: Transfer.

M: Wow.

R: Transfer. Well, but still they went through the interview process.

M: But you, with your record...

R: One of the things that kind of like...thing was of my internship supervisors when I was doing internship in Honolulu, when I was at School of Public Health in 1975. This lady named Mary Ann Pyun.

M: Pyun.

R: P – Y – U – N.

M: P – Y – U – N. She had a PhD in health...in public health. She was in Honoka'a. When the plantation closed down in '95, she was there. And her husband is very famous. He was a lawyer in Honolulu kind of defending all the...a lot of criminal cases, Matthew Pyun. I don't know if you've heard of him, P – Y – U – N. She applied for the job too. She was my supervisor when I was in school, you know. She had no hospital administration experience. She didn't know I was doing this since 1987 in Kula and I was at Hilo Medical Center.

M: Yeah. So what...

R: And all my...a few of my high school classmates were on the selection board. Of course, you know, and Takamine.

M: Takamine. State Legislator Dwight and his father. In fact, Yoshito Takamine told me to come back home to Honoka'a and run the hospital when I was at Kula, and that's why I decided to come back home. And he says when are you coming back home?

M: To Honoka'a? Oh.

R: So, that kinda stayed in the back in my mind. This is 1989. So, that was '95.

M: It's like a big circle now.

R: Yeah, it's a big circle. And one of the things, this is to me, it's going home, really going home. And when will I have this opportunity ever to open a brand new facility...

M: Yeah.

R: ...in a place that I started from.

M: You have two good things going.

R: 360 degrees full circle

M: Yeah.

R: So '95...but it was a time of upheaval in Honoka'a. The plantation just closed down. People didn't have jobs.

M: Yeah, that's hard.

R: They didn't know what to do. The state, unlike the project in Kohala when they pumped in millions and millions of dollars, all they did was job training. One of the things they did was some of those employees who were males and females, primarily females, but some males too, is they had to have nurse aide training for them.

M: Okay.

R: Nurses aide training so that they could enter the facility as nurse aide assistants. So, it was with that kind of stuff that looking and I returned home. But, you know, transitioning was really not hard. So, the first couple of years was just locking down things. But I didn't have to worry about the facility running down because...

M: Correct, yeah.

R: ...everything was brand new, everything, you know.

M: Now you and Jodean moved.

R: Well, finally, '96 Jason graduates from high school.

M: Okay. Hilo High.

R: And Jodean was already doing administration work. She was principal and vice-principal, you know....

M: Good.

R: ...in Laupahoehoe .

M: Laupahoehoe.

R: Then she came to Waiakea Intermediate right after that, then to Paho High School. And then she decided to transfer to Honoka'a too. I said, so I'm commuting every day...

M: Oh, okay.

R: ...from Honoka'a because while Jason was still in school, we thought we'd wait 'til he graduate. So, I'm commuting Honoka'a/Hilo. There was a house for me, but it's a small cottage in Honoka'a. But I said I ain't gonna do that. So, I had the state car so I'd drive in the morning and drive back.

M: So you never bought a house in Honoka'a?

R: Not yet.

M: Later, later, yeah

R: Not yet, so until, but once we got there, we started looking for a place

M: All right.

R: So, we finally located this 18 acres parcel with a partly built house – just a skeleton of a house with a roof, no floor yet, no walls, nothing, but a cottage on the side, where the guy, the owner of the building, was building the main house. So, we invested in it, completed it, and when it was completed it in '98, December of '98,

M: '98 okay.

R: We moved, oh, Mom and Dad can come and stay now. There were 2 living rooms there. We designed the room for them, you know, that they would have their separate rooms. Finally convinced them to come.

M: They left Pukalani.

R: Back up one more time (clap). The boys came home. They were already in college at the U of Washington to help them pack up and everything and we moved to Honoka'a.

M: My goodness, you were all going home.

R: Yeah, we all came home. We all came home. So, they lived with us in that house. And Alice separated from her husband

M: Husband yeah.

R: She and her daughter came to live with us.

M: Also.

R: We have this multi family now kinda living in Honoka'a. Things were good

M: Turn.

R: We sold our house. My parents' property was still kept there. And so, we're in Honoka'a. So I got really immersed in Honoka'a.

Yoshito Takamine and Dwight Takamine being the politicians, we were allies, you know. We planned a lot of things. And one of the first things and this is probably is what I consider would be my vision to what I thought was necessary up there, was we only had fifty beds.

M: Fifty beds.

R: Fifty beds for the hospital.

M: Okay.

R: I figure with the growth of the elderly, we will need more beds serving Kamuela and the entire area, that we needed to build whatever we could get. I wrote the plan for legislation, worked with Dwight Takamine. And he got funding for an additional twenty-five beds. Twenty million dollars. really expensive, but that's what it was. Another wing...

M: Another wing for the hospital?

R: ...another wing for the hospital. Meanwhile, we have all these new administrators coming to run the system, Hawai'i Health Systems Corporation. They were all from the military. The head guy the CEO, we call him CEO now, Tom Driskill.

He brings all these colonels like him who, you know, in the military, once you attain colonelship and you don't get promoted to be a general in a couple of years, you're stuck. So, a lot of them retire. So, all these colonel guys they are running hospitals that was a fellow colonel. I'm one of the last holdovers, you know, that was hired in the old system and is now with the corporation.

So, we get legislation to expand...

M: Aha aha.

R: ...and you know, Tom, wouldn't release the money. You gotta ask to release the money from the legislature. He wouldn't release it. He didn't ask for it. Driskill said, in fact, you know, once he told me that it was not his project.

"You did it without my okay," and he was right. I went directly to Dwight. I said this is what happened. And so, what happens with monies that is appropriated and not "encumbered" or not committed to be spent is gone within 3 years. We were the last year of the appropriation with termination date of June 2006.

M: It's gone, disappears.

R: Yeah, it's...so I started researching what it to be done about before it was on gone in three years. He didn't want to release this – "It's not my project." Meanwhile he hires a lobbyist, a guy name Toguchi.²¹

M: Toguchi.

R: The former Superintendent of DOE...I told him. I said, "Tom won't, release the appropriation. I was at a restaurant in Honolulu and saw him so I went to sit with him. I

²¹ Charles Teruo Toguchi, former State Representative, Senator and Hawaii State Department of Education Superintendent.

said, you know, he won't release it. I kind of B.S. my way. I said, "He won't do it. I'll talk to Dwight," I said, "about your other funding." He said, "Let me talk, let me talk to him".

So, he releases the money, but we have 3 months encumber or commit to spend the money. You have to have a plan.

M: Right.

R: In order to get the money released, you have to have everything in place. You have to have everything. We have nothing. This is already March. My CEO practically tells me he ain't going to release it. He finally says, after Toguchi must have talked to him, he said, "Okay." So they released the money. But now, you have to have the plan. Design and have the actual building plan in place.

M: Yeah, quick.

R: Melinda, I become a paper engineer and an architect. I pull out the old plans we have for our hospital. I work with our contract officer and purchasing agent. We said – I said – we need to do this. Let's work this out. Just copy the old plan. Use all that and copy because it was already approved and built.

M: Yeah, just so you have something, yeah.

R: So long as we encumbered the money before it lapsed, you know, at the end of the fiscal year, June it was, I think, then you're okay. So, we did it. Normally what you do is that you got a consultant to write it. And my training or my knowing to read plans from highways and from roadways...

M: put it to good use.

R: ...became helpful.

M: Yeah.

R: And so, we were able to encumber the money. I don't know it was 2006...2006.

M: 2006. So, how long were you in the hospital? As your...

R: Well...

M: What's your title there?

R: 2006?

M: What's your title?

R: Well, Administrator.

M: Director. You're director of the...

R: No, administrator.

M: Administrator.

R: Hospital administrator. That was the title.

M: The title.

R: Some guys like to use CEO.

M: CEO

R: Chief Executive Officer.

M: Chief officer.

R: I never thought that the title was okay for me.

M: So, you were the hospital administrator.

R: I'm just the administrator, that's all.

M: So you were there from 1995...

R: 1995.

M: 1995 to?

R: I retired in 2007.

M: 2007

R: Twelve years.

M: Oh, that's a long time.

R: But the crowning...the end was this to get it. But I realized. Then, the earthquake hit us in 2006.

M: The earthquake!

R: Remember the big earthquake 2006? 2006, the summer of, I think, October of 2006.

M: Okay.

R: It shook Kohala and hotel buildings in Waikoloa and a church in Kohala where my hospital, which was the newest in the system, sustained the damages...the biggest

damage. We were the nearest to the epicenter.

Kohala was closer but it survived because it's an old building, just wooden. But mine is totally concrete, two floors. I was home about 2 miles above the hospital when the alarm went off.

R: This was a Sunday morning. My house started to shake. I thought my house was ready to fall down. It was near 7.0. The television fell off.

M: My god.

R: Everything, all over the house. I left. I drove to the hospital right away. Sirens blowing all over the place. I get in there. The whole ceiling has collapsed.

M: My goodness.

R: Water running all over the place. The faucets, the eaves of the roof were hanging around the building and some collapsed. By the time I got there, luckily we always practice evacuation drills.

M: Yeah.

R: And so, fifty, almost fifty patients are lying in beds or sitting in wheelchairs outside the hospital.

M: Oh my.

R: All over the parking lot. I'm there. This is 9:00. It's amazing how the community came to offer assistance. There was a soccer game going on next door at the park. They brought all their tents to provide shade for the patients in our driveway. And I called Harry Kim, our County Mayor. By then, I kinda knew him, a personal friend and he's visited me several times.

M: Yeah.

R: He liked some of the things that we were doing, like bringing the community together saw my concept, my belief, is that if you get the community behind you, they'll be there to support you in time of need. So, he really liked that. And so, he said. "Romel, what do you need?" I said "Harry, I need your guys to come, make sure that the building is safe. We will need transportation because I don't know where we're going to house them."²²

M: Wow, that's major.

R: The old hospital below the new one was still vacant. It's totally vacant. It's a wooden building. remember? "But I need your engineers to check that too because I know I

²² Patients.

couldn't depend on the State to send DAGS people over." He said, "You got it."

So, engineers and building inspectors came to inspect. I said, "Check the old building for me. Is it safe for me to bring my patients there?"

You can look at the exact date 2006 when the earthquake hit. He said okay, "I'll send a bus over if you need to transport anywhere." I figure the gym, the high school. I didn't get any support from my colleagues at Hilo Medical Center. They didn't even come. I couldn't even locate my director of nursing, ha, ha, I don't know where she was. But she came later on.

But, so here all these patients sitting in the parking lot with the tent and everything and water gushing all over the place, ruptured.

M: Yeah.

R: CNN comes over, want to interview me, so I'm on national TV. My classmates called me. They said, "I saw you on TV, you know." So I didn't get home 'til about the next morning.

M: Wow.

R: You know you always have to have backup power. There was electricity, but what if the electricity failed. I got 50 patients in different critical condition. So we, I, I had to see where I could get a generator. So, when we finally got a generator, somebody rented out a generator to us, two generators and got it connected and made sure it worked.

M: Is that from the community? From Honoka'a?

R: Well, some contractor.

M: Contractor came, uh huh.

R: Contractor came and put. So, I finally got home to check on Jodean. How was it at home?

M: They were okay?

R: She was okay.

M: So, nobody got killed in that, uh....

R: No

M: That's good.

R: We always practice evacuation...

M: Evacuation...

R: ...all the time. And the beds were rolled down.

Can you imagine rolling down the hill? The guy had a flatbed truck. We put as much beds as we could, but...for a couple of months, we were operating out of the old hospital.

Luckily and at that time, we already kind of transitioned out the property to the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. They were going to have it as an education center. So I called their director. I said I need the building back. So, we, ah, "we got it". says, "you got it". We'll do it. So, for a couple of months, we operated out of that.

Now it was January or February. I finally told myself, I said, "Well, at soon as we can return the patients back up to the old building when it's safe for them to clean up the place, check all the ruptured, you know. I don't think I'll stick around because, if I stick around, I'll probably would be here another three years to complete the wing, right..."

M: Correct, yeah.

R: We need the new building.

M: Yeah.

R: So, I told my director of nursing, I said, "You know, I'll stick around. I'll use all my vacations. And once I'll use all my vacations, I'm going to be in and out...but you know I'll be here all the time and I can help you out."

So, that's...so, I retired in June 2007 when I exhausted all my vacation. The patients were back in the building. And we know that sooner or later...but you know, you're talking about repairing the building and you know how the State works...how long it takes to repair a building. Better yet to have the new wing.

M: It's about time.

R: So, I wasn't...I can't stick around. It's better for the person to complete the wing and then they run it themselves.

M: New one.

R: So, my director of nursing, she was a gal from Waimea, Jeanne, she was a public health nurse on Maui which I knew. I trusted her. I said just stick around until I can at least get the building going. And she did that. And when the wing was completed, she retired too. And so, that was kinda like...

M: Wow.

R: But, ah, the beauty of my coming back home and seeing some the plantation workers, especially the Filipinos, that were in the community came in for care. One man was, I know was always the cook at the parties. He was there. He was so happy to meet me.

Then this other man who was married to a Japanese woman, C. Quiban. One time, I said to the staff, I know the guy likes to drink beer. I said get him an O'doul²³ nonalcoholic beer, and then give it to him. And I was there.

M: But after retirement...it's not really retirement because you went back and got involved in the community and the Filipino in particular.

R: Well, so we're, so we're living in Honoka'a now, you know.

M: Yeah, Honoka'a Heritage Center.²⁴ You got involved.

R: '07...so, you know, one of the things that we facilitated is to transfer running the old hospital to UH to offer classes and establish a heritage center. The UH-H point man was Gerald DeMello²⁵, who was a lobbyist from UH-Hilo, got most of the improvements for the University. He came to me once while I was and asked, "What are you going to do with the old building?" I said, "Shy?" He said, "You want it? You guys can use it?" I said, "Yeah." So, they got monies to refurbish the buildings and also to build a new structure before the 2006 earthquake, and then we move away to Hilo in 2017 about eleven years later.

M: Yeah, you were in Honoka'a. That's your, ah

R: While living in Honoka'a I was involved in all kinds...projects and meeting and volunteer to sit on Board advisory committees. Major committee to recruit and hire a new CEO to replace the incumbent who has resigned. The Center was primary of outpatient services to the community. It was the successor to the Hāmākua infirmary that provided health care for the plantation and the entire community. I was a member Hāmākua Health Center Board of Directors for a number of years.

R: Yeah, yeah, so that's how I met him.

M: Oh, okay.

R: So but that.

M: So, you continued your health...

R: Yeah.

R: ...care activities as a volunteer,

²³ O'Doul's is brewed by Anheuser-Busch as a traditional beer whose alcohol is then removed through the use of low temperature, low-pressure distillation.

²⁴ <https://honokaaheritagecenter.org/>

²⁵ Gerald Demello was the director of UH-Hilo's university relations and external affairs.

- R: And Patricia Brown I met her in FAHSON back in 2006.
- M: In 2006...during the 100 year.
- R: So, she was the president then? FAHSON and I kind of met her then.²⁶
- M: Oh, I was in Australia at that time.
- R: Then she says you want to be in FANHS? “Well,” I said, “why not.” So, I got involved in FANHS and then...
- M: So, why? Why are you interested in FANHS? In FAHSON? Honoka‘a Community Heritage Center, Cabugao project?
- R: Well, that’s around 2017/18. Well, right after I retired, I realized that my Dad and his three compadres were the last sakadas in Pa‘auilo. Somebody had to write their story. So that led to my interviewing the four and writing articles in the Hāmākua Times.
- M: Hāmākua Times, yeah.
- R: And that opened up other things that I wanted to write about and which people enjoyed reading: living in the plantation, how my going back to the Philippines in 2014 to visit my Peace Corps assignment almost 50 years later. I wrote about that and about general things. And for the Filipinos, it was something that they really enjoyed reading because it was about them and what they experienced, we all sharing the same experiences, you know.

And so in 2018, the mayor of Cabugao²⁷ came and wanted to promote a sister city relationship between Hilo and Cabugao. So we got Harry Kim and the mayor²⁸ to write a memorandum of agreement so that you a sister city relationship would be establish and formalized. And so a Filipino common group has visited Cabugao twice now. We have projects there. We started kind of a mini museum at UNP...University of Northern Philippines.²⁹ And besides donating funds to the high school and the elementary schools there, just kind of general exchanges, goodwill.

²⁶ The Filipino-American Historical Society of Hawai‘i (FAHSON) recognized the centennial of arrival of the first Filipino contract workers to the U.S. by hosting the 2006 Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) biennial conference in Honolulu. In 2006 the FAHSON president was Gina Vergara-Bautista. Patricia Brown would serve as FAHSON president during 2009-2015.

²⁷ In June 1946 the last group of Filipino contract workers left for Hawai‘i from Port Salomague, Cabugao, Ilocos Sur, Luzon, Philippines. The following month the Philippines gained independence from the United States.

²⁸ Mayor Josh Edward Cobangbang of Cabugao.

²⁹ University of Northern Philippines, Vigan, Ilocos Sur. <http://unp.edu.ph/>

Personally, I have learned to master the ukulele and the guitars, and I serenade at nursing homes and senior centers in Hilo.

M: Yeah, music.

R: I've used that to kind of go back to the long term care nursing home and senior centers, but COVID prevented us from continuing that. 'Til now, they haven't really, you know, that much. So, basically maintaining, being active also with the political Democrat Party, but in the last 4 to 5 years, I said, "No, it's about time for the young guys to get involved with that stuff." Meanwhile, I continue to get interested in promoting, giving talks about Filipinos, of course, at the museum, for instance, at Lyman³⁰ and that kind of stuff, and of course, promoting the Heritage Center at Honoka'a.

M: Correct, correct.

[BREAK]

M: Because we sort of reviewed, not in all details, but the main...

R: Yeah, yeah.

M: ...aspects of your life, so it's uh.

R: I mean, some.

M: How do you evaluate? What was your philosophy? What is your philosophy of living?

R: I was raised with the notion that a lot of things that happens in your life is because of your gasat or your fate.

M: Your fate. Yeah, there's a gasat here, yeah, fate.

R: And to a certain point, I would tweak that, in a sense that also yeah luck, but you also have a lot of ability to change course...

M: Correct.

R: ...and to tweak it. And so, and the most important thing I think for that is that you have to know who you are, know your values, know where you came from, know your environment where you're working. Because if you don't, you know, you don't know where you came from, you don't know where you're going to go...

M: Yeah.

³⁰ Located in Hilo, Hawai'i, the Lyman Museum began as the Lyman Mission House, originally built for New England missionaries David and Sarah Lyman in 1839. In 1931 the Museum was established by their descendants. <https://lymanmuseum.org/>

R: ...either. And I'm also a strong believer and this is probably part of my conservatism is, yeah, I'm willing to fall, but I, and that's the planner part of me, is that you also have to have a cushion at the bottom. You gotta be prepared so that when the fall takes place, you still can bounce up.

M: Correct.

R: Or, knowing that even with the failures, either you plan how you gonna get back up, how you can bounce back up.

M: Correct.

R: What you were trying.

M: Correct.

R: And that's conservative. I don't charge headlong. Maybe that's the accusation I have from Jodean and my kids...that you think, you plan too much. You think too much. And that's the planner part of me. But that's the tweaking, that I said. I'm not afraid to try. That, you know, I've done, and I...

M: But you're not reckless.

R: No, I'm not reckless either.

M: Yeah.

R: I know that if it's a cliff, and I know if there's sharp rocks down there, I ain't going to do it. I'll find a way to get down there with a parachute maybe. Or I'll climb down but I won't jump in. In fact, I used to tell...John knows this. John, Johnny³¹...I told him before, I said.

M: Johnny.

R: I told him, "You know my philosophy about that, Johnny." And maybe he respects that. I said, "You know, we need guys like you. We need guys to charge up the hill. But you need guys behind you to save the wounded. You know, I'm more of that.

M: Correct.

R: But I'll be there with you. I'll go to the battlefield with you.

M: Correct.

R: But we need that too.

³¹ Johnny Verzon, FAHSOH member who made video documentary, [Makibaka: Huwag Matakot](#)

M: Correct, you need all kinds.

R: Yeah, you know. But I still believe that, you know, yeah, some things, it's a matter of being at the right place at the right time. And I feel fortunate that I've been there and I've had support from my parents and from the people that I grew up with in the plantation and then from people who in academia like you guys, you know, you, Amy³² as role models and my profs at the university that check on me because one of the things I remember when I was having a hard time at the hospital.

I always remember what Jon Hayakawa would tell me. He goes and he says. We can't prepare you for everything. We can teach you the tools on how to, you know, look at it in a way that makes sense. That's the tools you need. I said but I've never had hospital administration. "You'll learn." And basically I accepted the job in Kula as health administrator. Although I have the degree but it's not hospital administration. It was more health education. And I don't know which one is more important.

You notice that a lot of health administrators are usually guys with so-called MBA, Masters of Business Administration. They think it's financial funds. But I, in the end, you know, if you're going to be the CEO or the manager, you can hire a CFO. That's his job. You don't have to be the finance guy because that's not your forte. But getting people to work together and move together and accomplish the goal.

M: That's a scholar. That's a skill.

R: Yeah. And if you don't have that interaction skills with people. And that's why I think a lot of people. And of course, knowing the environment, yeah. That's why you can't just jump into something unless you really have some knowledge of the local scene...

M: Correct.

R: ...too and what's happening. And I think that's what sometimes guys that arrive from a different place, when they come in, they think, "Oh that's how we did it there. It's going to work here." Not necessarily. You have to adapt it.

M: If I were to summarize your life story, you mentioned a lot of gazat, the fate, but I also see a lot of what I call your own personal agency. You took a stand when you see a junction. You decide and act on it. It's not as if you were forced to do things but you acted on what was in front of you.

R: Yes. And I think also, and I tell my kids this, and I tell about your job and your lifestyle, and I tell them and I tell people that are willing to listen. They're the same. You can't separate your lifestyle from your job.

³² Amefil (Amy) Agbayani, former director of UH-Manoa's Student, Excellence, Equity and Diversity Program, is a long-time advocate for minority and civil rights issues.

M: Yeah, correct.

R: Your job is what keeps you going, support. But the lifestyle you have, yeah, you gotta make compromise. And you can't be all pure, you know, just one way. I said you have to make a compromise. You have to make a choice in your life. And Melinda, this is where I wanted to be. I never wanted to be on the mainland. I had opportunities. In fact, when I was, I think, just when my second son was born, I wasn't too happy where I was. This was '78.

M: Where were you '78?

R: Yeah, I was still with SHPDA at that time.

M: That's right.

R: And I was recruited by AID.³³

M: Okay.

R: And also, they brought me to DC, interviewed me, went through all this battery of tests because I thought I had, I was going to be even in the State Department.

M: Correct.

R: So, I went, interviewed. I got to learn how they interviewed people in these battery of tests. When I came back, they said, "You're accepted. We want you. We can post you in the Middle East...

M: Ooh.

R: ...or South America." But Jodean was pregnant with Jason. One of the things that they told me, once you commit, you're locked in with us.

M: Yeah.

R: And your kids will have to go. You can bring them when they're young abroad with you. But when they get to a certain level, you have to bring them back for indoctrination, you know, to America. They have to be educated. You have to bring them back.

M: And which you did...

R: Oh, Jodean was pregnant, and I thought about my parental responsibilities to my folks. They mean so much to me. To this day, I say I wonder if it was a lost opportunity, that if I didn't take that option, where would I be now? I had one of my...

M: So, what do you think?

³³ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

R: No. I made the right decision.

M: I think so, too.

R: I made the right decision. And as my son, second son, I told him that again, you know. I said, you gotta. It's your life. You can't divorce that. Because when your job is your life too, the job is easier because you know you gotta make compromises. Everything kind of balances. So, that's where I come from.

M: Oh, that's a good philosophy.

R: You know, and so, I always said when I was on the mainland and I traveled over back then. I said, you know, if I can see the mountains above and I can see the ocean to my left, I'm at home. That's me. I said. That's Pa'auilo, you know.

M: That's right.

R: I always see it that way. I formulated my kind of philosophy. To me, life, work and life. They have to be the same. You can't divorce it, too,...

M: Correct.

R: ...because if you do that, you're going to have a hard time. It was your money. Your lifestyle suffers. If you get too much fun, you can't live.

M: Correct.

R: And also know the limits, you know. There are limits. You got to compromise.

M: Thank you, Romel, it's been very pleasant.

R: Well, thank you, Melinda, and you know, I still wanna...kind of grateful for...

M: Experiences.

R: ...giving me the opportunity to talk story with you and sharing the story with people, you know. And, I'll take your advice and, then, maybe someday writing from a personal standpoint.

M: Yeah, uh huh, and there are so many rich details that we cannot capture here. At least we have the main outlines of what you have gone through and wonderful experiences you have had – work...family.

R: Well, I hope it's worth, you know.

M: It is. Thank you.

R: Thank you.