

Filipino-American Historical Society of Hawai‘i
Oral History Project
Interview #1

Romel Dela Cruz (R)

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

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Honoka‘a, Hawai‘i

- M: Okay, we want to start today, Romel. It’s November 9, 2021, and we’ll start with the first period, the first, what you call, the first phase of your life, from your birth until you went to Pa‘auilo¹ and then graduated high school. We will do that for today,...
- R: Okay.
- M: ...so, you just feel free to digress...also because this will be edited,...
- R: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.
- M: ...and so it’s not really that crucial that we go toot, toot, toot...
- R: Okay, okay.
- M: ...okay, so, first, give me your full name.
- R: Okay, my name is Romel Dela Cruz,...
- M: All right.
- R: ...R – O – M – E – L. I want to make that distinction because actually, in my baptismal paper, the name is written with two ‘M’s.
- M: Romel, okay,...
- R: Romel...Romel.
- M: ...Romel I thought it was Rommel.
- R: And the story is, when I was born on January 27, 1945, it’s already, you know, the war is almost winding. The Japanese are on the run in the Philippines, and in my birthplace called Darayday, which is Barrio 49, Laoag City²...

1 Pa‘auilo is a plantation town located in the ahupua‘a of Pa‘auilo on the Hāmākua coast of Hawai‘i Island.

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

M: Okay.

R: ...Darayday, I understand from my grandfather in Ilocano means a gathering place, Darayday...

M: Oh.

R: ...you know, during tribal wars or the Spanish or American Filipino war, it was a gathering place...and the purok or the village, it's where, according to my grandfather, they would gather, you know, in the times of important events. So, that's why they call it Darayday. I don't know. That's what he told me.

M: Is that a barrio?

R: It is a barrio, 49.

M: 49.

M: And it's under Laoag or...

R: Laoag City.

M: ...Laoag City?

R: Laoag. Yes, it was Laoag, yeah.³

M: And you were born on January 27, 1945?

R: Yes. yes. yes.

M: Okay.

R: According to my mother, there was a little confusion...about my birth date. She wasn't too sure until they declared it in my birth certificate...whether it was 26, because supposedly, I was born at night.

M: Midnight.

R: And they were not too conscious of the hours and when recording it. And my mother said my father wasn't around.

M: Where was he?

R: He was commandeered by the guerrillas to dig trenches. And so, he wasn't around. You know, it was my grandfather and my grandmother that actually were present during my

³ Currently, Darayday is listed as Barangay 49-A (population 960) with Raraburan as Barangay 49-B (population 1,631), both located in Laoag City.

birth, which took place supposedly on the ground floor of my grandfather's house surrounded by basi burnay, in Ilocano, or big vats of base or wine.

M: Was there a midwife at present?

R: No midwife or not even a partera – a woman in the village experienced in childbirth assistance. Only my mother and my grandmother.

M: So, your grandma just assisted your mom.

R: Yeah, she assisted, or with somebody else, but supposedly she delivered along the burnay or the big vats of basi – sugar cane wine – that my grandfather made and stored under the house...

M: My goodness.

R: ...so, that's what I'm told...

M: That's right.

R: ...and my father did not come home until morning when I was already born, according to the stories, you know.

M: And I have to record the full name of your mother and your father.

R: My mother's name is Asuncion Alonzo Dela Cruz. And my father is Benigno Tomas Dela Cruz. That's my paternal grandmother's surname, middle name, I mean surname is Tomas Dela Cruz.

M: And I wanna, or, so, your parents. But I wanna ask first. I read in your account of your mom, for Patricia Brown's collection of stories, that right after you were born, the family had to move to the hills.

R: Yes...

M: Wow!

R: ...in fact, one of the important things that I didn't know, and they kept telling me their war stories. And my mother and my father would say, oh, nag bakwit kami...

M: Bakwit, bakwit.

R: ...and I'd say what kind of word is that? Bakwit, bakwit? It wasn't until after many years that I realized that the word is actually 'evacuate'...

M: Yeah, bakwit.

R: ...but they did not pronounce it with an “e” as in “evacuate.” So, they had to move in a carabao pulled karison or cart and go up to the hills across the river near the village because they were told they had to bakwit. They had to evacuate because the Japanese were on the run and the guerillas and the Americans were chasing them. I guess, because that’s what I understand...

M: And your?

R: ...the Japanese were retreating up the Cordilleras, yeah.

M: Killing civilians along the way.

R: Yeah, yeah, and killing civilians and so they bakwit . And they camp out among the bamboos in the forest across the river where they live. And I don’t know how far in they were, but they put blanket over it. And the story is that I had relatives that came along and they brought rice and other dry food and gathered whatever they could, you know, in the forest which my father and my grandparents were very familiar with, of course, because that’s where they grew up.

M: Was your father with you at the time?

R: Well, then he was then with us...

M: During the evacuation?

R: ...during the evacuation. So, I don’t know how long they stayed out there. But when it was safe to return, then I guess, they returned home.

M: Because that’s a short period there.

R: Yeah.

M: You were born 1945. And then the next year, your father was going to Hawai’i...

R: Yeah, ‘46.

M: ...‘46, oh, okay. Just to flash back a little bit, what’s your mother and father doing? I mean their life situation?

R: Well, before the war, my mother was in high school. I guess, what was considered high school, in the Philippines, and she was in her third year, I believe. My father’s education, I don’t even know...what grade level, maybe second grade, he told me and that he could read and write in Ilokano as a young adult...

M: He could?

- R: ...he could. Somehow he learned the alphabet, you know. But he was a farmer, basically. He came from a big family of five brothers and one sister
- M: When you say farmer, did they have a piece of land?
- R: They had a small piece of land. My paternal grandfather died when my father was very young. He never knew the man...
- M: Okay.
- R: ...his name was Leandro Tomas Dela Cruz. My father was the last child. So was my mother.
- M: Big families? Your father?
- R: My father, like I said, had five brothers and one sister. But my mother had three brothers, and she was the only girl She was the last child.
- M: I'm asking this because in 1946, your father left.
- R: Yes.
- M: So, you are left with your mother and all these relatives?
- R: Yes...
- M: Oh.
- R: ...and my parents own no home.. The only property value owned by my father was this bicycle that this Hawayano⁴ brother bought for him. You see, all his brothers came to Hawai'i to work.
- M: All your uncles?
- R: All my uncles from my father's side also came to Hawai'i to work in the 20's. In fact, I think my father's brothers were brought...
- M: Okay.
- R: ...before or a little after the strike of '24 referred to as the Hanapēpē Massacre.⁵

4 Filipinized term for someone from Hawai'i.

5 Following a 1920 labor strike of Filipino and Japanese sugar workers, in which only minimal concessions were made, 12,000 Filipinos from 23 of the 45 plantations went on a long, violent and tragic strike in 1924 that would last eight months. On September 9, 1924, strikers at the Makaweli camp in Hanapēpē resisted, and a battle ensued lasting several days, resulting in what is known as the Hanapēpē Massacre. When the smoke cleared, 16 Filipinos and four policemen were dead and scores wounded. Gov. Farrington sent two machine-gun squads and rifle companies of the National Guard to Kauai. The National Guard restored order, arresting more than 100 strikers. Seventy-six Filipinos were brought to trial, and 60 were given four-year sentences.

M: '24. As strikebreakers?

R: His older brothers told him he couldn't go with them to Hawai'i. He was the buridek or the last one, and he had to stay home and take care of my grandma.

M: The bunso.

R: Yeah, yeah.

M: How do you say it in Ilokano?

R: Buridek, the last.

M: Okay, but why did he go eventually in 1946?

R: Well, in 1946, the story is, you know. He married my mother, I think it was February '43. I think, actually, my grandparents were not too happy...

M: With the marriage?

R: ...with the marriage simply because they think their daughter deserved better.

M: Marrying down.

R: She was, you know, I mean she was on the verge of becoming somebody as the one of the first ones if not the first one from the barrio to go to high school. She was boarding in Laoag, you know.

M: And for a woman, yeah, at that time.

R: At the national high school there. She was much much older than most her classmates which was not unusual and she was determined to get an education encouraged by her Hawayano father and brothers.

My parents married in '43. The reason they tell me that is that because...

M: The war?

R: ...a woman would be much safer if she was married, not totally, but, at least if she can say that I'm married, then the guerrillas, which were just as cruel as the Japanese...

M: At the time?

R: ...yeah, at that time. And if something bad should happen, there would be a man to protect her, if they were separated from the family, right? And so they married, and they owned a bicycle which would become the ticket to Hawai'i of our family...

M: A bicycle.

R: ...an uncle, my last uncle closest in birth to my father, returned, and to pacify my dad, he bought him a bicycle. And my father used that bicycle to ride to travel to town and find work and he used the bicycle to court my mother and gave her rides on the back seat of the bike to town.

M: Very romantic.

R: Yeah, but I should, I mention it because it's the only real possession that they owned all the while war was all around them...

M: Correct, yeah.

R: ...my mother was living with her parents. My father was living with his parents...

M: And he was farming?

R: ...he was already in his early 30's. He was older than my mother and was born in 1913 and my mother was born in 1921. There was some disparity but not too great...

M: But there was.

R: Not long after their marriage I was born but before there was another who died in childbirth...

M: Really? Ohh.

R: ...but anyway, here we are after the war. My father thought that he would just remain home and take care of us and try to make do. They tried to live with my paternal grandmother...

M: That's hard.

R: ...and sister, but they just didn't get along. So, my mother went back to her parents, which was in the same barrio. They were living with her parents, my grandpa and my grandma. And sometime I think in February or January of '46, my father heard one of my godfathers who happens to be named Ricardo Dela Cruz from another barrio had all his papers done to go to Hawai'i and was bound for Kahuku...

M: Okay.

R: ...but he changed his mind.

M: Why?

R: That he was having second thoughts about going.

M: Was he married, too, at the time?

- R: He wasn't. He was much younger than my dad. He was only 19 years old...
- M: Oh, okay.
- R: ...and my father was already almost 32...
- M: Okay.
- R: ...and my father, somehow, I don't know, maybe he was persuaded by my maternal grandfather, who was a Hawayano who came to Hawai'i and returned.
- M: Okay.
- R: And all his brothers were back before the start of WWII.
- M: His brothers all came back?
- R: Yeah, they all came back already and they were all back before the war.
- M: My goodness.
- R: So, they're all in the Philippines...
- M: Wow.
- R: ...and so they also tried to present themselves to return to Hawai'i and they couldn't. They were considered too old
- M: That's the history of migration. Okay, uh huh.
- R: So my father somehow decided he should go and talk to his compadre, my ninong, my godfather.
- M: That's Ricardo?
- R: Yes and my father's name was Benigno. But he shared the same last name Dela Cruz. So, he said to Ricardo, "Hey compadre, you know, I heard you changed your mind. Would, you be willing to part with your paper but I don't have any money. Instead I'll give you my bicycle for it..."
- M: Ohh.
- R: ...for the papers."
- M: Exchange for the papers
- R: There was agreement. But, Ricardo was 19 years old. My dad was 32. How's he's going to figure out. He had to have a copy of a birth certificate...

M: Oh, okay.

R: ...so, my dad goes to town to get a baptismal certificate indicating that he was 19 years old, yeah. A church officer scolded him for fraud and lying to God and my father replied that all he wanted to was to go and work in Hawai‘i to help his family. And somehow, he persuaded the guy.

This was his only chance to go to Hawai‘i and he succeeded in getting the fake baptismal certificate. And then, he needed to get the tax clearance. But you have to go to the provincial office. That is where another trouble started.

M: Why?

R: The guy who happens to be the clerk and knew him and said this, because was a lie, “I can’t give you a release. It’s not you. Furthermore, by lying and if we get caught, you and I will end up in jail with little or nothing to eat.”

So, my father was about to give up hope. He’s on his bicycle in Laoag, heading home and crossing a steel bridge on his way home when he saw a bunch of American soldiers playing softball below the bridge. Melinda, you have been to Laoag, do you remember the steel bridge?

M: I remember.

R: It was the Gilbert bridge. So, he crosses over and looking down, he saw the Americans that were the war victors. You know, the soldiers were playing softball on the sand down below. So, he bikes down and he’s watching the game...you know with papers in his back pocket. And one of his friends or a relative grab the paper out of his back pocket and says, “Ania?” or “What is this, Benigno? I thought you said you didn’t even want to come to Hawai‘i with us?”

They were all ready to go. He says, “Now you want to go?” And he said, “Yeah, so, but you know, that guy at the clerk office told me that lying would cause all kind of trouble.” His friend said, “Eh, that’s bullshit.” He said, “Go back tomorrow. Don’t see the same guy, eh.”

So he goes back the next day. He got his clearance. I don’t know, whether he said something different or gave him something, whatever. But somehow he got the clearance and his baptismal clearance all under an alias.

M: So, did they change the date? Or whatever?

R: No, no. The baptismal certificate and the tax clearance identified him as Ricardo not Benigno which was his actual name. And so with these documents and with his HSPA⁶

6 Hawai‘i Sugars Plantation Association

document he and others proceed to Vigan which is about 50 kilometers from Darayday, Laoag. So, by crook or nook...I don't know, how he got there, whether he walked or by other means. I don't think he bicycled. He must have left the bicycle. Oh, by the way, my mother told, "You know, ah...." Well, I'll get back to that later.

M: This is 1946 in March or there about.

R: Yeah, this is 1946 already and S.S. Maunawili was contracted by the HSPA to transport the recruits or the last sakadas. Two voyages took place in January and February. So, we're into April. I gotta tell you a story about how he thought he wanted make sure that he was going to go, get to go. They had to do their physical.

M: Okay.

R: They had to have x-ray, you know, check for tuberculosis and all that type of stuff. So, he's in line to get the x-ray done. So, he's lining up...they're all lining up. One of his buddies shows up. He says, "Hey Benigno," he says, "You're getting your x-ray?" He said, "Yeah..." So, my father asked him, "Are you all cleared to go?" He said, "Yeah, I got my papers." He says, "Let's switch."

M: Switch?

R: Yeah. He said, "You fall in line with me. And I'll go out that door when its time to get my x-ray. I wanna to make sure that I'm gonna pass since you already have your clearance."

So my father said they went through the door. Right when he was about to enter, you know, not too far...he slips out and his friend goes in for him and gets the x-rayed one more time. My father wanted to make sure that he was gonna get his x-ray clearance.

M: Your father had a good buddy.

R: Yeah, yeah. By the way, I should tell you that, when I was in Vigan and Cabugao last year, near where my father and the last sakadas departed from, I was walking with Tyler Dos Santos around Vigan, the current head of the Democrat Party. He's part Filipino, you know, by the way. We were walking around around Vigan, because I told him about my sakada roots. I wanted to find out where my father was processed and housed while waiting to ship out to Hawai'i on the S.S. Maunawili. So, we were walking around and entered this museum called Sy...something...museum.⁷ Came to find out that it was the home of Elpidio Quirino, the second elected president of the Philippines.

M: Okay, the president.

⁷ On the corner of Salcedo Street and Quirino Boulevard in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, the Syquia Mansion Museum was the family house of Quirino's wife, who was killed by Japanese during World War II.

R: Yeah, it was his home. It has been converted into a museum. And we were walking around. And this lady is narrating and we get up, we got up to the second floor, looking across the street. And she said, “Oh, by the way, sir, that building over there is the Hawai‘i hotel.” I said what, “Why Hawai‘i hotel?” He said, “That’s where all the Filipinos that went to America or Hawai‘i stayed.”

HSPA, I later found out rented 4 different buildings in Vigan as administration offices, health facility, kitchen, and dormitory. The hotel is now a museum, was actually where my father and all the 6,000 members and the 2,000 dependents stayed while waiting for the ship, SS Maunawili before shipping out.

M: They are still there...the building?

R: It still there...it’s a museum.

M: That’s right, yeah.

R: So, oh man, I felt so excited and I said, my god. My father slept on the ground floor of this building. The floor was dirt. So, they had cots. But while they were waiting for the ship, my father said they were being fed every day. Oh, he was so happy that they had a kitchen. And they were preparing meals for them. All of them had tickets. And they were eating meals three times a day...

M: Oh.

R: ...and they had projects for them to go and clean out the rivers, you know, just to give them work and keep them occupied, but they were anxious to know their departure dates so that they could go home and say good bye to family. Oh, I should mention that they should have left on April 1st, 1946, supposedly.

M: Okay.

R: But we all know that 1946, April 1 was April Fool’s Day in Hawai‘i, America. But that’s when the tidal wave hit the Territory of Hawai‘i and Hilo experienced death and heavy damages.⁸

M: ’46. Okay, okay.

R: April 1. And so that shut down the ports here. So, they couldn’t. So, they were delayed. So, when they were finally given the signal to go, he went home. You know, HSPA provided a truck, kind of like the regular truck, and they all went home. They said you gotta come back tomorrow, you know. So, my father came home. I was about 15 months old.

8 Generated by an earthquake in the Aleutian Islands, the April 1, 1946 Hilo tsunami was the most destructive tsunami to hit Hawai‘i.

M: A baby.

R: 14 months...15 months old.

M: But how was that? Uh, isn't that difficult for him. Maybe, he was excited. But for your mom?

R: Oh, you know...

M: Yeah, mother.

R: ...my mom, but she was with her parents, my grandfather and my grandmother. I mean, they were behind supporting her and me. And, uh, and so, I imagine it was hard for my dad.

M: Correct.

R: He had no intention of going to Hawai'i until somehow it hit him, I said maybe this is my chance. How can I can not go? They will not be recruiting anymore, right? This is the last recruitment.

M: But why? Was there a big economic push? You were not...the family was all right. Because they always say that in migration history, the push and pull and so forth, that the Filipino plantation workers came because life was so hard. But it looked like your father's family...it wasn't?

R: Well, my grandfather bought a couple of pieces of land. He built his own house, the Hawayano house. He was the, uh, the *teniente del barrio*⁹...

M: Yeah.

R: ...he was the head of the village, my grandpa, little man, not even five feet.

M: So why push, this father?

R: I guess. Because he had nothing to call his own.

M: All right, okay. That's motivation.

R: He had no land. He had no home. Just that hope. He had a son. So, he got home...and in a box, he just packed several things in a paper box, that's all he had.

M: It's interesting, yeah.

R: And left. And, uh, interesting, one of the things that he told me was, on the way back, there were, you know, on the way through the streets of Vigan to their dormitory and to Cabugao, Port Salomague, where they boarded the S.S. Maunawili, there were thousands of men

9 "Teniente del barrio," also known as "cabeza de barangay" or "barangay head."

waiting on the side of the roadways hoping that they could still go and that some guys would be willing to part with their papers. He told me these guys were camping and cooking on clay rice pots on the street hoping to to get lucky.

My father said he was so lucky, He was eating three meals a day, you know. He, he, he, he, you know, during the war, I guess he was not. But they were eating good food.

M: Okay.

R: So, he did, so the next morning, I guess they boarded and left my mother and I, and my grandparents and my grandparents' house.

M: Were you there to say goodbye when they left?

R: No, they couldn't go to the...to Cabugao. Like I said, it was about...you had to be in a vehicle and all that kind of stuff. So, they just said their goodbye in Darayday.

M: In Darayday and that's it, okay. So, when your father left, you and your mother were supported by your extended family?

R: By my maternal grandparents, no so much by my paternal side because they had their own families to take care of.

M: Maternal grandparents?

R: Because we stayed with them.

M: You stayed with them?

R: We stayed with them. We lived with them.

M: Who else were with you? Your mom, you, your grandparents...

R: Well, my uncle, my mother's brother who never came to Hawai'i and lived next to my grandparents home. Another brother was here in Hawai'i still. The uncle living in Darayday took care of the family farm they had a home in the back of my grandfather's house, and they were living back there. So, I remember, you know, growing up, growing up among all them.

M: Yeah, this is both the Alonzos and Dela Cruzes.

R: No, the Dela Cruzes live on the far corner of the village. So, I had to walk over to my paternal grandma's house. But my paternal grandma was just living by herself, supported by her sons who were Hawayanos and a daughter that never married. She was never allowed to marry, you know, and that kind of stuff.

- M: Okay. So, you were, well, you were surrounded by the family.
- R: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- M: That's the first nine years of your life.
- R: Yeah, yeah...
- M: Early childhood, no father. Your mother was there.
- R: I really never realized that I didn't have a father. I never asked.
- M: Yeah, because you were a baby. Wow.
- R: They only told me about my father. All they said was...all I remember, Melinda, was receiving a lot of things from America...from Hawai'i. Oh, I knew there was some kind of privilege for me, that I was getting nice clothes.
- M: From your dad. Your father was sending you things.
- R: New clothes, sunglasses, harmonica, yeah, harmonica (ha ha) I remember those things...
- M: Goodness!
- R: ...and, like, but somehow, I thought, gee, I'm better off than all my cousins and other kids. I was a cocky little kid. I had a bad reputation of saying whatever I wanted to say.
- M: That early, that confidence and, uh...
- R: I was not fearful of anything. There's a clip in my ear right here?
- M: Yeah, uh huh, what happened there?
- R: The teniente del barrio who succeeded my grandfather thought he could scare me into getting haircut from him because I hated getting it. I moved so much he clipped my ear, right here. You see that right here...
- M: Yeah, yeah.
- R: ...they would send, me this lady with an adenoid problem...
- M: Yeah.
- R: ...with a huge nose. She would dress up as a boogie lady and light a torch to scare me. But I would swear and say "ukinam" or 'your mother is a bitch' to anyone. She said I would burn your mouth, you know, but I told her I know who you are by calling her by her name, "Baba."

M: You were sassy.

R: I was.

M: Spoiled maybe?

R: I was spoiled...

M: Spoiled.

R: ...so, when I returned home for the first time, when I joined the US Peace Corps in 1967, mainly, especially my elder relatives said that the “na pilyo” or the “rascal” has return. OK, I admitted my “pilyo” reputation, but my grandpa was my father figure growing up.

Politicians in...during...during the season, would bring a generator and a loudspeaker for lighting, right? And because my grandfather was the teniente del barrio, he would host them, right? So they would hold the rally right in front of his house.

M: Oh yeah.

R: So, they'd give speeches, you know. So, when they left, my grandfather would put me on the table and say, now, what did they say?

M: Oh, your grandpa trained you.

R: He says tell them, “You're the smartest kid in the world,” he said. And so, yeah, that man was my first father. He was my father figure.

M: Correct, correct, my goodness.

R: I remember one year in elementary school...

M: This is your mom's father.

R: My mom's father. They didn't have enough kids in school in to start for a 1st grade class.. They didn't have kindergarten and started with 1st grade. So, the teacher was my mother's friend. We need one more. So, they enrolled me with all these older kids. So, I'm in first grade.

So, I think it was in second grade and the teacher wanted someone for Christmas to recite, “The Little Town of Bethlehem” in English.

M: Okay, in English?

R: In English. So, my grandfather would help me. He would wake me up in early in the morning and with the kerosene lantern or “kinke” in Ilocano help me to recite it, He says, “Come on, apo”...or grandson, “you wake up, now,” you know, with the kerosene light.

M: How did he know, how did your grandpa know?

R: He knew how to read English and Spanish. He spoke Spanish and English because he was in Hawai'i.

M: Oh, he learned it here.

R: Yeah. He was here. In fact, during the war, you know he survived? He never left his house. He was the barrio captain. He never left his house. He stayed. And he got along well with the Japanese soldiers perhaps because he could throw a couple of Japanese words here and there. He knew a little about Japanese people.

M: My goodness, so he trained you.

R: Well, he. Like I said, he was my...I used to wonder. I had all these cousins but they all had fathers but I never thought who's my father. I never asked.

R: No one ever told me about my real dad.

M: Your Grandpa was there.

R: If I had a father, I did not hear about it.

M: Enter...

R: Yeah.

M: What's the full name of your grandpa?

R: Guillermo.

M: Guillermo?

R: Guillermo Alonzo.

M: Alonzo. So, he was a local elite at the time.

R: Well, I guess. I think that's the reputation you got when you venture outside of your barrio and ends up in Hawai'i. He came here in 1918...

M: 1918.

R: ...1918. He was probably the first to leave our barrio.

M: Yeah, correct.

R: But they actually were on the east side of Ilocos Norte more on the Cordillera boundary, up the mountain and before migrating to Laoag. I don't know the exact time they move to

Laoag took place but it must have occurred after my mothers birth in Solsona.¹⁰

M: Solsona

R: It's on the foothills of the Cordillera Mountains. I remember as a child going to the area during the rice planting and harvesting seasons referred to as "di daya" or east where the family rice fields were located and where once in a while the upland natives of the mountain region called Itnegs would come to trade with the low-landers in their native attires, i.e., g-strings.

M: Yeah.

R: But, so later on...I should relate just one more story about my mom, too. My mom, I told you was already third year in high school. And about '47 or '48, she received a letter from her high school saying that all those whose studies were interrupted during the war, you are welcome to return back and work and get your diploma.

M: Finish your high school.

R: Yeah. And in those days, it was perfectly acceptable for high school grads to start teaching.

M: Yeah.

R: So, my mother had this...

M: Dream?

R: ...thing...so she wrote to my dad and said, you know, my parents said I should go back and they are willing to take care of Romel. So I would like to have your permission to go back to school and get my diploma. My father said, no.

M: No?

R: And I remember the exact words that my mother said that my father wrote to her, "you and I should devote everything to Romel so that he will be the one to enjoy all the fruits of a good education." I don't know how my mother took that and whether she totally accepted it.

M: Disappointed probably.

R: Yeah, yeah. So, you know, when it was time for me and my sister Alice to go to college, I think my mother thought about that, because a woman cousin that my father and my uncle, here in Hawai'i, helped to get a college was the first in our family to ever get a college degree and became a teacher. And I think my mother, at that point, determined that if

¹⁰ Solsona is about 30 kilometers due east of Darayday, Laoag.

someone else that was helped by her husband to get a college education, why can't my kids? Yeah, so, I think that was the motivation later on, why she and my father pushed so hard for us, when we got to Hawai'i to go to school and do well. Yeah, that's what it is.

But when it was time to leave the Philippines, in '52 and '53 when Filipinos were allowed to become American citizens, somehow my father learned how to read and write a little bit in English and so enrolled in citizenship class and became an American citizen.

M: That takes motivation, too...

R: Yeah.

M: ...you know.

R: So, in '53, he finally got his citizenship and told my mother you guys can come now. I'll bring you guys to America/Hawai'i. And my mother and I for two summers, we'd go to Manilla.

M: What did you do?

R: To work on our immigration papers...

M: Oh.

R: ...luckily we had relatives that lived in Malate...

M: Okay.

R: ...right on Remedios Street, if you're familiar with the street.

M: Yeah, I used to live there.

R: And the embassy is very closed.

M: Yeah, Dewey boulevard at that time.

R: I remember going, getting on the Philippine Rabbit. You know the Philippine Rabbit was the bus, yeah, yeah. So, my mother and I would stay couple of weeks and bring goodies from the province in exchange for room and board. The people that we stayed with were her ninang/ninong...godparents...of my parents.

M: In Malate.

R: Yeah. My apo Urbano Peralta, moved his family to Manila from Daraydaoy. He was a carpenter and bought a little piece of land on Remedios street in Malate and built a home on it.

M: That street, I remember that.

R: Would you believe it, it was kind of a skinny little house. And they had a pig downstairs. And they had someone renting a room next to the pig pen. They had two daughters and who would take me around Manilla. I couldn't speak Tagalog but I could speak a little English. That's how I communicated.

M: But before you came to Hawai'i, what was your mother doing to support you?

R: My mother, my mother was a jack of all trade of all things, you know. My cousins looked up to her. She was kind of like the matriarch, the model for the family. She didn't have a full-time job. But once she learned how to kulot, or hair styling, by curling hair using chemicals, you know, those little bags...

M: Sometimes, it takes electric.

R: ...so, she did that and they would come to the house for her to do that.

M: In Dayrayday?

R: In Dayraday. She, uh, but you know, she was kinda like consultant for both sides of the family, because she had that three year high school education. And so, but insofar as working, she didn't have to work because my father was sending us money regularly enough even for her to purchase several hectares of prime rice fields.

But I also remember going to the market with my grandma and her. I would be sitting in the back. They had a black umbrella and sell my grandfather's vegetables. They would go to the market and sell...

M: Sell the veggies there.

R: ...the veggies and they had an umbrella. And I was bored like heck, but I would be sitting, leaning in the back of them with the umbrella on the top...

M: Spoiled, spoiled boy.

R: ...and when I was hungry, I wanted that sorbetes and ice cream coming...

M: Spoiled boy.

R: But you know, I could read Ilocano better than English.

M: You couldn't?

R: I read, I read Ilocano at a very young age. And my mother would keep me busy with the Banawag. I could read the Banawag, read all the novels, the comic strips Kenkoy or short

story about Limahong, the Chinese pirate. I knew all that story. I was reading. I was reading in the back.

M: Eating your sorbetes.

R: Yeah, eating my ice cream because I was bored, you know. But she tried to enroll me, she says oh, you gotta get in a violin class. You gotta play the violin. So, my cousin, who was taking summer courses at the Saint Williams College in Laoag, I would accompany her during the summer. But in the Philippines, learning how to learn music is not like here, man its different and hard. You gotta know all your notes first and you gotta sing and read the notes, or get whack on the hand and all that kind of stuff, so.

M: Before going to Hawai'i.

R: Before going to Hawai'i.

M: Where did you go to school?

R: I went to school in Darayday.

M: Grade 2, grade 1, grade 2, grade 3, grade 4 maybe.

R: We had Darayday Elementary School.

M: Darayday Elementary School.

M: And how was that? That school...public school?

R: Public School. You went up to the 4 years, 2 teachers sharing the same class, right, for second, third and fourth.

M: And how was the experience there?

R: I knew both teachers, my mother's friends, right? She told them whack my hand because I was a natural a left-hander...

M: Whack your hand, oh.

R: ...yeah, hit with the bamboo stick so that I could write with my right hand. I remember.

M: So, you're still right?

R: Yeah, so, today I'm little ambidextrous. I can use hands both...

M: Good, good.

R: ...basically. I still remember going to school.

- M: Poor thing.
- R: Mrs. Ermitano's class. She's this old, old lady teacher.
- M: Even the name. Ermitano.
- R: She was never married and a real old lady to me. She, you know, I was only 5 years old. So, still had my nap time. So, she told my mother, why don't you bring his...his "induyan" or hammock or a simple swing made of a blanket and ropes?
- M: Induyan?
- R: Yeah, indayun in Ilokano. So, I remember that, you know. And then finally I outgrew that so then and it was all right. But then when I got to third and fourth grade, it was a younger teacher and I was more motivated and made learning more fun.
- M: You remember the name?
- R: Mrs. Duldulao...
- M: Duldulao, Mrs.
- R: ...who married the teniente del barrio who took over from my grandpa.
- M: Okay, okay
- R: But Mrs. Duldulao was my mother's real good friend.
- M: And she was a good teacher?
- M: Yes I liked her a lot. They decided one day, says, oh, on my birthday, you gotta have a big birthday, you gotta invite all the biggies, which she did, you know.
- R: I tell you, Melinda, I still remember that birthday. I don't know whether, how old I was, but, ah,...
- M: It was a big one.
- R: ...yeah, it was a big one and I remember the song, in Ilokano known as "Tumarektek Agpa Kawitan) or in English "Strut Like a Rooster" which depicts the actions of a rooster to attract the attention of a hen.
- M: It was held in the school?
- R: In my grandpa's house
- M: In your house.

R: In my grandpa's house...

M: Grandpa.

R: ...my grandpa's house. And all the...she invited all the superintendent, other school administrators and other teachers. She got into a little pickle of trouble because they made me sing a song, which was quite nasty.

M: What did you sing?

R: Something about a rooster, you know, who courts and mount then a hen.

M: It's a dream. It's a dream.

R: I heard and learned learned that song during the annual Laoag fiesta in February.

M: It's a funny song.

R: It's a funny song. It's kind of like, in Ilocano, you know, when the rooster kinda strikes its feathers.

M: Correct.

R: According to my mom her teacher friend got into trouble because when the Superjntendent told the teacher that's the reason why you're fooling around with the teniente del barrio here in Darayday. You're the hen and he is the rooster. You taught and encouraged your student to sing the song.

M: But you were just a little boy, just kidding.

R: I don't know. You know when I went back, those old people, they reminded me, remember when I learned that song and was singing that all over the place.

M: They had a good laugh?

R: Yeah, that was a good laugh, yeah. But when we came, we finally came in December...

M: You finally came.

R: ...oh, before that, my mother gave me a choice before leaving...

M: All right.

R: ...we were going to go. She says, well, the maestro says, "I think he's ready to play the violin, so why don't you get him a violin?" But while in Manila, I learned to ride the bicycle, right. My mother says, I think January of '54 or whatever, "Well would you rather have a violin or a bicycle?" I said, "Are you kidding me?"

M: The bicycle again.

R: The bicycle of course. And so, but then, when it was time to come, my mother had second thoughts. She didn't want to come. My mother did not want to leave her mother...

M: She's leaving.

R: ...and my father finally, after several months of back and forth, my father said, "Well, if you don't wanna come, then forget you. You guys stay there and I'm going to move to America, you know."

M: Mainland?

R: I suppose America means...

M: Mainland.

R: So, my mother packed. We're gonna go.

M: Why, was she having second thoughts?

R: Well, you know, the daughter is raised to take care of her mother, right?

M: Uh, but the grandparents, what did they say to your mom?

R: You gotta go.

M: They said, "you gotta go."

R: My grandfather says so, I remember.

M: Oh, that's kinda. That's heart-breaking.

R: So, rather than going on a ship, you know, lot of, if you ask a lot of the people that migrated about the same time in the '50s, they always got on the President Cleveland. My mother can't take boat rides.

M: So, what did she do?

R: Pan Am

M: She flew?

R: We flew on Pan Am.

M: My goodness.

R: You have this boy from Dayrayday who has seen a plane only on the ground, only in the air, and traveled only on a Rabbit bus and only been to Manila twice.

- M: Wow, you were about nine, nine years old, yeah, wow.
- R: I remember still my grandpa and my grandma with her “pandering” with her Ilokano skirt at the airport in Manila. My grandpa, he had this bolo knife in hidden in his Ilocano shirt and pantalon or pants. He looked very Ilocano. And then my grandma, my grandma, is crying and crying. She’s telling my mom, “I’m not going to see you again. You’re going to leave me. I’m going to die without you.” And my mother was really constricted, you know...
- M: Wow, yeah.
- R: ...so, this was in November of 1954.
- M: ’54?
- R: Yeah. And so, the voyage took 2 nights. You believe that on Pan Am? First overnight you land on Guam in the morning. You leave 10 pm Manila time and you land in Guam in the morning then onto to Midway.
- M: Midway.
- R: And then, another night, you land in Wake Island.
- M: Oh, you had to go through all that.
- R: Yeah, three different stops.
- M: Oh, my goodness.
- R: I didn’t know what the heck was happening. All I know here I am in this airplane.
- M: Were you happy in the airplane? What was your, what was your...
- R: I didn’t know nothing. All I remember was like on Wake Island, we were put on a little bus from the airport. Taken you to a hanger. And served finger food like little hot dogs that I have never seen before.
- M: You deal with other people or just you and your mom.
- R: Oh yeah, yeah. full, you know, full plane.
- M: All pinoy coming to Hawai‘i?
- R: Everything was a blur. I never saw anyone except this white man who offered me oranges.
- M: Oh.
- R: So, we land early in the morning, 5:00 here in Honolulu at the airport.

M: And who was there to meet you?

R: My father came to meet us.

M: All right. Did you recognize him?

R: I did not know how he look like, and I don't remember exactly any pictures I saw of him...

M: Yeah, he left when you were one year old.

R: ...any pictures I saw.

M: That's really interesting, yeah.

R: He arrived in April 1946 in Maui but later moved to Honolulu and was staying with neighbors from Darayday. So, he was staying with...do you remember down in Kalihi where there was a Luzon Market?

M: Luzon?

R: Luzon Market.

M: I don't remember that.

R: On Gulick Street?

M: Gulick, I remember Gulick.

R: You remember where Paul's Bakery...that was on Gulick Street. The market was near it.

M: Gulick Street, okay.

R: But my father was staying with them because they were neighbors in Darayday. In fact, this lady, you know, was the one that convinced my dad to move to Honolulu during the strike of '46 began. She told him you're not going to find work, ading, you gotta move, come to Honolulu with me. So, my father did. But then, he moved back to the Big Island to be with his brother after that. So, when we finally came, he was living on the Big Island.

M: All right. So, he was, was living in Pa'auilo at the time?

R: Yeah, he stayed with his brother, his older brother that came back in the 20's.

M: My god, really, all this cycle of migration is pretty interesting.

R: Yeah, yeah, so, that uncle, by the way, died two years before we arrived because he fell off a truck that ran him over. So, he's buried on the Big Island. So my father was the only one remaining in Hawai'i. The ironic part is that among all his brothers, he's the only one that ended up living in Hawai'i and bringing his family and raising a family, yeah. We're the

only Dela Cruzes of our original family that are living in Hawai'i today.

M: Eh?

R: So he comes with his neighbor. I remember getting in a car. His friend says, oh, son, barok, he says, this is our nuang which is the carabao in Ilocano. I'm looking for a water buffalo. Nuang is water buffalo in Ilocano. He said, "this is our water buffalo, this is our nuang, the coche, the car..."

M: The car.

R: "...I'm looking for the water buffalo, right?"

M: He took it literally. Yeah, he said this is our water buffalo. I said "oh, okay." So, we stayed in Honolulu couple of days. We went to visit an uncle who was my mother's oldest brother who married and living in Ewa...

M: Okay.

R: ...and they had couple of kids already.

M: What was his job?

R: He was the oldest brother of my mother. He was in Ewa.

M: What was his job?

R: Cane cutter.

M: Cane cutter, okay.

R: His name was, you know, Anselmo.

M: Anselmo.

R: Anselmo Alonzo.

M: Alonzo. Ewa. He was the last remaining of the Alonzos in Hawai'i because another uncle who was younger, who came with him, returned home and later died in a truck accident.

M: Is that all his relatives now?

R: Oh, we're all relatives. We're all Alonzos. We all, they all, you know. So, anyway...

M: Interesting. okay.

R: ...so, we went to visit my mother's brother, Anselmo, who was married but his wife was not present, but I remember seeing all these kids younger than me...my cousins.

M: Your uncle's wife?

R: Yeah, three kids and, but their mother, my Aunt was not around.

M: Why?

R: For a reason I don't know. She was previously married with kids and I later learned that she ran off with my uncle which I later learned was termed as "coboy, coboy." Anyway...

M: She was, ah...

R: ...yeah, she was married before. Accordingly, later on, I was told that maybe she was about run with another man again. You know what my uncle did? He took the entire family to the Philippines. And, so there is this crossover. My mother and I visit him. I get to meet all my cousins who are younger than me. They were still in diapers, you know. And they're all American born, right.

At sixty-five, my uncle retired. He took them to the Philippines. And I end up in Hawai'i. So, they were educated and raised in the Philippines. They couldn't even speak Ilocano when they got there.

M: Was the wife much younger?

R: Oh, they're about the same age. In fact, my father knew her when they were all growing up during the war in the Philippines.

M: She was just...

R: My father knew who she was. And so, there's this crossover. So, we fly to the Big Island after that. My mother, at that point, she tells her brother, if you're having trouble with your wife, she said, I'll take all three kids with me to the Big Island. I'll take 'em all because her brother told her of their marital problems.

M: She was a little bit loose or free.

R: So, my mother didn't even know what she was getting into on the Big Island. So, we get to the Big Island.

M: Okay, so you went with your father, mother and you to the Big Island.

R: To the Big Island.

M: How did you go?

R: By plane.

M: By plane. Hawaiian Air, you know...

M: Okay.

R: ...the propeller type, not jet. Once in a while, they still had to actually push down the propeller or the plane to start. So, we get there, and there and met by a friend in my father's car that I remember was a green 1952 Dodge. You know, we drove.

M: Pa'auilo?

R: ...and settled and lived in a three bedroom house.

M: Okay, that was the house you pointed to me. That was a different one.

R: Three bedroom house. The thing was that there was a single man living in the two rooms room and the third was my father's room.

M: So the three of you in one bedroom.

R: The three of us in one room...

M: In one room.

R: ...and a shared kitchen and bathroom.

M: Shared.

R: We shared everything with this these two single men. And it so happened that this is November 1954.

M: '54.

R: That month it was raining practically every day, I remember. And then snow started to fall on Mauna Kea, white mountain. It was cold. It was raining. My mother was crying every day. She says to my father why did you bring us over here? Why? Why? I wanna go home. Send us home.

M: It was more comfortable back home.

R: Yeah, and it's cold and it's...you know...

M: What did your father say? It's hard. It's hard.

R: I don't remember what he said or did but I don't think he was happy either.

M: What was he doing? Was he cutting cane still at the time?

R: Yeah, they were all cane cutters. You know, I mean...

M: It's hard, hard life.

R: The plantation was on the verge of the transition to mechanization at this time, you know, so.

M: Yeah, you're okay.

R: Yeah. And so, that's when I enrolled in school. I remember going to Pa'auilo School with my mom, accompanied and driven by Auntie Martina Baraoidan...

M: Baraoidan.

R: Baraoidan are distant relatives. They owned Pa'auilo Filipino store, and she was kind of like the matriarch of Pa'auilo, I guess.

M: This is now. Tell me the connection with the Baraoidan family.

R: Baraoidan. We have some distant relations because my maternal side of their come from the same place in the Philippines in Solsona and Piddig located, on the eastern borders of Ilocos Norte.

M: Is this the mother's side? The Baraoidan?

R: My parent's side, my mother...

M: Mother?

R: ...mother, yeah.

M: How come, your mother side is really well connected there.

R: Baraoidan and Alonzo. The Baraoidan were living in Lahaina¹¹ by the way when the 1937 strike took place. Uncle Catalino Baraoidan kinda led a group of people moving out of Lahaina. They were chased out from their homes, yeah, during strike, you know, the Filipino-led strike in Maui. So dozens of them moved to the Big Island...

M: Really?

R: ...and re settled in Hilo and Pa'auilo about three or five.

M: Baraoidans...is that Adrialina Baraoidan's relation?

R: She's related to us by that name...

M: Related? Okay.

R: Her father and my parents were acquainted back in in the Philippines.

11 Area in west Maui, former whaling port and capital of the Hawaiian Islands (1820-1845) and, beginning in 1820s, an area developed for commercial sugar cane plantations.

- M: You did.
- R: Oh yeah, my parents sold a piece of land to him. He was one of the people that my mother said well, we don't need this land anymore. So, Adrialina's father...
- M: Father.
- R: ...wanted to buy the land.
- M: This is in Pa'auilo.
- R: No.
- M: Back home?
- R: Back home.
- M: Oh, that's the one that Adrialina visited? Yeah?
- R: Yeah, yeah.
- M: Oh, you're all related. So, what happened to you? Um, let's see.
- R: So, I enrolled in school.
- M: Yes with some English, when you went?
- R: I enrolled in school.
- M: What school first? Pa'auilo?
- R: Pa'auilo School.
- M: Elementary school or just called school? Pa'auilo School?
- R: Yeah. Pa'auilo...Pa'auilo Elementary and Intermediate School.
- M: Pa'auilo.
- R: That school goes from kindergarten to 9th, one of the very few places. They still do it today. Then you go to high school.
- M: Where did you go to high school?
- R: Honoka'a High School, yeah.
- M: Honoka'a, oh, okay.
- R: We had to drive seven miles to get there, the high school.

- M: So, I can picture yourself as a little boy entering school for the first time Pa‘auiilo Elementary School. So, how was it? How did you adjust? How did they treat you?
- R: You know, the class was taught by this Hawaiian man. His name was Henry Keomalu...
- M: Keomalu.
- R: Mr. K...old Hawaiian man. I later learned that he graduated from a normal school. He came to school everyday with a white shirt and a necktie...
- M: Oh, how nice.
- R: ...and, uh, and I remember...
- M: This is. This is grade, what grade now?
- R: Grade 4, okay. But I was actually in 5th grade in the Philippines...
- M: So you were, okay.
- R: ...so, they look at my birthday and they said, no...
- M: Too young.
- R: ...gotta go with the 1945 group, yeah...
- M: Okay, yeah.
- R: ...otherwise I would have been a year ahead. But I think that was the best thing because the class was more of my peers despite I was advanced in some subjects, i.e multiplication and division. I was more advanced than lot of the other kids in arithmetics.
- M: Why, you learned it from back home.
- R: Yeah. I could also speak a little English, no matter. It was a matter of I remember. My aunty took me with my mother to the Principal’s office. He tried to ask me questions and I responded to all “Yes, sir” or “No, Sir. This Principal was also a Hawaiian man, Mr. Ezer Mathews...with had a moustache and curly hair. I was totally afraid of Mr. Matthews, but he welcomed and brought me to Mr. K.’s class.
- M: Mr. K. how do you spell that?
- R: K – e – o – m – a – l – u.
- M: All right, okay, good.
- R: By the way, he’s related to Alice’s husband, this man. He was one of the few Hawaiians who became a teacher and came from that Pa‘auiilo. Anyway, Mr. Keomalu sits me right in

front of the class, right behind this girl name R.F. who was Filiipino-Hawaiian girl, R.F. and she sat behind me. And to this day, I always refer as her as my “ninang” or godmother.

M: Why?

R: She took care of me.

M: She did!

R: She took...you know, she helped me out, kinda tell me where the bathroom was, you know. I didn't know where the bathroom was...I didn't know even how to use a bathroom. I squat on it, you know. I put my leg on top. I didn't know you had to sit down. I said that's too cold. But anyway...

M: She's nice.

R: I didn't know there was a boys and girls bathroom. I would chase this one girl who teased me. There was this Hawaiian girl that would tease me. I'd chased her in the bathroom. Boy, why that got me into trouble, you know. To the point where Mr. K. gave me the rubber hose, water hose he kept it folded in his desk drawer and whacked my leg. I said oh, “Why, what did I do?” He tried to explain to me that the girls' bathroom and the boys' bathroom were different.

M: He did not explain?

R: No, and if he did, I did not understand...

M: You have to know.

R: ...that there was boy and girl bathroom. We had bathrooms.

M: There was no ESL. No one explained.

R: No, no, no. I was the first...

M: Immigrant there.

R: ...yeah, in the school.

M: But how many Filipino boys or Filipino girls?

R: All locals, right? All local born.

M: Local born pinoyos.

R: And they the ones giving me a hard time too, our neighbors, you know, chasing and teasing me.

M: They were the ones.

R: One time, because I took off my shoes and walking barefoot. And this one guy took my shoes and threw it in the cane field, you know. But later on, I stood my ground and gave challenge.

M: Yeah, did they bully you?

R: Oh yeah, yeah. They bullied me, teased me.

M: This is the local born...pinoys, pinoys.

R: You know, boys and girls. But I grew up fast and we became friends till today. And I kinda tell them now. I said did you remember when you guys did this to me, you know?

M: What did they say? So, how did you, I guess, how did you overcome all this? How did you overcome all this? That's hard.

R: Man, I learned pidgin English fast and soon I got along with them.

M: That's the first step, yeah, uh huh.

R: And I had no one to really to turn to for comfort...

M: Did you tell 'em?

R: Because if there were other Filipino immigrants, you'd probably would stick together with them...

M: Yeah, but you were the only one.

R: ...and try. But I had none of that. I was forced to play with them and to deal with them. And I would say by the end of '55 when my sister Alice was born in December of '55

M: '55.

R: I was pretty well acculturated.

M: You were acculturated...integrated.

R: Integrated...

M: Yeah, wow.

R: ...and, uh, you know, the immersion was kind of swift. I said I guess you're forced to do it. And pretty soon, some of these local kids would be hanging around me at my house. They wanted to do things with me...

M: With you?

R: ...because I could, I was teaching things that we did in the Philippines that they didn't know anything about, you know, like I could make things from wood, making my own top, you know...

M: Oh, yeah.

R: ...and things like that, but I had trouble with my Dad.

M: Your Dad back then. Your Dad?

R: Of course.

M: He was strict?

R: Well, he didn't know how to handle me.

M: Because you were sassy back home.

R: I challenged him. One time, I was pointed my bow and arrow at him , you know.

M: Why?

R: Well, he angered me about something. And then he grabbed the stem of a hedge plant. He whacked me on my back, on my leg and my ankle. And one of the men that lived with us, they had to stop him from beating me up bad.

M: Because he didn't know you, because he didn't know.

R: Because he thought that I was being unrespectfull I guess. So, my uncle and my aunty, they all came down, and told him, "Benigno, you can't do this. You gonna end up in jail you beat up your son like that, you know." And so, he taught me a lesson, you know. So, you know, I buckled down, I guess, after that.

M: And your Mom? It must have been hard, uh, the adjusting.

R: Yeah, my Mom, but the adapting was kinda harder for her you know. One time, she was, I guess '55 sometime, she was, she was walking around the camp and she saw these Japanese men sitting on the bench with a cap on with full beard. She panicked.

M: She panicked?

R: Yes, I guess the man reminded her of the Japanese that would come to the village in Dayrayday....

M: You have to talk a little bit loud.

R: ...to ask for food for, you know. She panicked. She thought it was one of the soldiers, that they had come to Hawai'i. My father had to kind of settle her down and said these are Japanese people from Hawai'i. They're not the same people in the Philippines. But she suffered that trauma, you know. But when Alice was born, it was all, you know, she was more occupied and began to adapt better. And I was the big brother. I was kind of like her helper.

M: And your father maybe mellowed down?

R: Yeah, yeah. And it wasn't years later on that we were able to get our own house because once we had a family, then you were entitled to one of your own based on seniority. We waited, I think, maybe before I got to the 7th, 9th grade that we finally had our own house...

M: All right.

R: ...and move on. But there was one single man that lived with us all those years, for five years. His name was Florentino Aguillion, a man from Cagayan.¹² He never married. He never had girlfriends and became a close part of my family...

M: Part of your family, uh huh.

R: ...yeah, and he was there til the end...

M: Oh, how nice.

R: ...when I was going to school and he died, and had to go to St. Francis.¹³ He was undergoing dialysis, you know, but he was part of our family.

M: Were there other single old men...

R: Oh, yeah.

M: ...in the community, because that's the feature, uh, of the plantation?

R: Yes, yeah. This man was the closest to us because he was my, Alice's godfather, ninong. He came to Honolulu when Jodean and I got married. I told him Tata Sato, you gotta come to our wedding.

M: What's his name? What's the full name?

R: Saturnino. But his real name was Florentino.

¹² Cagayan is the Luzon province next to Ilocos Norte to the east.

¹³ St. Francis Hospital, located in Nu'uuanu, Honolulu, was founded, in 1927, to serve anyone in need of medical help regardless of creed or race. During its 82 years, it pioneered many programs in response to the needs of the people.

M: Florentino?

R: He took somebody else's papers but with the same surname of Aguillion.

M: Florentino Aguillion.

R: Yeah. Can you imagine, a man who came in 1924 sometime and came to Honolulu the first time since arriving to attend the wedding. So, Jodean knows him. He stayed close us for the rest of his life. And I still go to his grave site today to remember him.

M: So, you had a good academic record in your elementary and then intermediate and then high school?

R: I would say, yes. I would say that I was unafraid to do new things.

M: You were fearless.

R: I played sports and I became very good at it.

M: All right. What kind of sports?

R: Basketball, baseball. I could run fast. I could talk. From the time I started, from the time I was able to speak, I started, you know...

M: Okay, talking.

R: ...I was able to talk. I think it goes it came from those days...

M: Probably...

R: ...with my grandfather who had dreams of me becoming an "abogado" or "lawyer.? In fact I had this notion had early on that I was going to law school and perhaps become a politician.

In intermediate school, I remember I was in the varsity basketball team. We had our own basketball team from. I was one of the few from 7th grade that would be part of the team. There were all these big kids. I remember being unfearful that one of the best players was roughing me up. And I just stood up against him and he resented it. And he was about to beat me up.

M: Oh.

R: Luckily one of the older boys had to to pull us apart, and you know, to this day, that guy drives taxi around town, I always thank him. Remember M., I said, you saved me from A.

And we would have this political contest for student government, right. In seventh grade, you run for office and one of the features is you go and give a speech in the library. You have a podium and you give a speech but you have to have a campaign manager. I asked

the joker in our school to be my campaign manager, this Portuguese boy, it was the funniest thing.

So, I go there. I win, you know, and so, I'm the Vice President. The same thing the following year. So, I became president of student government in intermediate school.

M: In intermediate school...imagine.

R: And, but academically, it was only the Japanese students that did best. Because there there was really no one to help me at home buckle down at home or tutoring me in math and sciences, for instance. Math and science were my weak spot. I knew that. I didn't have Jodean as a math and science teacher which would have would help me greatly. My mother and Dad couldn't help.

M: Was there any? Did you feel, like, perhaps you know, perhaps the accounts of some of the local Filipino Americans, they felt very low self-esteem and the teachers were putting them down. Is that? What was your experience in the...?

R: During my intermediate years from 4 to 9 at Pa'auilo School, I really didn't feel any of that.

M: You did feel it...did not. Did not, okay.

R: I didn't really didn't feel it although I sensed that amongst the students that they think they were better than you because you're Filipino. You're an immigrant. The teachers, you know, I would say especially the principal actually took me under his wings.

M: And he was?

R: Yeah, he was this man named Mr. Y.K....

M: Okay.

R: ...who later. Later they called him called him Jackson. I don't know if he was a Jacksonian in philosophy and history and in later years I read that he was part of of one of the State's Constitutional Convention.

M: All right.

R: But he took me under his wing and tried to help me a little me with science and history. He told me, "You want some side money? Why don't you come and take care of my yard and I'll pay you." You know, he tried me to get me into the sciences, but was I wasn't into it.

M: Any your teachers encouraged you? They were good to you?

R: They encouraged me to go to school, but then, there was...there was this family, Okinawan Japanese family...the T.T. family

M: T okay.

R: Mr. T.T. was an Okinawan, who was born too late to be a part of the 442nd but always wanted to go but he was too young. He was in high school at that time, I...when I arrived, he and his family were in Honolulu being trained by HSPA because HSPA began to kinda train local guys to have higher level jobs. Filipinos were not there yet. But they were being introduced into the machinery so that they could move from cane cutting and then they would eliminate cane cutting, by the way, and then it was totally mechanized afterwards.

But anyway, the family came back the winter of '55. They had three boys. R, who was my, you know, my peer. We were born together. His formal name is T. He had a brother, Pi and then Barney. And the mother would encourage me to come to their house to join the cub scouts, boy scouts, and then to work on projects. And I don't know, Melinda, whether she was monitoring me regarding my progress, because she knew that her son, R would be my competitors and wanted to monitor my progress or to help both us together grow together.

But then, maybe it just goes to show you that, you know, they gave me that opportunity that I would go to their house and I see what they had and to work on projects. Both of them were high school grads. But the father, Mr T.T., supervised my dad. He was the harvesting superintendent. My father was a...a cane truck driver and previously he was only a cane cutter and manual laborer.

M: And that's an improvement from the field.

R: Yeah, that's what the union did in 1946. The '46 strike allowed for collective bargaining agreement and seniority as a factor for promotion as well as to provide training program for the workers. And that's how the Filipinos moved. Otherwise, when they didn't have that... before that, you know, the plantation would have 5,000...10,000 cane cutters because it was a labor intensive job. But once they moved into mechanization, they developed harvesting equipment that could harvest cane rapidly and efficiently.

But this man would tell my father, "You send your boy to school. You make sure that he goes to school."

M: He said that, oh, okay.

R: And then you talk about the Clinton book, about the village, and he's telling my father to encourage me to go to school because I was a good student and athlete.

I remember, too, the...the old Filipino men, when I worked the summers, I would work in the fields with them. We set own with the toscani¹⁴ or tobacco in their mouth and never eat

14 Toscani seems to refer to a cigarette-sized and shaped cigar. Originally, the Toscano cigar is a brand of Italian cigars manufactured in Tuscany, Italy. They are made with fermented Kentucky tobacco. The brand was established in the late 19th century.

lunch for a long time. I'd say we should take our full hour or go to nap, but these guys, because are in contract, the more they do, the more money they make, right? So, they would tell me you're gonna be the one to get an education...

M: They told you, encouraged you.

R: ...and represent us, yeah. And you know Melinda, that carried through my life. I was so afraid to fail.

M: I, you were afraid to fail?

R: It seems like I was carrying the torch for all these sakadas out there. They said,...

M: You'd be the one.

R: ...“We didn't go to school. You don't want to work here. You don't want to be like us.”

M: Hard, huh?

R: To me, that was heavy, that was a heavy burden for me for all my life. That was it.

M: Did your father also tell you that? Or...

R: He never did, but I knew it was there, you know, and my grandparents in earlier days, of course.

M: And your mother?

R: My mother? My mother too, you know, she never said...it directly you know, to go to college for guy like me who grew up in the plantation was a given and sensed it from her especially.

M: At Honoka'a, no one, the counselor encouraged you to go, the teachers?

R: Well, they did and there was no overt racism or discrimination...but I sensed that it was there from teachers and student peers.

M: In Honoka'a?

R: But before we go to the high school, you know, we have graduations at ninth grade before going to Honoka'a High. So, we decorated the whole Hongwanji Hall in Pa'auilo. And we have...I have a picture of me and R on one side and I'm on the other side. We had twenty-seven in class. But R was the valedictorian and I was without academic recognition because my grades just average. But when we became a state...

M: '59...

R: ...in March of '59, that's when we graduated, by the way, there was a teacher from Honoka'a...Mrs. A.H. who was a home economic teacher and English teacher. She had us write what statehood meant to us. This is April/ March of '59.

I wrote...I don't know where I got the notion from, but I said that becoming a State was the coming together of all the different ethnic groups together like a rainbow to form your 50th State of Hawai'i. And our principal, Mr K. and...and Mrs. H., decided that I would speak after the valedictorian's speech and I would read this statehood paper...

M: The essay.

R: ...that I wrote in front of the graduating class and the community. And I read it and I still remember the applause. I remember keeping that.

M: Essay.

R: We wrote it on a butcher paper because Mrs. H. got us the butcher paper. But that...that, that, kinda made my mom and my dad so proud. There's a picture of Alice and I. If you ever go to our heritage center, there's a picture of Alice, and I, and my mom. By the way, my dad never came to the graduation but he refused to attend my athletic events. He thought that it was not worth my effort.

M: Too bad, okay.

R: But he didn't mind forcing me to work and care for our pigs and making bagoong with him and my uncle...

M: That's right, bagoong¹⁵ business.

R: ...you know. But, he didn't have any problem with that. He was always working, you know, and kind of providing money and food for our table. But when I went to high school, Honoka'a, all the feeder schools in the community go to Honoka'a.

M: Yeah, that's a bigger area.

R: We played against them in basketball and baseball and things like that. So, those guys in Honoka'a think they were it and, of course, Hilo High ruled all. But the feeder schools in Honoka'a, the guys that went in, always stuck together, certain parts of the school.

M: So, you had a group now.

R: Yeah, well, the Pa'auilo guys...

M: The Pa'auilo guys.

15 Bagoong is a Philippine condiment made from fermented fish, krill or shrimp paste and salt.

R: ...then you get the Kukuihaele¹⁶ gang, the Waimea gang and...

M: Oh, okay.

R: So, we would, we got along and united in mutual support in political school contest. Student government, vice-president campaign, 10th grade...

M: You ran, again?

R: Yup, I ran again, won again, beat R. again. So, I'm vice-president of student government. Same thing in senior, I become president in student government.

M: You became president? Of student government?

R: Yeah, of student government.

M: So you were able to get the support of the student body.

R: I knew how to politic, all my feeder school friends. The feeder schools were my friends. And supporters.

M: And so the atmosphere...the same question that I'm going to ask you, did you feel any encouragement or discouragement? How was the discrimination? I guess I just used the word discrimination, that they always use.

R: To tell you the truth, I really never did experience it outright. We had a vice-principal that was very helpful, but our school counselor was not. But, well, for student government, luckily, we had this haole teacher, whose husband was a supervisor, superintendent for the plantation, Mrs. D.B.

M: Mrs...?

R: Mrs. B...and was this old haole lady and kinda she was the advisor to the student government, so she gave me a lot of boost, but then she retired later on, I think in my senior year, she wasn't around.

But the counselor was a Japanese woman. Her daughter was in my class. They ran a store in town. I told her that I wanted to be a lawyer, you know?

M: Okay.

R: Rather than pointing me into that direction to to prepare me for it, she said you should be a teacher and encouraged me instead to go to a state teacher's college in Kansas someplace. Then we had this this new English teacher who used to wear a sweater in the winter most. He recently from graduated from Colorado State Teacher's College in Greeley and

16 An area north of Honoka'a above Waipi'o Valley on Hawai'i Island.

graduated from graduated Honoka'a High School from whom I sensed some racist sentiments.

M: Is it haole guy?

R: Japanese.

M: Japanese.

R: Graduated from the school.

M: Graduated, graduated from Honoka'a and then came back to teach.

R: Yeah, so that was, that was kind of unusual.

M: What do you mean? How did he show it?

R: You know, uh, I remember. I returned into his homeroom after a political rally and I was running for president, right? I gave my usual stump. I am in homeroom and he tells me...cornered me and he says, "You meant all that stuff in your speech, you mean all that..."

M: He said.

R: ...what you said.?" What could I say? I'm just trying to get votes. Here's this guy asking me if I really meant the things that I said.

But I won again, right, well later on, but another negative experience with him and me...and was in his English class, he said, "Oh, we're going to have a writing contest with the Voice of Democracy. You should write an essay and the school winner will go to the state and then nationwide if successful."

M: Yeah. VOA or Voice of America.

R: I won the essay contest for Honoka'a High School.

M: You did?

R: At least, I was selected.

M: What did you write?

R: About the meaning of democracy and the importance of defending it. I thought about the sacrifices that people make for democracy and what it means to be a democratic society and all that kind of stuff. So, you know, our counselor, Mrs. U. and...and Mr. CH., we met and both worked with me and practiced it. We taped it...we send it to a radio station as specified.

One month, two months, three months, I never heard nothing. Later on, she comes to tell me, she says, "Oh, sorry, Romel, we sent the tape to the wrong place, to the wrong address."

M: Gee.

R: I told my mother that and my mother says was so mad. She said, "I think they don't think they like you, you know." To this day, I don't know...

M: What happened.

R: ...what really happened. But I suspected later on, Melinda, I think, this is what happened. I did not become an American citizen until I was in my second year of college. I chose not to.

M: Because?

R: Because I didn't think it was that important to do so.

M: Oh, okay.

R: So, I was wondering, you know, if it was because...you know, the Voice of Democracy is sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution. You have to be an American citizen. They did not bother to ask me. Everybody thought I was an American citizen all these years simply, because, you know, I was so Americanized, I don't know.

M: But even, so, they could, should tell you the reason.

R: But I never asked. I never asked. But I suspect that might have been the case.

M: Probably.

R: And they never bothered because they just assumed. Funny thing, one man, years...many years later and attending a meeting and I encountered my English teacher who was working on Molokai.

M: You did? This one who is sort of pretending.

R: Yeah. By the way, he was also the basketball coach and he went on vacation, and I was promoted to the varsity and when he came back, he took me out, yeah.

M: He took you out?

R: Yeah, out of varsity.

M: There's a little bit of something there.

R: I don't know. He put somebody in my place that was the one of one of his buddies, you

know.

M: Those things happen. You don't know if it's personal or...

R: Yeah, yeah. so, you know, I was recommended on the School Advisory Council by Ben Junasa, and I was in Molokai to attend a meeting of the Department of Education...Board of Education.

M: But what about the other teachers in Honoka'a. They must have been supportive of you?

R: Generally yeah, that was. Oh, the baseball coach liked me. He called me the Manila flyer.

M: Okay, and he is Japanese, Japanese yeah?

R: Mr WK.

R: He called me the Manila flyer because I didn't know how to stop when I ran the bases.

M: So, this is the baseball.

R: Yeah, baseball. And I had a teacher named...tough-talking lady looking, boy, teacher...history...Ms. H. who encouraged me to loved history and open my eyes to possibly joining the US Peace Corps later in life.

M: So, it's really hard to generalize, isn't it?

R: No.

M: It's usually one or two.

R: But you know, the students, some of the students, they think they were better than you, you know, me being Filipino.

M: Correct, yeah.

R: You would never, you know, although it was breaking down, I think, you know, nowadays that we get to our reunion, you know, school reunion, I see some of the students.

M: I guess it varies. If you have a very strong self-esteem in the first place...

R: Yeah, yeah.

M: ...those things don't matter.

R: No. It's really, you know, the point was, nah, I said, "I can do it, that kind of stuff." But just to tell you know how unprepared I was. When it was time, you know, I don't know what a PSAT or SAT was. It was really. I never

M: The counselor did not go out to help and prepare for it ... minimal effort.

R: Never took the effort out of her way...

M: Effort.

R: ...to explain to you how to take the test.

M: See, that's the one that's really...

R: I'm a poor test taker...I will be the one to admit to you. I didn't know how to take standardized test. To better your scores...I didn't know how to make educated guesses. I applied to the University of Hawai'i as a last minute. I did it last minute.

And in those days and we are we are talking about 1963. Despite all the extra activities that I did, which I thought was an indicator of your extracurricular and leadership activities, ability, my application was rejected.

M: In Hawai'i?

R: Mānoa.

M: UH Mānoa?

R: Yeah, Mānoa rejected me. So, as a last bit of measure, I ended up at Chaminade.

M: Chaminade, oh, okay.

R: They were taking anybody, you know. So, that's how I got there.

M: That should be our next topic – your college, your education and your, later on, the middle part of your life. But I wanna ask something, that, you remember Lani was telling me about? Lani.

R: Yeah, yeah...up in Kohala, right.

M: Because she lived there too in Pa'auilo. And she was talking about the class or social structure there. And I think, you mentioned it one time, about the managers. Did you sense it growing up? The managers were there. The workers were there.

R: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

M: So, it was there.

R: You know, that highway, when you pass Pa'auilo where Pa'auilo Store is, see the plantation manager's house is right there, right. All the homes on that highway were all supervisors'...

M: Right, so the housing.

R: ...but in the back, more the inner side, were the haoles usually, there was only one Japanese family I remember living over there. Yeah, and the oldest homes in Pa'auilo was where the older Filipinos lived and referred to as the old camp...

M: Old camp

R: ...old camp, and it was old. It was, dates back to the '20s. Their house was worse than our house. Our houses were built right after the 1924 strike, I think, in the '30's. Despite the fact that Manlapit did not accomplish what he wanted, I think there was a sense that they had to do something to make the life of the workers better, you know, building them gyms and giving them better homes.

So, the homes had indoor plumbing in some of those homes or on the side. Whereas in the old camp, you gotta go, you still had to bring your can of soap to go to the bathroom. In fact, when I was growing up, I remember this old Filipino man, Tata Julio, we called him. He lived in the old camp. So, when they came back from work, he would put his robe. He had a can and he carried his soap and his brush and slipper and, in his bathrobe, he would walk about a hundred yards to the bathroom in the main road in the camp and go to the banyo, you know.

But we had, I would say, indoor plumbing where we are, indoor plumbing is, well, I tell you, it's at the side of the house. The back step usually is where the bathroom was...

M: All right.

R: ...so, you had to climb up the stairway to go to the main house and there's the front doors that, you know

M: You had water, or...

R: Yeah, we had running water. By then, we had running water, yeah, yeah. But, and even when I moved, I guess before that, they actually placed people in, with other ethnic groups, which, you know, to many, they think it was racial thing, but I think people preferred it that way.

M: They preferred it.

R: Yeah, that was preferable.

M: Sense of security?

R: Yeah, yeah. By the time, we, uh, you know, I was there, the housing was being placed. There was a lot more inter-ethnic marriages, so it didn't really matter where they lived, you know. The homes were now being assigned.

- M: You mean inter-ethnic...Japanese and Filipino intermarrying each other?
- R: Yeah, yeah.
- M: How about the haole and Asian?
- R: Oh, never, never. You didn't see any haole-Filipino local marriages, you know.
- M: So among the Asians?
- R: Yeah, the Asian, Japanese, Filipino...
- M: Hawaiians?
- R: ...Portuguese-Filipino, and Hawaiian-Filipino. And then, you know, when you move to a plantation, right up to the '60's and '70's, you know, people didn't make a choice to go work on a plantation.
- M: Correct
- R: Plantation was pretty selective too who they allowed, you know.
- M: So, we'll rest. Are you okay?
- R: Is that all right with you, where we stop?
- M: Very good. I will review it. If there's some more questions related to this interview, we'll follow it up tomorrow. But tomorrow is the middle part of your life experiences. Thank you.