

30th Anniversary Filipino EDSA/People Power Essay-Writing Contest February 25, 2016

Sponsored by Philippine American Writers and Artists (PAWA) along with the Philippine Consulate General in San Francisco, the EDSA People Power@30 Committee, and their community partners (ABS-CBN International / TFC, Inquirer.net, and Philippine American Press Club).

First Place: Josh Severn

To My Grandparents,

How did you feel when Marcos' government fell in 1986? What went through your mind when you heard the news? Were you happy that a regime that took so much from the people was gone? As *Ilocanos*, were you upset that a man who began with big promises for the people was unfairly slandered by opposition forces and unlawfully deposed? Were Ferdinand and Imelda your John and Jackie Kennedy? Were the people right in their revolution? What did your families say when they sent letters, or did they mostly ask for money? I wish I had asked before you went to God's side. I knew of you, and spent time with you, but never had the chance to really know you. I was so young, and knew nothing of death. I felt you would be around for a long time.

I wish I could have asked you about your life in the Philippines. As a young child, I never learned about our Filipino culture and our *Ilocano* language. Now that you are both gone, I'll never be able to recapture your unique stories. As an adult, I can now read about the conditions Filipinos faced in early twentieth century America. Having read *America is in the Heart*, I can imagine a little of what you, *lolo*, went through on your journey to Hawaii and California. Did you, like so many *pinoy*s, come to the United States in hopes of a better life? Did you see so little opportunity in your home that you felt a long voyage across the sea would open the doors for your success? What made you decide to purchase one hundred acres of Central Coast farmland with your brothers? How were you able to purchase the land, at a time when Filipinos were still looked at with suspicion and prejudice? So many questions, and yet so few answers.

How did you feel about your children? Were they raised to be wholly American, with so little expression or knowledge of their Filipino heritage? I know among many immigrant parents

it was better to cultivate the American culture, in order to assimilate more completely, and draw less attention from the government officials who tried to expel “illegal” workers and “lawfully” exclude Filipinos from free access to all being an American national meant. Were you proud of your children? Did you feel, as so many parents do, that there was more you could have done to make them even more successful?

How did you feel about me? A third-generation Filipino American with so little knowledge or cultural ties with our family’s Filipino culture. A young person who must rely on books, secondhand stories, and friends’ families to learn anything about our Philippines. Who knew so little that, prior to this assignment, didn’t even know what the 1986 People Power Revolution referred to? I knew who Ferdinand Marcos was, but only as a dictator who styled himself a political playboy. I knew of Imelda Marcos’ shoes.

How can I recapture that narrative which, through my and my parents’ upbringing, was so quickly lost within two generations? While I feel so blessed to have unrestricted access to a wealth of virtual resources I can use to study our culture, they are not you. They are not your individual stories. How can we; young, third and fourth generation Filipino Americans with, at times, so little connection with our Filipino heritage, recover a lost history that’s so often ignored in our American and World history courses? We must ask questions and take action.

Would you, our *manongs* and *manangs*, be proud of where we have come? We have a TV show that depicts a Filipino American family sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner without over-the-top stereotypes. We fought to rename a high school after two of our most prominent, but largely forgotten, labor union warriors in Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz. We produced a documentary that introduces so many of our own to the fight in Delano, and its role in the great labor battles of the twentieth century. We’ve done much but, like those who came in support of their personal values and rights as citizens on the Epifano de los Santos Avenue, there’s still much work to be done. Neither the Filipino people or we are truly free of the status quo.

Ours is not a physical conflict against an individual regime or tyrant, but a cultural struggle against anonymity in history and invisibility in society. Our conflicts are not waged in revolutionary language with great public displays, but with a quiet determination in the halls of government and behind our cameras. In speaking with you and your children, and telling or

retelling the story of our people, we honor our culture and those who fight for their beliefs. We are the offspring of Filipinos, but we are also Americans. Our charge may not be to overthrow a government, but like the Revolutionaries we must change minds and hearts of others who do not know about us. We must save our cultures from disappearing into the shadows of history, lest we ourselves forget. We owe our lives to the sacrifices of men and women like you, *lolo* and *lola*. Without you, I would not be here, able to enjoy the benefits of this great country. I hope our young people are up to the challenge of honoring the lives of our grandparents and great-grandparents, and honoring the spirit of those who fought for a better life for themselves and their families on the EDSA in 1986. Though we are in different arenas, we both fight for our right to relevancy and visibility in our national stories.

To my grandparents, I hope I made you proud. I wish we had had more time to get to know each other, and share our stories with family and food. I look forward to showing you more about my life when I see you again.

Love,

Your grandson

Second Place: Jon Luigi Abella Caña

Although I grew up in the Philippines, it was only until I moved to the United States that I learned to appreciate the 1986 People Power Revolution. Allow me to explain myself.

I was raised in the metropolitan sprawl of Cebu City, in a tiny dead end street near the Capitol building. Growing up, I attended an international school, where speaking the local language- Cebuano- was forbidden. Any education about Filipino history and culture was reduced to one week out of the school year- *Linggo ng Wika*. I vaguely remember learning about Jose Rizal, the pros and cons of colonization, and even a traditional dance for a school performance. What I don't recall learning about, however, is a historical revolution that put the world's eyes on the Philippines, inspiring millions of others across the world to topple down their own repressive governments.

My family and I- with the exclusion of my eldest brother- migrated to the United States in August of 2006. We joined the Filipino diaspora, 10 million+ migrants strong. As a 1.5 generation immigrant struggling with identity, I clung onto the most tangible facet of it at the time: my Filipino heritage. Because such was not instructed in classrooms, I began researching about Filipino and Filipino American history, subsequently gaining a stronger sense of my place within that legacy. I never had myself quite figured out, but my deep roots allowed me to face the turbulent winds of adolescence. This rootedness helped me transition between the East & West Coast, between communities where I often was the only Filipino.

My search for community was resolved upon the start of my college experience. While choosing colleges, I visited the UC Berkeley campus and noted the presence of a Filipino student organization- a place I knew could call a home away from home. I wasn't wrong. Throughout my involvement with Cal's Filipino community, I've been able to grapple with my identity alongside a supportive network of individuals striving to do the same. I was in awe at the spirit of students reaching beyond their academic commitments to discuss topics like Filipino beauty standards and US military presence in the Philippines, simultaneously pushing for campus diversity and each other's development as community leaders.

I took the exploration of my Filipino identity beyond campus borders; in fact, beyond the nation's borders. During the summer of 2015, I was privileged with the opportunity to participate in Kaya Collaborative's Summer Fellowship Program. For two months, I lived and worked in Manila, immersing myself in the nation's rich history, culture, and camaraderie. In a span of two months, I developed a relationship with the Philippines that I never had during my 13-year upbringing there. I met with government officials, indigenous community leaders, and corporate officers, all of whom gave me a better understanding of a country I left, but never forgot. One instance over that summer shook me to realize a dark time in Philippine history, and the strength in community it took to overcome that hardship.

We visited the *Bantayog ng Mga Bayani* Memorial Museum in Quezon City, dedicated to commemorating those who lost their lives in the fight against Martial Law- in the fight

for Filipino freedom. The museum took us back to a time often forgotten in modern era, where freedom was not a right for all as much as it was a privilege for a few. In seeing clips of the EDSA protests, to the engraved names of the People Power Revolution martyrs- including Benigno Aquino- I was crippled with emotion at the hardship endured by so many, to which I knew so little about. How could I enjoy my freedom without remembering the strife it took to have it?

In reflecting on the struggles for Philippine freedom, I realized that the value central to the People Power Revolution and movements throughout Philippine history was one I practice in my own daily life: unity. It is unity that allowed the Filipino people to topple down a repressive dictatorship during the 1986 People Power Revolution. It is unity that allows Overseas Filipino Workers across the globe to come together in spite of separation from their families. It is unity that allows Filipino students to stand together at their campuses, pushing for diversity and representation.

Historical events such as the People Power Revolution inevitably become more and more distant in the minds of Filipinos with each passing day. We wake up to face not the past, but the present- society's current events. As for myself, a 1.5 generation, queer, Filipino American immigrant, at the seams of entering the work force, martial law and the Marcos regime is not an imminent concern, thanks to those that fought during the People Power Revolution. With this freedom comes the ability to self-determine my future and reach for my dreams. As I step beyond the comfort zone of UC Berkeley's Filipino community,

it is the spirit of unity that will continue to serve as a means of support and strength in my pursuit of such goals.

Within the campus Filipino community, we practice a cliché: “when one falls, we all fall, but when one rises, we all rise.” As a Filipino American, the legacy of the 1986 People Power Revolution lives on till this day through the unity embodied by Filipino students, OFWs, and communities alike, across the world. It is unity that supports us in our individual pursuits, knowing that there are people there to catch us when we fall, and cheer us on as we rise.

Third Place: Joelle Eliza Mercado Lingat

My family's journey to the U.S. began like many others – on the back (and through the strength) of my mother. She was recruited as a teacher in the early 1990's. As a young woman, she endured the standard symptoms of forced migration: cramped living quarters, low and untimely salaries, and the unpredictability of H1-B visa holders, all for a sliver of hope at the proverbial American Dream. Our family was the lucky exception and my father and brothers were able to follow soon after. As she made her way up the Eastern seaboard in search of a stable teaching position I was born through the transient journey of the Filipino diaspora.

Growing up, I heard stories of the Philippines, small tokens of memory still remnant in the young consciousness of my brothers. They often recalled the dusty eskinita of my Lola's home, the itch of painstakingly starched white uniform shirts, and, of course, the roars of hundreds of thousands of people marching along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, EDSA. My brothers were mere toddlers during the 1980s as they were born in 1982 and 1986, respectively. Yet they recalled memories vividly, as if the conditions of that time catapulted their minds into maturity. They described the blades of helicopters, slicing through the air, with such tenacious veracity that even as a young girl, I felt gusts of hot air, whipping across my face, from a country I had never even been to. My mother's gentle hands would feign disassembling and reassembling a rifle from her mandatory military training in college. She had never seen combat, but naturally as valedictorian of her class, she was the fastest and sharpest marksman. And of course, most of all, I remember the tune my father would hum, mindlessly recalling the home he wished to return to.

*Ang bayan kong Pilipinas,
Lupain ng ginto't bulaklak.
Pag-ibig na sa kanyang palad
Nag-alay ng ganda't dilag*

As a Filipino youth in the U.S., I inherited a strong affinity for my home country from my family. I was raised in a migrant Filipino community, so I fell asleep at Simbang Gabi, wore my mother's shoes at Santacruzán, and line danced at fiestas more than I did typical "American" things like eat pizza instead of spaghetti during birthdays or keep up with any trends that weren't first endorsed by our favorite teleserye stars. When I was five years old, my mother, alarmed at my alternative upbringing as a Filipino child growing up in the U.S., brought me back to the Philippines. As I learned Tagalog, walked in the steps of Andres Bonifacio, and met the extended family I sought after my whole life, my mother wrote a book describing the richness of the Philippines. My eyes were opened to a wealth of not only resources, but of warmth, culture, and, most of all spirit. I soon learned that it was that spirit that helped preserve all of our riches.

*At sa kanyang yumi at ganda
Dayuhan ay nahalina.
Bayan ko, binihag ka
Nasadlak sa dusa.*

Ferdinand Marcos, in presidential office from 1965 to 1986, declared Martial Law in the Philippines from September 21, 1972 until January 17, 1981 through Proclamation No. 1081.

Under the Marcos dictatorship, the Philippines garnered \$27 billion in foreign debt that the country is still recovering from today, and the number of Filipinos below the poverty doubled to 35 million in 1986 from 18 million in 1965. In 2003, the Supreme Court found that the Marcos family accrued an excess of \$304,000 of their legal income from 1965 to 1986. Presently, the Presidential Commission on Good Government has managed to recover only \$4 billion of the \$10 billion funds in the Marcos' Swiss banks. Further, the military was increased from 65,000 to 270,000 personnel. Conversely, there are allegedly 3,257 extrajudicial killings; 35,000 torture victims; and 70,000 incarcerated, and about 120,000 arbitrarily arrested and detained.

Ibon mang may layang lumipad,

kulungin mo at umiivak!

Bayan pa kayang sakdal dilag

Ang di magnasang makaalpas.

Yet, the Marcos regime did not amass its great power on its own. The U.S. government provided \$2.5 billion in bilateral aid, and \$5.5 billion through multilateral institutions like the World Bank. A 1979 U.S. Senate report stated Philippine government agents were in the U.S. to harass anti-Marcos activists, most heightened with the assassination of Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes in a Seattle union hall in 1981. After the February 7, 1986 snap election, Marcos was pressured out of office through the People Power movement and he sought assistance from the U.S. On February 25, 1986, U.S. Senator Paul Laxalt helped orchestrate Marcos' escape via U.S. Air Force C-130 planes to Hawaii from Clark Air Base in Angeles City, Pampanga. These are the undeniable realities we must contend with as Filipinos in the U.S.

Pilipinas kong minumutya

Pugad ng luha ko't dalita

Aking adhika,

Makitang sakdal laya

Bayan Ko is often considered the unofficial National Anthem of protest, especially during the Martial Law era. Not only was it sung by the thousands at EDSA, but it was also a song of hope that weaved together countless dissenters in schools, factories, and urban poor communities. The lyrics speak of the awe-striking beauty and wealth of our country that so many have sought after, including the very country that I reside. Appropriately, the song was first written as a poem in Spanish by José Alejandrino, a general of the 1896 Philippine Revolution and the Philippine-American War. José Corazón de Jesús later translated it to Tagalog during the American occupation of the Philippines in the 1920's to 1930's. The spirit of the 1986 People Power Revolution is the continuation of the spirit of the 1896 Philippine Revolution against Spain. As a young Filipino American, to honor the sacrifice of the 1896 Katipuneros and the 1986 anti-Martial Law activists is to carry out the revolutionary tradition of Filipino youth to advocate for the rights and welfare of Filipinos both home and here in the U.S. *Bayan Ko* is not just a song that I learned when I was young, but it is a message that I will carry on to all Filipino American youth now and in the future until our country, our home, the Philippines, is truly free.

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