A TEI Project

Interview of Al Mendoza

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1.1. Session 1 (June 7, 2011)

Singson

Today is June 7, 2011, and we're doing our first session with Al Mendoza. This is Precious Singson and we are here in Brea in his home.

How are you, Al, Uncle Al?

Mendoza

So far, so good.

Singson

Good. Okay. We're going to start this first session, and we'll try to cover your family background and early childhood, so it's best to start by asking when and where you were born.

Mendoza

Yes, this ought to be good. Okay, let's go back to 1936, August tenth, 1936, Los Angeles, California, in a home half a block south of Temple Street on Alvarado [Street], which is, I would say, right smack in the middle of what they're calling Historic Filipino Town

today. That brings up more issues for me than--probably won't have time to cover today, but anyway, yes.

The folks were on relief at the time, which is what welfare was called at that time. I was born at a house that we were renting, a little two-room house, because the laws of relief at that time said that as long as one child of the family was born out of state, the other child could not receive maternity benefits.

Singson

Oh, wow. So yes, because this--

Mendoza

So as a consequence, I was born at home without a doctor or midwife.

Singson

Wow. So this is the great depression.

Mendoza

Yes. Yes, right in the middle. So I used to kid around and say that I was a depression baby; as soon as my father saw me, he got depressed.

Singson

Well, let's talk about your family. As far as you know, why did they immigrate to the Philippines? When did they immigrate--I mean, when did they immigrate from the Philippines to the United States?

Mendoza

Let's start with the old man [Alfred Pulanco Mendoza], born--and I have to laugh, because depending on which record you choose to use, he was either born in 1902, 1905, or 1910, 1908. Take your choice. He's used them all. Just like most of the Pinoys of that area, they toyed around with their ages, depending on what suited their needs at the time.

Singson

Can you elaborate on that? What do you mean what they needed at that time? So who asks, or what would help them?

Mendoza

They needed to appear younger. I'll use as another example World War II, when they formed the First Filipino Regiment. They had guys in their thirties, thirties and forties, who were volunteering for the unit. But, of course, they doctored up whatever documents they had so that they appeared younger, just so that they could get in, so that kind of thing. It served to their advantage at the time.

Singson

As far as you know, what region did he come from in the Philippines?

Mendoza

Narvacan, Ilocos Sur.

Singson

So he's Ilocano.

Mendoza

Yes, G.I. I had a thought there and I lost it. Anyway, okay, we'll use 1905 for convenience right now, but Narvacan, and he was raised in Narvacan, didn't go anywhere else, pure provincial. Then a little family situation. He immigrated to the United States in 1927, and we had one, maybe two cousins in San Francisco at the time. And he started his American career in 1927. I was just digging through the records, as a matter of fact, arrived on the President [Woodrow] Wilson, had all his smallpox shots and everything, very legitimate. At the time, Filipinos were nationals, so they had free access back and forth. A lot of this I discovered later.

So he followed the employment-migratory trail, I call it, where you hear from other guys in the community that, "Oh, they're hiring over in Vallejo," or down south in Stockton or something. So you go there hoping to get a job. You figure this is the beginning of the

depression, and things were already tough for Filipinos. So as a consequence, you followed the employment trail, winding up eventually, around 1930, '31, in Denver. About that time, my Uncle [Francisco Mendoza] arrived from the Philippines and joined my father, so they were both living in Denver at the time.

Singson

Were there a lot of Filipinos in Denver?

Mendoza

Surprisingly, yes. I have one picture, as a matter of fact, of one function in Denver. I mean it was Rizal Day, something like that, and you could say it's a Filipino community.

Singson

What kind of work did they actually find in Denver?

Mendoza

Whatever paid. Whatever paid. I remember a story my father related. He couldn't have been here, landed more than a couple, three days, and he happened to find a day job, at least for that day, in a lumber yard, just loading, unloading trucks, and a lot of the Filipinos are there. It was a hot day, and this was in San Francisco. It was a hot day, and everybody's working without their shirts. This truck driver pulls in, so the Filipinos started loading the truck, and so this white truck driver says, "Come on, you monkeys, load it up. I'm in a hurry." Monkey this, monkey that. And the old man, whether it's Ilocano or just his spirit, he was very much influenced by Jose Rizal and the principles of liberty and the rights of the individual. So he's the only one who stands up, and he says, "You got all that hair all over your body, and you're calling us animals?" And needless to say, the truck driver didn't care too much for that, so he took a swing at the old man. Of course, the old man ducked. My grandfather was an eskrimador, so he had taught some to my father, and my father picked up a couple of two by fours, and he threw one to the truck driver and says, "Okay, take your choice." So

the truck driver picked one up, took a swing at the old man, and the old man beat him out of the yards.

Singson

Wow.

Mendoza

So, yes, that for me, it demonstrated for me the kind of personality and spirit that my father had, and imbued in me a lot of what drove me throughout my quote, unquote, "career," if you will, working in the community and just generally living.

Singson

Right. So your father, how did he eventually come back to Los Angeles?

Mendoza

Okay. While in Denver, he had organized a lodge of the Dimas Alang. In the process, of course, there was a sizable Filipino community there, of course having dances. He met my mother. Now, let's go back to my mother [Amy Alice Brothe], born in 1912, Fort Lupton, Colorado, which is a ways from Denver. She quit school in the eighth grade, found her way--just couldn't wait to get off the farm--found her way into Denver, where a girl with an eighth-grade education, what can she do? She was working as a housekeeper in a home, and a friend had invited her, accompanied her to a dance which a Filipino friend had told her to come. So they went. My father was engaged at the time to a Mexican lady in Denver, and he met my mother at the dance and all thoughts of marriage just flew out the window.

Now, he offered to take my mother home, and he, being raised of the old school Filipino, of course you set your lady on a pedestal, and you treat her like a lady. My mother had never been treated like that. She was straight off the farm. And he opened the door for her, and he said, "Oh, this is wonderful," quote, unquote. So she became enamored, and they married. They got their license, which

was surprising, because Colorado at the time had anti-miscegenation laws. It was surprising that they issued the license, one, because that couldn't have happened in California. Two, they found a--I was going to say clergyman--a preacher, or a justice of the peace kind of guy, who was from a little town outside of Denver, who was willing to marry them. His wife served as a witness and all, so they were legally married in Colorado, unbeknownst to them at the time, that California didn't recognize their marriage. Anyway, that was '31, '32.

Singson

I'm curious. Unbeknownst to them--the anti-miscegenation law is sort of something that a lot of Filipinos [unclear] know, and that's why a lot of them moved or traveled to a different state for marriages. Why do you say that they actually didn't know?

Mendoza

Well, like, for example, around the Los Angeles area, they couldn't get a license, one. If they succeeded in getting a license, they couldn't find anybody to marry them, so they would go to Tijuana. That was a popular place to go to get married and then come back. But while the State of California might recognize a Mexican marriage, it definitely wouldn't recognize a marriage between a Filipino and a white. So Mexican was acceptable, black acceptable, white, no. So as it was--are you familiar with the process that followed that, the anti-miscegenation law in California, and particularly California?

Singson

No, I'm not, so if you can explain a little bit further.

Mendoza

Okay. This occurred, let's see, around the same time that my folks married in Colorado. In 1933, a Filipino man by the name of Santos, I believe, was refused a license to marry his white sweetheart on the basis of section whatever it was at the time, that there could be no marriage between whites and Mongolians, Mongolians, black,

and I forget the other one. He challenged the law in court on the basis that he wasn't Mongolian, he was Malayan. He lost the case. He appealed. In late 1933, he won the appeal. Four months later, four months--just to show you the legislature could move when it wants to, when you're familiar with the process of a bill passing and becoming law--Malayan was included in the anti-miscegenation law, that Malayan cannot marry white. [laughs]

So as a consequence, neither would they be issued a license, they cannot marry, nor would their marriage be recognized by the State of California if they were married outside the state. So it took a Filipino to really challenge the law.

Singson

So your parents, after--I'm sorry, when did they get married?

Mendoza

It was around '30, '31.

Singson

Okay. So when they arrived in California--or can you talk about the circumstances of their arrival?

Mendoza

Yes. Okay. They married and things were tough, because he had no real job at the time. He would jump between bellhopping and whatever else he could find. Ma's the housekeeper and like I say, eighth-grade education. And my sister [Magdalena Louise Mendoza] was born in 1933, or '34, April 1934. And then again, around the time that my mother was pregnant with me, he heard of a better job in Los Angeles, and I can't recall which uncle had mentioned it to him. So my Uncle Frank [Francisco Mendoza] remained in Denver. My father comes out here [Los Angeles], establishes an apartment, and brings out my mother, so that was our roots here, and then I was born in 1936.

Singson

Okay.

Mendoza

Long story short.

Singson

Can you describe your family's relationship with other Filipinos, how they got together, perhaps? So, for example, you mentioned the CDA [Caballeros de Dimas Alang], the Dimas Alang, as being a very central part of your father's life. So can you talk about how that social networking of Filipinos worked?

Mendoza

Between the networking within the Dimas Alang, which my father was a member of, a very, very staunch supporter, as well as cousins, family friends, town mates--that was one term that I became very familiar with very early. Town mate figured in very heavily and very importantly into the social networking. Any time there was a party, it would usually be through a town mate, or a family member, distant cousin, which were all uncles to me, birthdays, the usual kind of thing. Then the dances of the Dimas Alang. Oh, every week there's always a dance, one lodge or another, and particularly in the Los Angeles area there are numerous lodges, and one or another was always having a dance. So being as gregarious as we are, of course, there's a dance. So it seemed like for as long as I can remember, I was always at a dance and playing with some of the other kids.

Singson

Right. Yes. Actually, there's not a lot of documentation about young Filipinos, because there weren't a lot of family formation during this time. Can you describe your relationship with other Filipino kids, or were you hanging out with a lot of more Filipinos, or was it more interracial?

Mendoza

It was more interracial. There were occasions when I would encounter other Filipino kids, but it wasn't all that often. I'll give as an example, from my early days in public school, from kindergarten on, I think there were maybe three Filipinos in one grammar school that I went to. There were--in 1942, we moved to Salinas. There were more Filipino kids in my elementary school there, so I interacted with the Filipino kids there. Then when we moved back to Los Angeles, again subsequent grades in elementary school, there were maybe two Filipinos in the entire school, so almost all the interaction within the school, as well as on the street, was always interracial and I'd say majority--I couldn't even say majority was Mexican, because I was raised in the downtown area of Los Angeles was pretty multiethnic at the time.

Singson

So this Filipino town in downtown Los Angeles, or Filipino community area in downtown Los Angeles--

Mendoza

Temple and Figueroa.

Singson

Right. Were there not a lot of Filipino kids living--

Mendoza

No. Again, the situation of not too many families because of the difficulty getting married. So while there were a number of Filipino kids that I knew around the Temple-Figueroa area, I only discovered them in later years. Let's say 1940--oh, this is really trying my memory--1946, '45.

Singson

After the war?

Mendoza

Yes. Well, actually, no, let me back up. During the war as well, because the timeline was 1942, February-ish, around there, I had a

uncle in Salinas running a Filipino restaurant. A lot of Filipinos in Salinas, agricultural town. He gets drafted into the First Filipino Regiment, which was being trained right out of Fort Ord and Camp Hunter Ligget and Camp Cook, which was just miles away from Salinas, so Salinas was the base. It was already a military town because of Fort Ord. So because he was drafted into the unit, he called my father to come down and run the restaurant for him. Ha. So, one, it presented an opportunity for my father, and where he had picked up the cooking skills I don't know. To this day there's a gap of, how did he pick up all these skills? Because as far as I knew, he was mostly bellhopping and whatever odd jobs he could pick up until, say, 1941, and then off we go to Salinas. We're there a couple of years.

We come back here in late '43. In fact, it was the summer of '43 when they had what they called the Pachuco riots in Los Angeles. So when we came back, my father opened up a restaurant on Main Street. So that was access to other Filipinos in that I was daily at the Filipino restaurant on Main Street, where all the single Filipino men would congregate. There were a number of other Filipino restaurants in the downtown area, but not that many Filipino kids. Occasionally I would run across one, but I didn't know them. So, yes, I'd seen them, but no familiarity. So there was only one family, and this didn't establish itself until about 1946, '47, where I became acquainted with and close friends with the Cruz family, Augustine Cruz, and he's been a friend--Augie and I have been friends since then, so that's a whole lot of years, come to think of it.

Singson

But they're from the war brides' family formation?

Mendoza

No. I never was quite familiar with how Mr. Cruz met Mrs. Cruz, who is pure Pinay, but I would imagine she was among the Pinays who came here for education, and very singularly, and apparently Mr. Cruz encountered her and married and raised three children. So I became close with them because they would occasionally come to

the restaurant, where I had a chance to play with them. A young kid of seven, eight, nine, ten on Main Street is nothing. And it's amazing, given today's structure on the street. I was allowed to do anything, and the folks never had track of me. You know, I could have been kidnapped and two or three days later, "Where's Junior?"

So at any rate-where was I--as it turned out, the one-room apartment that we were living in, which is about two miles or a mile and a half, really, from the restaurant on Main Street, 3rd and Main, was only maybe a mile away from where the Cruzes had a house that they owned. Surprising. And so I would visit them on what occasions that I could. And it was nice, because living in a one-room apartment, going to a six-, seven-, eight-room house was pure luxury for me. So I enjoyed going to visit my friend Augie and playing, and from time to time, it makes me reflect on my childhood, throughout my entire childhood, in so much as I was always going to other people's houses. Nobody ever visited us.

And I got just evaluating and thinking of I wondered why, and an example in Salinas. We lived in Chinatown. It was literally across the tracks from the main part of town. So even on the lower social scale and lower rung of the social ladder, in Salinas, Filipino ladies only went to Chinatown to eat. You never socialized.

Singson

Okay. Well, I wanted to get a sense of, since we're talking about the social class of Filipinos, I think it's important also if you can talk about the single men who go to your family's restaurant, as well as your observations. You mentioned that you lived in a single-room apartment. Is this apartment--

Mendoza

In Los Angeles, yes.

Singson

--in Los Angeles, right. Is this apartment also where all these single men are living? Because we know a lot of the Manongs are older, single Filipinos.

Mendoza

We were the only--surprisingly, the reason we got the apartment was because the manager was Filipino, that [unclear] Filipino that my father knew. So it was before we had moved from Salinas that he had set it up. We were the only Filipino family there, surprisingly. And I reflect on it now, as well as later years from there, and I wonder why. No other Filipino families had moved in. It was a three-story apartment house, very old and very typically an apartment house of the time. Very few people had their own phone, and there was a telephone in the hallway, and it was a very rickety place, but typical of the time.

Singson

So you'd only encounter the single Filipino men who--

Mendoza

Only at the restaurant.

Singson

Okay, only at the restaurant.

Mendoza

Or at social functions.

Singson

Okay. We can pause if you need to just take a break. Just let me know.

Let's talk about the CDA, I mean the Caballeros de Dimas Alang one more time, because, again, this is one of those big organizations for Filipinos that's not documented. So I'm wondering how it played a role for Filipino families, especially if Filipino families are very rare. Were the kids of your family always participating?

Mendoza

Yes, let me put an addendum to the Filipino families being rare. There were a number of families in the Los Angeles area that were

the children of Mexican mestizo. Being, in most cases, a Mexican mother, they were raised more Mexican than they were Filipino. The countless stories where I encountered, through high school, from all the way from elementary school through high school, the number of mestizos that I did encounter really didn't know anything about being Filipino. And because of my father being so staunchly Filipino, a disciple of Jose Rizal, that's all I knew was Filipino, Philippine history, Dimas Alang, so it was second nature to me that when people wondered why I had any kind of knowledge about it at all, why not?

The point was hammered home to me time and again throughout my life, that was kind of epitomized by working with Roy Morales. We started publishing a paper called "Balitaan." At an Asian American picnic, more of a festival, we would distribute them. We're handing them out. I handed it to a Filipino kid and his father, and the guy looks at it. He looks at the paper, looks at me and looks at the paper again. He says, "Why are you handing these out? What, don't you like to read?" [laughs] So it took me awhile to--and yet not, because right away he wanted to make a connection between how I looked and, "Why are you handing me a Filipino paper? What's your connection?" He needed a label. He needed a box to put me in. I said, "One, what difference does it make," if he'd want to read the paper or not. "The other thing is, I'm Filipino mestizo. So what?" But it kind of highlighted for me and reflected how I had been perceived throughout my life, and how the Filipinos in the Filipino community still view mestizos and American born, that up until now, we're still not real Filipinos.

A number of occasions occurred throughout my political career where a number of Filipinos didn't want me as a [Los Angeles City] Human Relations Commissioner, for example, because I wasn't a real Filipino. I wasn't from the Philippines, and I didn't speak Tagalog. So, again, that reflected and represented much of the thinking throughout the Filipino community, and increasingly so as more Filipinos came from the Philippines, that the American-born aren't quite Filipino. They aren't really Filipino enough. So as a

consequence, there has been that division, American-born FOB [fresh off the boat] since 1945 when Filipinos started coming across. You had the Hanggang Pier Land Brides, and then families.

Singson

Well, I think this is really interesting, and I'd like to go back to this idea of you being a mestizo, especially during your student experience. But first, let's sort of deal with Caballeros first, because let's try and talk about your family's interaction, the Filipino networking in Los Angeles. First, maybe you can define for us the functions of Caballeros de Dimas Alang. What is it, and what did it do for the Filipino single males and families? And for you in particular, what do you remember of it?

Mendoza

Okay. The history of the Dimas Alang I picked up as we went along. They were incorporated in California in 1921 that I'm familiar with. They had their main quarters on Weller Street, and I have a picture to establish that, in Los Angeles.

Singson

I'm sorry. What street?

Mendoza

Weller Street. It is now Yonizuka [Street] in Little Tokyo. What I had mentioned when they started talking about Historic Filipino Town being in the Rampart area, I said, "No, no, no. No. Filipinos go down to Little Tokyo way back in 1920s." Okay? But who are the people pushing for Filipino Town here? They just arrived in 1985, 1990. Of course, history starts with them. So, anyway.

So my father being knee deep in Dimas Alang, we would on very frequent occasions go down to Weller Street at the headquarters, and, of course, he was doing Dimas Alang business, and between that, the dances, there are a number of other Filipino commercial establishments on San Pedro and on Weller Street besides the Dimas Alang headquarters, restaurants--there was one nightclub

that I recall--so between that and the dances, and it was at the dances in later years that I encountered more of the kids from the Filipino families that I would see at the dances. For a lot of them, there wasn't that close association and friendship, so I knew them, I knew of them. So there were some families and kids that I became familiar with, others, no.

The conventions usually presented more of opportunity to really get to know a lot of the kids. It was at the Dimas Alang National Convention in Los Angeles in 1949, 1948, that I ran across a running buddy who was a very close friend and became a compadre. I was godfather to his daughter.

Singson

And just for the record, his name?

Mendoza

His name was Joe Wasan [Pepe Wasan]. His father was Grandmaster of the Dimas Alang at the time, so we established a very close friendship that ensued for a number of years, up until I was early twenties, and then we just kind of drifted apart.

Singson

The Dimas Alang really functions as a social organization, right?

Mendoza

Yes. It was fraternal. The original purpose was to serve as a safety net for Filipinos, because of the social atmosphere at the time, a very hostile atmosphere for Filipinos. You stop and think of the Tydings-McDuffie [Act] law of 1934, pretty much epitomized how Filipinos were viewed, and the race riots in the Marysville and Salinas area in the early thirties--

Singson

So I'm curious. In what way did they serve as sort of a protecting organization? I mean, obviously, you didn't have any political--

Mendoza

Clout.

Singson

--clout, right. So in what ways did this organization really help? Is it really only for the parties, the social gatherings?

Mendoza

There was a social network. The other side of it was an avenue for employment. Lodge brother so-and-so heard of a job. Your lodge brother, of course, is going to get preference. Housing. If a lodge brother was fortunate enough to have a house or have an apartment, two, maybe three other lodge brothers would have available the lodgings there. So, again, it was family, a family network for lack of a better concept, that you could always count on a lodge brother. If there were social injuries or offenses, then the lodge could be counted on.

Singson

Right. Now, Rizal is such a big part of the Dimas Alang, and you mentioned also your father's hero, right. Now, is it because he was part of Dimas Alang and that's why Jose Rizal is very prominent in his view? Or is it sort of something else that ushered in Rizal--

Mendoza

It's almost like a chicken and the egg situation of, did he pick up the principles of the revolutionary heroes in the Philippines or his schooling years, or was it the association with the Dimas Alang that helped cement it? It's both, really. So he just became very staunchly principled in following and emulating Jose Rizal.

Singson

How did this translate to you? I mean, was he actually schooling you about Rizal?

Mendoza

Yes. And the family--between explaining why he was doing something for the Dimas Alang or having a dance for Dimas Alang

or in Dimas Alang, relating some stories of activities or adventures in the Philippines--he always related about he and a couple of cohorts, how they used to raid the watermelon patch, where they'd cut a hole in it, eat it out and then turn it over, that kind of thing. There were always stories that he would relate, and I guess in comparing my experiences with my father, for as little as I saw of him, because particularly when he had the restaurant and in later years when he was continually cooking, he was always working late afternoon into the evening, so I rarely saw him, and when I did see him, we would talk, and it was when I would be Filipino. The things we ate, for example, was always Filipino. You had my mother's sandwiches and hamburgers and things like that. But in comparing my experiences with cohorts, they didn't have that kind of close relationship with their parents. One or two--my friend Alex Flordelis, as an example, had experiences similar to that. Augie, Augustine Cruz, had experiences similar to that. But there are others where they had experiences with their father in the present environment, but not relating back to the Philippines, so they knew very little about being Filipino or the Philippines. So Filipino was just here. And maybe that's what helped establish the reputation and the impression that American-born Filipinos didn't know anything. And it's a shame, because that same perception, the same attitude is still carried on today, where there's still the division of--I still call it FOB and American-born.

Singson

Since we're on the topic of learning, perhaps you should already get on your story, your history, your educational history, so from what you can recall, and especially you being a mestizo, what were your experiences like as a Filipino mestizo?

Mendoza

A mestizo that doesn't look Filipino.

Singson

Right.

Mendoza

Because there are other mestizos around who looked very typically Filipino. I didn't. I didn't come out that way.

Singson

So in school, who were your friends?

Mendoza

It usually is Mexican, because Mexicans were around in school, and first of all, Mendoza, he must be Mexican.

Singson

And just for the record, what school did you go to?

Mendoza

Kindergarten I was in Rosemont Elementary School, where right now there's quite a population of Filipinos in the Temple-Alvarado area. From there, two years spent in Salinas, California, at Roosevelt Elementary School. From there we came back to Los Angeles, where I completed my elementary school years at Fremont Avenue [Elementary] School, which no longer exists. It is now the 3rd Street on-ramp to the Harbor Freeway. Went to Virgil Junior High three years and then Belmont High School for three years, at which I encountered more Filipinos, and it was in junior high school where I encountered more Filipinos and established associations that carried through into high school, as well as socially.

Singson

So what do you mean associations? Are you talking about formal organizations?

Mendoza

No, social, purely friends.

Singson

Okay. And let's talk about these Filipino friends. What were your recreational hobbies among Filipinos? I mean, we hear--

Mendoza

Girls. Purely Filipino. [laughs].

Singson

And if you can help me track what years this would take place? Because I'm trying to get a sense of when World War II, because World War II had such a great impact on Filipinos, so if you could help me track in what years were you in junior high and then towards high school?

Mendoza

Right. Elementary school, when we came back to L.A. it was late '43 through '48; '48 to '51, junior high school; '51 to '54, high school. So just after the war years, okay. We're talking, I was still in elementary school when they filmed "Back to Bataan."

Singson

Maybe you can help us recall, what is the Bataan, what was the movie about, and why is it so important?

Mendoza

Well, one, it provided a Hollywood job for a lot of Filipinos in Los Angeles area. We couldn't participate in that because we were running the restaurant. So a number of friends, as well as my first wife [Roberta Mendoza] at the time's family was in the movie. Incidentally, as a diversion, that wasn't the first movie about the Philippines that was done in Hollywood. The first one was called "The Real Glory." That was released in 1938, that my father was in. As a matter of fact, he had a maybe one and a half, two seconds close up that I took a picture of.

Singson

You took the picture of him while he was on the studio set?

Mendoza

No, because I was about three years old at the time. Watching the movie I says, "Oh, that's the old man." So I played the tape back again, I stopped it and got a picture.

Singson

And as far as you can remember, if he's told you any stories about the filming itself?

Mendoza

No. It was in later years that I understood and discovered the significance of it, as well as there is history and there was Hollywood. That's when I really--oh, wait a minute, they're fooling around with a lot of facts here. That also was highlighted and reinforced with "Back to Bataan" in so much as they did a lot of finagling around because of the release of prisoners at Cabanatuan. At the time that I saw it, and I was, what, nine, ten, eleven years old at the time, it was just a movie. "Hey, then, it's us, about Filipinos. Great." I still remember being at the theater downtown, United Artists, seeing the movie and having the old man translate what was being said in Tagalog. So there was a pride there, because it was us. Until then, we were unknown.

You'd never see us in the newspapers--I take that back--until 1948 when Vicky Draves, Vicky Manalo, I take it back, got the gold medal for diving, high diving in the Olympics. First ever. Wow.

So anyway, "Back to Bataan," and like I say, it was just a war movie for me then. It was in later years that I understood the significance that they were releasing--it was about the release of the battle, release of the prisoners at Cabanatuan, and it was in later years that I discovered that--and there was a lot of Hollywood there, if only for the fact of the big Filipino hero was a Mexican, Anthony Quinn. Is that the best they can do? Well, at least supporting actors were Filipino, and I knew a number of them already, so this is old home week. And, yes, a number of them would come in the restaurant every now and then. Also, Carlos

Bulosan had come into the restaurant and I had talked with him, but I didn't know who he was. He was just, you know, one of the other Filipinos. So that's all that "Back to Bataan" represented.

It was in later years that I finally read more of history of the Philippines that I understood and started collecting a lot of the media, not only books but the tape on the release of prisoners from Santo Tomas, which was obscured by a little battle called Iwo Jima, so they got all the press instead of the release of prisoners in the Philippines.

Singson

Well, and this is as far as you can remember, where maybe again you would have understood the significance of it later on, how did that movie or even just the impact of World War II, Filipinos participating in the war, how did that change the dynamics, the racial dynamics and how Filipinos were being treated in L.A.?

Mendoza

There wasn't a whole lot of difference. You had Filipinos in uniform who were still, throughout California as well as in Los Angeles, were being refused haircuts and being refused service in restaurants. There were still the social barriers that were still encountered. 1946--I still have pictures of when they first formed up the First Filipino Regiment. I was very proud, because I was one of the few kids, Filipino kids who was exposed to those historical events that it didn't mean a whole lot to me at the time, but in later years, particularly in our community, Filipino community later years, that I was there firsthand. You know, you guys read about and hear about history, but I was there. And it just meant a lot to me, knowing that, hey, that was quite an event.

Singson

Right. Let me pause.[Recorder turned off]

Singson

So we're back from our quick pause, and we are going to sort of divert a little bit, because while we were at pause we so happened to talk about your encounters with Filipinos who experienced a labor migration to Hawaii, and you've encountered them--

Mendoza

And back.

Singson

--and back, and your encounters with them in Salinas and in Los Angeles. So if you could--

Mendoza

Yes. So particularly the music, in so much as being musicians, of course you picked up a lot of Hawaiian songs. Again, in the camps, the agricultural camps, as well as, oh, parties or social functions, dances, they would play some Hawaiian music, and, of course, a number of guys played steel guitar. So anyway, I was familiar, particularly through the music of Hawaii, going back to five, six years old that I can remember, and again in Salinas more so, because every day were the Manongs coming back from a day in the fields, showered, relaxed, and like I say, either practiced Eskrima, worked with their Balisong, or they played music, and again the music being either Filipino or Hawaiian.

So become very early familiar with and second nature to Hawaiian, in particular, music. And it was because of that that the later exposure to a lot of cohorts from Hawaii, let's say in the late forties, coming from Hawaii, there's that exposure. My to-be brother-in-law married a Pinay from Hawaii. So between the social network, the family network of Hawaii and close to Hawaii, and already the familiarity with the customs and music, in particular, of Hawaii, Hawaii was always second nature to me. That in turn was imbued in my children, in so much as Auntie Soling [Marcelina Mendoza], Auntie so-and-so in Hawaiian, it was just, again, second nature, so that Hawaii and Hawaiian figures very closely in our psyche and social makeup within the family. So, again, I don't give it second

thought. A lot of people wonder how the Hawaiian figured in, where I don't give it much thought. I have to go through the story, "Oh, I'm familiar with Hawaii," and try to leave it at that.

Singson

Through the Filipinos. Well, Salinas you describe the recreation and hobbies of the Manongs. What about in Los Angeles? What did you observe? What were their preoccupations, and especially the single Manongs in L.A.? And perhaps you can talk about, because we were talking about World War II, how did it change after World War II?

Mendoza

Yes. Let's see. World War II did a lot to change the economic circumstances in particular, for many of the Filipinos, because now they could get a job, a real job, instead of bouncing around from job to job or doing totally just service work. A lot of the Filipinos were able to get work in the shipyards and the airline--not airline, but war plane industry. And as a consequence, because of the location of the factories, they found housing closer to their employment. So now there was the scattering of Filipinos from the metropolitan area of Los Angeles to outer--what I call outer limits--Santa Monica, for example, close to McDonnell Douglas; Long Beach, both for the airplane industry and the canneries; Wilmington, San Pedro. Did I say Long Beach? Anyway, Long Beach as well.

So you've got significant migration and community development of Filipinos, and this is all due to the war, and we're talking significant years from, say, '44 up through the rest of the forties. The social activity still transpired, only becoming more localized for where they're at now, so because you've got enclaves throughout the greater Los Angeles area, now you've got development of social networks away from the metropolitan L.A. The CDA played a very significant role in that development and the ties with central and metropolitan Los Angeles, because headquarters are still here.

Singson

So a lot of the families of Filipinos from the greater L.A. actually still traveled to downtown for the CDA social gatherings?

Mendoza

Yes, for the social functions, and vice versa, going out to areas. There was still the very familial social network of Manong. "Manong Ernie still has his truck farm out in Gardena. Let's stop by and visit him. Maybe we'll pick up a load of squash or something, whatever he's growing." So there was that kind of network as well.

My father organized the Quirino Lodge in Gardena.

Singson

I'm sorry, the what?

Mendoza

The Elpidio Quirino Lodge, number so-and-so, of Dimas Alang, out in Gardena, with all the old Pinoys and [unclear] that live out there, and this was at the time when, oh, late forties, early fifties.

Singson

That's curious to me, because why would your father establish a lodge all the way out in Gardena? And is it possible for sort of this one person to be a founder of a lodge somewhere further away? How did that work? I guess I'm kind of thinking of how the CDAs organization--

Mendoza

Yes, as far as the politics of it, I don't know. I'm not that familiar with it. All I know is that he knew a number of the Pinoys out there. I think one or two of them might have been town mates, and they knew friends who knew friends and so on, and other families, so on, and apparently they got the idea, "Why not get organized? Let's build a lodge out here that gives a social network and formality and all." Given my sociology background and developments over the years, I kind of went, why do you want to do that? You know, as you start drawing lines, somebody always gets left out. So anyway,

don't let me get into that. At any rate, he organized the lodge and they were an up-and-going concern, and they would have parties and dances, and I remember my father dragging me out for different parties or whatnot.

One interesting part is it was always me and him. My mother never went along, and you kind of wonder about it now, but it was always going along with the old man to Gardena or the Torrance area to visit or to a party or events.

Singson

Were your brothers, your sister, you had a sister, your other siblings--

Mendoza

My sister [Magdalena Louise Mendoza] passed away in 1940.

Singson

And did you have other siblings?

Mendoza

No. I became the only child. She was a special-needs, and she was always having a health problem, one health problem or another, and passed away in 1940.

Singson

So I wanted to also pursue this, since you've already mentioned it. You have this very developed Filipino identity, it seems like, as you grew up. And what about your mother's side? Was it ever instilled in you that you were--

Mendoza

That I was German as well, yes. No, she never really pushed that. She never sat me down or in the course of conversation or anything, because we never really talked that much like that, of that you're German. The German side would come out in terms of talking about relatives, but what I was able to gather from things

that she said, the way she said it in later years--what she said in earlier years, I mean reflecting on it in later years, was that she's pretty much ostracized by the family when she married a Filipino, particularly by her older brother, my Uncle [Dave]. He, as a matter of fact, I found out in late forties, mid-to-late forties, say '48--my Uncle Frank, my father's brother, lived in Denver, went to visit my mother's brother, who, you know, they're [unclear]. My uncle, he was old fashioned, so he was a [unclear]. So he went to visit, and my Uncle Dave chased him off the property with a shotgun, blaming World War II on "You Filipinos." I says, okay. So beyond that, other things told me that Ma was pretty much ostracized by the family.

My grandmother still kept connection with her. She still kept connection with the family with letters, but there was no real closeness. Late forties when we went to visit, a couple, three days went to visit, and I met a few relatives, but there was the standoffish quality that was there. You know, it's nothing really visible, nothing really tangible, but it was felt, and ever since, I was never close to the German side or to the family. But my one cousin still tried to maintain the linkage, and she still tries, but the situation of the event between my uncles really put a bad taste in my mouth that for me reflected, I would say, pretty much the feeling of the entire area--

Singson

For Filipinos?

Mendoza

Yes, in so much as--

Singson

Kind of going back to the fact of World War II to Filipinos in Los Angeles, especially during probably the late forties, early fifties, the historical narrative says that there's a wave of new families coming in, especially with the war brides. Did you actually observe that while you were growing up?

Mendoza

Yes.

Singson

Okay. Can you talk about--

Mendoza

I remember one particular incident, altar boy at Saint Columban's [Catholic Church], and one new family recently arrived from the Philippines became members of the parish, and two daughters, sisters. My buddy Augie and I, we tried to get to know them, and friendly girls, but they were extremely standoffish. They would whisper to each other in Tagalog and just avoid us entirely, and I still remember that pretty much reflected how others who were recently arrived viewed American-born in so much as we were tolerated rather than anybody really wanted to be socialized with, and they developed their own social network and communities rather than really intermingle with the established American Filipino community.

Now, this was noticed by others as well, and I'll use as an example the development of an organization of ten years or so, that still exists, and they have picnics and social functions now.

Singson

I'm sorry. What's the name of the organization?

Mendoza

The American Filipino. I'm trying to recall the formal name of the group.

Singson

That's all right. We can probably research that later.

Mendoza

But it's American Filipino. That part was very heavily established, American Filipino, not Filipino American, which tells me, reading between the lines, that that notion and that attitude was a reflection

of earlier times of, yes, there is a division, there is that separation between Philippines-born and American-born, and there is a difference in attitudes and outlooks. So it's still very much a part of the community. I don't know if we do ourselves a service or disservice by ignoring it, and it's one aspect that I'd like to pursue a little bit further in so much as we can't really continue like that and still develop any kind of political clout, which we're sorely overdue for.

Singson

I'm sure this came up, too, later on, during the next wave in the post-'65 years, when there's a lot, so we'll definitely come back to that topic. But I think at this point, it's probably a good time to end, because we sort of jumped the hurdle of World War II. But just before we end, I do want to ask why there seems to be a division among these new war-bride families versus the older established Filipinos. Is it possibly because of social class? Or what do you think is sort of the main source of divide? Or is it culture?

Mendoza

Class, yes. I don't think you can avoid class at all. Culture in so much as, like it or not I still feel, and it's reinforced from time to time, of the hate/envy of the mestizo, going back to the nineteenth century, of the hate/envy of the mestizo, where you had the Spanish mestizos, who are trying to identify with, of course, the Spanish and the upper classes, and that leaving a bad taste in the mouth of the general population, so that the attitude may be carrying over to the mainland American in so much as, "Oh, he's a mestizo," and the hate/envy of, "Well, he's got all the advantages."

I use as an example one Pinoy social worker, who in the course of a discussion in workshop--

Singson

I'm sorry, what decade is this?

Mendoza

This is the seventies. One of the many conferences and workshops that we had, where she really started getting along and in essence is saying, "We want the same advantages as you American-born mestizos." I looked at her and I said, "You mean you want to sell newspapers on a street corner at nine years old to help the family income? Is that the kind of advantage you're talking about? Or is it working in the fields at fifteen, to help a family income and also just to have a summer job, because that's the only job you could get?" And, again, it's that attitude that, "Well, you've got all the advantages. You're American-born and you're mestizo."

And that also, again, is reflected in the American Filipino of the second-generation guys and cohorts and colleagues of my age group, that feel that division and wall between Philippines-born and them. Yes, I don't speak Tagalog anymore. Maybe I'll understand a little. I don't recognize or accept a lot of the cultural values, but does that make me less Filipino? And that is the crux of much of the problem is that by so doing, maintaining that attitude, they're saying, "American-born Filipinos, you're less." And how long and how far do you want to carry that? In what regard less?

Singson

You mentioned that you were working at fifteen. Is it you, in particular? Did you say that you were working?

Mendoza

Oh, that was common for all the Pinoys, yes, the Filipino kids.

Singson

Well, maybe you could--again, before we end this period of 1940s, I wanted to ask you what your particular experiences are in terms of work. Were you working while going to school, at the same time?

Mendoza

Yes, in the summer, a summer job. A common job for a junior high or high school kid in those days was as a box boy in the markets. Those jobs were all sewed up by the Beverly Hills' kids and all the

white kids, so forget it. So the only jobs available to other Pinoys were working on the farms.

Singson

And you in particular, what did you do? Did you go to the farms?

Mendoza

I picked celery for a while and packed celery, along with Alex Flordelis, my running buddy, Alex. And Alex I knew since we were eleven, ten, nine, thereabouts. So it was the same economic and social circumstance in so much as you knew you had to work during the summer, but the only jobs available was working where the Filipino jobs were available, and that was always agriculture.

Singson

And your parents pretty much let you out every summer and allowed you to travel?

Mendoza

Yes, oh, yes. I wouldn't let my kids do that today, but that's where I got a lot of education, a lot of experience, working in Stockton for a little bit, and then working over here. I picked up a lot of--

Singson

Street schooling?

Mendoza

--I'll say experiences, because a lot of them were not good, in so much as constantly encountering that whole thing, "Oh, he's Mexican," especially among Pinoys that didn't know my father, you know, "This Mexican kid." Or among others who--they referred to me as that mestizo kid. "Oh, you know, him, that mestizo kid." It wasn't even Mendoza. "That mestizo kid."

Singson

Who says that? Filipinos or?

Mendoza

Oh, a lot of the people knew me. Families who weren't that familiar with my father, who was pretty high up in the Dimas Alang at the time, but they knew me and didn't make the connection with the old man. But they just knew me as a friend of their son or daughter or their kids, and, "That mestizo kid."

Singson

Well, I'm curious again, because there were not a lot of young Filipinos during the 1940s, and this is the 1940s that you're talking about when you were traveling, right? Who did you travel with? Is it mostly Filipinos, or sort of interracial?

Mendoza

Oh, yes, yes. Whenever I did travel, we worked the farms. But the Filipino kids--my buddy, I called him Pepe. His name was Joe [Wasan], but Pepe, with him, or worked with Alex in Venice, a Venice packing house.

Singson

And are they mostly American-born Filipinos?

Mendoza

Yes, American-born, yes.

Singson

Or are there newcomers already coming in, streaming into--

Mendoza

Pepe had the advantage in so much as he, like most of the Ilocano kids from Hawaii, spoke Ilocano, and if they didn't speak it, at least understood it. But just like for a while I was able to understand a little, but it took me so damn long to form a sentence, they would say something in Ilocano and I'd answer in English. So it finally got to the point where he would do the same thing. They would speak

in Ilocano, he'd answer in English. [laughter] So that was kind of funny.

But, yes, there was, interestingly, just in the last ten years, that same attitude is reinforced about being less. Filipino friends and associates from Hawaii, Ilocano, they don't speak Tagalog, but they're working here in the community, and people are speaking Tagalog, and, "I don't speak Tagalog," and they become less all of a sudden, because they don't, and that attitude still remains. Danielle So, what's-her-name on Channel 18, what's her name, the mistress of ceremonies, TV host, I still remember that crack she made at a SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans] fundraising function, where she said, "It's a shame that we no longer speak Tagalog at all our functions and events." And you talk about a slap in the face for all the Ilocanos and Visayans in the audience, and a lot of them very large supporters of SIPA. And wake up, woman, there's a lot of non-Tagalogs in the Filipino community. But that kind of attitude that, of course, you must speak Tagalog. Of course, this is the epitome of being Filipino and Filipino-ness.

But that brings me back to the whole situation of why Tagalog is the national language. And I still remember as a boy the conflict and controversies and the political arguments about the development of Pilipino. And that's the one thing that stayed with me, because I still remember my father relating that to me when that was presented to the Philippines legislature back in the mid-forties, actually early forties, but where they were saying, "All right. We're going to [unclear] Pilipino, and it's going to be a combination of Tagalog, Ilocano, and Visayan." All right? And then all of a sudden developed, quote, unquote, "Filipino." But it's Tagalog, okay? What happened? So I understand that lately there's been some resistance to the teaching of Tagalog in some of the non-Tagalog provinces. But I don't know. I haven't really confirmed that.

Singson

So, again, kind of sticking to the 1940s--

Mendoza

Oh, yes, yes. I'm diverging again.

Singson

That's okay. No, no, no, no, that's all right. Just on the changes of the war to you personally, you mentioned that you were still traveling every summer to do the labor camps.

Mendoza

Yes. Well, it was just over a couple of years.

Singson

Right. Okay. Did it ever change for you, life, work life, your social life after the war, as a young boy in the 1940s?

Mendoza

Well, as I grew from adolescence into post-adolescence kind of a thing. They talk about the American teenager's search for identity, and it's complicated for most of the Filipino kids, because it's, who in the heck am I? What am I? Because I don't speak Tagalog. Am I still Filipino? And that's reinforced with, "Oh, you're mestizo." "Oh, you're American-born." So there's this crisis as well that complicates the development of--

Singson

Adolescence.

Mendoza

--identity in a lot of the kids. And that along with a natural development of the economic development, in so much as, "Okay, do I go to college? Do I get a job?" Again, to put it in the context of the times, the road to adulthood when you graduated from high school was either college or military or you got a job, one of the three.

Singson

And for you?

Mendoza

And because I followed the advice of a counselor at Belmont who said, "You've got good coordinative skills. I really think you ought to stick to industrial arts' course," the classes, "and get a job in industrial arts," in essence telling me, "You're not going to make it in college, kid," so I followed that. I married not long after high school. In fact, four months after high school I contracted cancer, and that pretty much sealed what I was going to do. I had to get a job. I got married.

Singson

I'm sorry. What year was this?

Mendoza

This is '55. So I knocked around from job to job and raised a family for eleven years, and then I went back to school and found out that, (a), that counselor was full of beans. And I graduated UCLA [University of California Los Angeles] with a 3.4.

Singson

That's great. Let's end there.

Mendoza

They said I wouldn't make it.

Singson

I think that's a good--

Mendoza

So I'm an alumni.

Singson

Yes, you are, of UCLA, very proud.

Singson

Let's end there. I think this is a good spot to end, and hopefully next session we can come back to this period when you were raising a family after graduating high school and working, and then development of your Filipino activism, at least from 1950s, 1960s.

Mendoza

Yes, that's pretty much when it started.

Singson

Okay. Well, thank you.[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (June 14, 2011)

Singson

Today is June 14, 2011, and this is our second interview session with Al Mendoza, and we are here in Brea.

How are you?

Mendoza

Fine.

Singson

Okay. This is Precious Singson doing the interviews.

So we really ran through a lot of your life experiences in our first session, from your parents' background, your personal background, your early childhood, but let's just go back a little bit and talk about your early career, your early employment career. You mentioned that you were doing sort of on-and-off work and helping your father, so maybe we can first talk about that.

Mendoza

Yes. In career as such, it was more, at that age, fun stuff, in that when we're in Salinas, I'm five years old and helping bus the tables in the restaurant. They finished eating, and I brought the dirty dishes to the dishwasher, till I'd get tired, that kind of thing, helping my father preparing food. I remember in the mornings cleaning the-

-I believe they were the pig intestines, and, oh, I hated cleaning the--what does the mainstream community call--the hog maws, you know, bituka, clean all the fat off the stomach, and hoo. But it was, again, part of the experience of "this was my life," quote, unquote. So I became familiar with the foods, for example.

Singson

Yes. You were serving Filipino food, and you had mostly Filipinos who'd come to the restaurant?

Mendoza

Yes. Watching my father, that was part of my education, watching my father cooking in the kitchen. The stove was a typical Chinese stove, where you had the very intense flame for stir fry. And, again, because of my early exposure to that, it was really nothing new when I saw the same things later on in life in various situations, where friends or other people would ooh and ah that they encountered this, and for me it was nothing new. So watching my father cook, and I learned procedures from that, as well as using a knife, keeping it sharp and all. You learn at a very early age.

Singson

I'm also interested in your observations of the Filipinos who go to the restaurant. So are they mostly single, migratory labor? And what purpose did this restaurant serve for the community or for the customers?

Mendoza

The restaurant was, of course, in Chinatown, and the customers were, in the main, the field hands and field workers and farmers, mostly field hands. And at that time, because of the time, if you will, soldiers from both Fort Ord, where they were training, as well as other surrounding camps, particularly [Camp] Hunter Ligget and Camp Cook, where the First Filipino Regiment were, also the Second [Filipino Regiment], so come weekend, ah, weekend pass. What do you do? Filipino food. Even though the cooks in the Filipino Regiment were almost all Filipino, at least they had rice, but again,

the big celebration would be weekend pass, going to Salinas, Filipino food.

There were, I think, either one or two other Filipino restaurants that I was aware of, but, of course, my whole world was the restaurant that my father was running, and, again, a typical weekend crowd would be the farm workers or soldiers. Again, one of the favorite activities, both for the farm workers as well as the soldiers, is after eating, you figure they're sitting around, either at the counter or at a table, and there's maybe four, five, up to seven, eight just sitting there. After dinner, having the coffee and the stories, always the stories, and because there were Iocanos, Tagalogs and Visayans, it was usually conducted in English unless they were of the same language, and then they were talking in their own language.

Singson

That's interesting.

Mendoza

Yes. So I was attuned to hearing that, and, of course, that's how I learned the cuss words, because, of course, I would be around, and they would slip, and I would know they were cussing because I'd hear, "Oh, excuse me, Sonny Boy." So that's how I knew they were cussing. [laughs] And it was again part of my education of something that was just there and I just took it for granted.

Singson

Right. Let me ask your observations about the soldiers, the Filipino Regiment, or even sort of let's broaden this generally to how Filipinos participated in the war. So because the Filipinos were this ethnic group that had a history of racial hostility from sort of larger America, how do you think that they approached the war? Did they welcome it? Maybe you could describe some celebrations of it, or--

Mendoza

Yes. I find out later that most of them were drafted. A lot of them volunteered. A lot of them were in their thirties, late thirties and

into the forties and lied about their age just to get in and for only one reason, to get back at Japan for the Philippines, to free the Philippines, and very few stories that I could recall of what they went through as far as basic training.

There are a number of social situations that I recall. One of my uncles [Second Lieutenant Don Mendoza] was an officer who had gone to Fort Benning for training and returned back to the First Filipino Regiment, and we were walking down Main Street, I recall, in Salinas, and apparently what had happened was a soldier refused to salute my uncle. He's a second lieutenant, quite obvious--refused to salute him.

Singson

Was this a white soldier?

Mendoza

This was a white soldier, and MPs [military police] happened to be close by, and they were called either by my uncle's companion or my uncle, and there was a big to-do because he had refused to salute, and so the MPs took him off. I reflect back on that now because I understand that kind of situation occurred time and time again. I remember one group of soldiers talking about one had difficulty getting a haircut because the barbers that he had gone to refused to cut his hair, okay?

My other Uncle [Sammy Camcam] was refused--even though in uniform, he was refused to buy a bottle of liquor in a liquor store, because they thought he was Indian. Wouldn't accept the fact; no, he was Indian, automatic, no. Situations like that that again I recall later, and those were racial incidents, but I just didn't give them that much credit at the time.

Another situation that I recall with non-military was driving with the folks. We were on our way to King City, I believe it was, and several situations occurred within the course of one day. One, we were driving along the road and my father tried to pass this one car that was going extremely slow, or at least not the speed limit. So my

father attempted to pass, and the driver just kept edging him right off the road. This occurred several times, and each time--finally when we were able to pass along the shoulder, my father took a real chance, and I was scared, because--

Singson

Sure.

Mendoza

--just the attitude of my father. And I saw the driver and his passenger was an older white man and an older white lady, and they were just staring straight ahead, not doing anything, no gestures, no nothing, just staring straight ahead, and I know now that they just didn't like the fact that my father was with a white woman in the front seat, even though I was in the back seat.

We had stopped at a restaurant that same day, and this was close to King City, and we sat there something like an inordinate amount of time. Reflecting back, it must have been at least ten minutes, and the waitress just kept passing us by, waiting on other people that had come in behind us and not even giving us menus, not even bringing us water. So finally my father says, "Let's go." So we left, found another restaurant further down the road I think it was, and we had no problem there. So I remember that and reflect on it now, that, again, a racial bias that still existed in Central California at the time.

Singson

What about in Los Angeles? Maybe let's move forward to your high school years. Did you experience any of this racial or prejudices against you going to Belmont High?

Mendoza

Yes, nothing very overt. It was always perceived, a perceived atmosphere, if you will.

Singson

Perhaps we could talk about what Belmont High was like during that time. So you mentioned that there were more Mexicans that Filipinos, because you were seen as a Mexican, in the last session.

Mendoza

At that time, Belmont was pretty well mixed. There were Mexicans, there were Filipinos, there were Chinese, Japanese, whites, blacks. And I remember one teacher talking to another that I overheard the conversation, that they were talking about the ethnic islands that existed in Belmont that was quite apparent during lunchtime and at recess, and that was quite apparent. All the Filipinos hung around together. A lot of it had to do with the sports. If you belonged to a particular sports team or something, you tended to hang around with them. But in the main, there were the, quote, unquote, "ethnic islands."

I remember the number of Mexican mestizos that I knew in Belmont all tended to hang with the Mexicans, not with the Filipinos. And later it was, again, if the mother was Mexican, you tended to identify Mexican, or today you call it Hispanic. So that was understandable in that regard.

Singson

And did you used to hang out with the Filipino kids?

Mendoza

Yes. Again, that's so. And I still reflect on one question that one man asked me in later years. He asked me, "Why do you want to be Filipino?" And it stopped me cold. Like I say, I never gave it a thought, so that in high school I was Filipino, regardless of how I look, and it seemed like I was a classic case of the ugly duckling or the ugly dachshund that I like to use as an example of the Great Dane who was raised with dachshund puppies, and then, of course, he was a Great Dane. But in his mind, he was a dachshund. In my own mind, I looked like my father. Like every time I looked at myself in the mirror, and then hearing other people, and there is the one principle of identification of you see yourself as you see

others see you, and so unconsciously in my own mind being bombarded with the question, well, you don't look Filipino. So what am I supposed to do, stick my head in the oven or what? I don't know. So I still operate from the standpoint of to thine own self be true, and I feel Filipino, I know Filipino. There's nothing I can do about it.

Singson

Right. Now, we always hear about the JACL [Japanese American Citizens League sports leagues, so that's sort of a really formative experience for the Japanese American youth, so the basketball leagues and such. Did Filipinos have something similar in L.A.?

Mendoza

Yes. It was--

Singson

And were you participating in it?

Mendoza

It was nothing so formal, simply because the JACL, Japanese American Citizens League, formed up very early and recognized a need for programs. That did not occur in the Filipino community. Again, the only formal organization up to, say, 1946, was the Legionarios del Trabajo, a fraternity, or Caballeros de Dimas Alang [CDA], another fraternity. So the fraternities were the mainstay up until the formation of the Filipino American Community of Los Angeles, Incorporated [FACLA]. That was 1946. Even then, they did not recognize the need to start developing identification programs for youth or the consideration of youth as Filipino Americans, the developing of an identification process. That was recognized throughout and it was acted upon in the late 1960s, 1967, '68, when we started working on SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans].

Singson

So before then, before formal organizations, what did Filipino youth experience to sort of formalize their identity or to form and nurture their identity?

Mendoza

It was informal formation for basketball in particular. A team developed here in the Los Angeles area. This had to be, oh, mid-to-late forties. And I can't recall what they called themselves, because I think it was just to counteract the team that had formed in San Francisco called the Mangos. So San Francisco had the Mangos. I think they probably pulled in the Filipinos from the Oakland area as well. But greater Los Angeles, nothing. And like I say, there was a basketball team, and I can't for the life of me recall the name of it, at the time. Not being good in sports, I never paid that much attention to it.

Singson

Okay, right. So through high school, throughout high school, what were your experiences like, and sort of leading out to after high school in what you did with your career; did you sort of start looking for a job right away? You didn't think about going to college, or was college sort of somewhere on your horizon for you after high school?

Mendoza

At Belmont, I ran afoul of one of the counselors that was famous for the advice that he gave me, of convincing me that I had "good enough," quote, unquote, manual dexterity. "You ought to think about an industrial arts career, better not give too much thought to college. It's just doubtful that you're going to be able to make it. So as far as courses of study, better stick in industrial arts." So that meant the metal shop, print shop, wood shop. We had no garage, so, of course, that was out of the question. A lot of schools in the Los Angeles area did, but they were the richer schools, so, of course, they had all the accoutrements. But so that was pretty much--I took a lot of the educational basics and requirements, but

that was all, and then like I say, my lackluster career of scholastics in particular was [unclear]. It was in later years that I decided, "Time to go back." Anyway, that's totally another story.

But I did, because of--and I've got to give credit to this one teacher that I knew at Belmont. In my senior year, he took me aside after one class, and I don't know what motivated him to do it, but he had asked me, "What do you plan on doing? Do you plan on going to college?" So I talked to him about what the expectations of my father were, that he wanted me to become a lawyer. He had no idea what I'd taken in school. He had no idea what it would take to become a lawyer in the school system or educationally or monetarily; just become a lawyer, because it's very much the colonial thinking. So I resisted that, and that created another gulf between us. And this teacher convinced me that, well, I didn't think about going to college and learning enough to be of help to Daddy. Okay.

So after I graduated, I had one semester at L.A. City College, at which I had 3.5 I think it was, GPA, so that told me, well, okay. But I dropped out, mostly because I wanted to get married, and I wanted to work. Again, part of the problem was--and as it turned out, it was a major problem--four months after graduating, I had gotten one job delivering groceries, and I one morning noticed a very sore throat, and as things turned out over the week it got sorer. I went to the doctor. Turned out I had a malignant tumor, but I didn't know it was malignant at the time. All I knew as the tumor, and my doctor sent me to another doctor, in which case they said, "You've got to get radiation therapy."

And reflecting back years later, I wonder how come they didn't treat me in a hospital with the usual kind of therapy, and it's because we didn't have any money, neither money nor insurance. So I got radiation therapy that we paid as we went along on an outpatient basis, and because it was malignant, standard wisdom of the time was, "Well, if it doesn't come back in five years, he's okay." So because of the type of tumor apparently that I had, they didn't expect that I would see twenty-one.

So here I was, I'd just turned eighteen and, okay, I was pronounced clinically cured. I'd gone back to school, did that one semester at LACC. I then tried to get a job again and couldn't do it. Nobody wanted to hire me. And I found out later for what. They didn't want to take the time if somebody was going to be dead in a year, what.

Singson

For apprenticeship do you mean?

Mendoza

Yes, any kind of entry-level job. I couldn't do it. So all that faced me was either work in the fields, if I could catch up with the crews, or nothing. So at that time I was going with the girl who was to be my first wife, and her brother was my running buddy at the time, so we volunteered for the draft at the time, and this was just at the tail end of Korea.

Singson

Just so we could be clear about the names, so your first wife's name?

Mendoza

Was Roberta Mendoza.

Singson

Okay, and then your buddy's name?

Mendoza

Was named Ronnie Mendoza, who, again, we both volunteered for the draft in 1955. He was accepted, and, of course, because of my situation, I was rejected and qualified 4-F. So what was funny was that--and this I found out at the draft-board physical. So I went home and he went on to the processing, and he had called me from the bus station, wondering where I was. I said, "Well, I can run down and wave bye-bye to you, but I was rejected." And so he went on, and as luck would have it, or as fate would have it, he was selected for Officer Candidate School, went on to Officer Candidate

School, and as his career transpired, became a lieutenant colonel and was working with top brass in Cambodia at the time that President Nixon said that there were no military personnel in Cambodia. Mm-hmm.

Singson

Wow. He was Filipino?

Mendoza

He was Filipino. He was slated to be probably the first general, Filipino American general in the U.S. Army. As an aside, he was called "Hotdog" throughout Belmont and throughout the rest of his life. He was called Hotdog because in the movie "Back to Bataan," he had a one-second role of answering the question, "What did America bring us?" And, of course, these kids pop up, and he's the one who stands up and says, "Hotdogs." So that was kind of funny. What added to I think the irony of the situation was we both had the same last name, and reflecting back, a lot of people remember Mendoza, but in most cases they remember Hotdog Mendoza, not Al Mendoza, so that's kind of funny.

I digressed, didn't I?

Singson

No, that's okay. Through the 1950s, then, sort of moving on to--I'm trying to make connection to how, before you participated in the formation of SIPA, how the youth--because this is sort of a big concern for you, I mean SIPA is sort of really geared towards, or Oak Grove Camp is geared towards helping the youth. That's right. So I'm trying to sort of relate that formation in the 1960s and talk first about how youth identity is being formed through the fifties through different groups. So, for example, I'm thinking of--

Mendoza

Through forties and fifties, yes.

Singson

Right. So I'm thinking, for example, of FYA [Filipino Youth Activities] being formed in Seattle in the 1950s. Is there such a counterpart in California, or was FYA sort of the main driving force for the--

Mendoza

Very independent and distinct, and we didn't even know of its existence until later, so that forties and fifties--

Singson

Oh, really.

Mendoza

No, we didn't even know about it. Throughout the forties and fifties, in the association with Filipino friends and buddies, what was talked about from time to time, and what I had personally encountered was, every now and then we would hear the phrase, "Be proud to be Filipino."

Singson

And who was this coming from?

Mendoza

This was from various people. That was in social situations or listening to a Dimas Alang speech or something about pride of Filipino. And a lot of us, unbeknownst to the others, were thinking about pride, proud, pride, what? How? What does it mean to be Filipino? We didn't know. Not really knowing anything of the Philippines except the personal stories, that if we were fortunate enough to hear it from our fathers or his associates or friends or family, and as a consequence, we were constantly questioning, subconsciously if anything, what is it to be Filipino? What were the personal situations encountered through our lifetimes that either questioned our being Filipino, or minimized or diminished us as human beings or people or a person as Filipino? And so in the course of sharing stories and just being together, we found out that there was always a questioning among us of, what was it to be Filipino. But at home, in most cases, we were Filipino. Either the

language was being spoken in the home, or at least the food and some of the customs were Filipino. But all we knew was it was us. We didn't know that, okay, it's done before and in the Philippines. All we knew is, it was us.

In school it's different. The foods that we're supposed to be eating are not what we had at home. It's like they always talk about our sandwiches, the food that they served in the cafeteria, and I wasn't used to that. I was used to having rice with the meals. I think that's the part of being Filipino American--what it represented for me was a main entree on the plate could be American, roast beef, for example, or a hamburger steak, but always with rice. So, again, there was that merging of Filipino and American so that we had these doubts, if you will, questions in our mind about what does it mean. What am I as a Filipino American?

Singson

So what came out of these contrasts or these doubts and questions? Did you form a group of some sort to--

Mendoza

There was no formalizing of group. There was no formation of others. There was just that informal getting together, and we discovered or we became aware that, "Hey, we're being together as Filipino Americans." In, let's see, 1959, again, the socializing was Filipino American.

In 1961, 1960, the Philippines Women's Club was formed up, and it was the first time, through a lady named Mely Lopez, the Philippines Women's Club was formed up and was a part of the International Women's Club. Again, this is like Girl Scouts, so all over the world. For the first time, Philippines Women's Club. They formed up a Philippines Junior Women's Club. Again, this was a worldwide organization, and Philippines Junior Women's Club was part of it. First time ever. From that, the impetus to form up formally came over us, and in late 1961 we formed up the Filipino Civic League. And that was probably--yes, in fact, I know the only first time that I

was aware of that there was a formal organization and formal organizing around the whole concept of being Filipino American.

Singson

And who's a part of the Filipino Civic League? Who were the founders?

Mendoza

Myself, Dick Santos, Phil Ventura, Joe Calderon, Frank Sonico, gee, trying to recall them all. There was, oh, maybe ten of us.

Singson

Okay. And what were your activities and objectives?

Mendoza

The first thing was, of course, let's have a dance, fundraiser. Why? To pay for the stamps to send out and inform people that there's going to be a dance. We didn't recognize the contradictions involved at the time. But again, we saw the social side of it first and foremost. There was a subtext, if you will, in the formation, of being connected formally to the Filipino American Community of Los Angeles [FACLA, because we recognized, and that was part of our discussion was that there was no Filipino American input or connection with the Filipino community, and when we say the Filipino community, of course, we talk about the formal organization, Filipino Community. The only time that they included young people, younger than themselves, was for the queen contest every year, queen time contest only to bring in money, operational capital for the organization. We were dissatisfied with that.

Singson

What did you want? What, other than the queen contests?

Mendoza

More inclusion of Filipino Americans in the formal organization Filipino Community.

Singson

So, leadership, is that what you mean?

Mendoza

Approaching and approaching leadership roles. The closest we got to it was my being appointed parliamentarian to the administration of Ben Manibog. He was president of the Filipino Community at the time and the only one with the foresight to see that they needed more inclusion of the, quote, unquote, "younger kids." We were all in our thirties at the time, or late twenties. And as it turned out, what transpired was what always transpired, and up until this day, of the first generation being suspicious of the younger generation, younger Filipinos. Even though they're Filipino Americans, they're suspicious of them because they're still considered outsiders, and suspicious that they will "do something," quote, unquote, that will harm the organization or take over, or what they had in mind I'm not sure. But they were always suspicious and therefore reluctant to include Filipino Americans in whatever they did.

With one exception. In the year that I was parliamentarian, the Filipino Civic League was given the chairmanship, if you will, of the annual picnic, July Fourth picnic of the Filipino Community. We changed the venue. We included games, formalized games--that had never been done before--and as a consequence, that change was a little too much, too quickly. I was able to reflect on it in later years. And so, of course, the, quote, unquote, "seniors" were reluctant to do it again and criticized it up one side and down the other.

Singson

I'm trying to understand sort of this tension between the, quote, unquote, "seniors" and the youth. Most of these people would have their kids as well, right? Or would they have families of their own?

Mendoza

Yes.

Singson

So why is it that they seem very not willing, unwilling to be changed, to have these games and such youth-oriented activities? Are you guys very radical?

Mendoza

It's a power struggle, pure and simple. They didn't recognize, as you pointed out, that contradiction of, hey, your own children are Filipino American. Or if indeed the issue was mestizo, most of your kids are mestizo or there are going to be mestizos in your family sooner or later, so, better get used to it. So why that conflict? It continued on. There was always the suspicion that there was ulterior motives on the part of the younger kids.

What was an additional element that we found out as we went along was that unbeknownst to us--we just weren't aware of it--but all of the members of the Filipino Civic League were almost all mestizos. We never gave it a thought. But again, and that's how we were viewed. "That mestizo organization." Even though Phil Ventura, for example, was president, and he was full-blood.

Singson

Were you very radical in the Filipino Civic League? Meaning radical as in, what was your vision when you created your activities, or when you got other kids to participate in your activities?

Mendoza

Nothing radical in, say, the full definition of the word. We were, in the main, working with the system. There was a connection to the Philippines consulate, as an example. We worked very closely, because many of our wives, for example, were concurrent members of the Philippines Junior Women's Club, so there was that support network and group. And there was the crossing over of, we're supporting their function and they were always around for Filipino Civic League functions.

Singson

Can you describe, for example, even one or two particular activities that you organized through the Filipino Civic League? So you had the fundraising, and what--

Mendoza

Yes. One was trying to get the Filipino Community into shape, which was just a house at the time. The Filipino Community owned three lots on the corner of Temple [Street] and Burlington [Avenue], and the corner house and lot was the, quote, unquote, "main building."

Singson

And what was this used for?

Mendoza

For all the meetings. And I think they did some gambling in there, probably, knowing Filipinos. So that's all it was. It was just a house. Filipino Civic League volunteered to paint the house, so it didn't look as shabby, and we planted ivy on the outside and made it a little more presentable, so we could say, "Hey, this is Filipino Community." It wasn't Shabbyville. That lasted only so long, because, again, people got tired, and that coupled with the reluctance of the seniors to really include us and to take us seriously--a lot of the guys got burned out. And so I'm encompassing, oh, two, three years of time, so that gradually guys burned out and they went on on their own way, so that Filipino Civic League existed as the paper tiger, if nothing else.

Singson

What do you mean?

Mendoza

Well, the name was known, but there were no meetings, no meetings anymore. Phil Ventura was still the president. I was vice president, and the only time that it was existent, if you will, if there was a social function where Filipino Civil League was invited, for example, to a party at the Philippines consulate. The home of one of the vice consuls, who had a very large family, Mr. Florencio

Dumapias, and the family was--the kids in particular were very sociable and well known to a lot of the young kids and young people.

So beyond that, nothing really occurred until 1965, when the FYA [Filipino Youth Activities] decided on their California Here We Come trip, and again, it was to march in the Miss Universe Parade in Long Beach. As luck would have it--well, I get ahead of myself. It was up to the Filipino Civic League to work on the bivouac of all the members of the Princessas and the Filipino Youth Activities to be housed here in the Los Angeles area for the participation in the parade. So it was all Filipino Civic League members' houses that we used and had set up. Why us? Phil Ventura was the brother of Fred Cordova, who was head of the Filipino Youth Activities, the FYA.

Singson

Right. And just to kind of clarify, how was FACLA participating on this, the FYA tour? Or did they have anything to do with it?

Mendoza

Yes, yes. Again, because of the Filipino Civic League efforts and philosophy, if you will, of connecting Filipino American youth and activities to Filipino Community, we got the Filipino Community to sponsor an event honoring and showing the Princessa Drill Team and Filipino Youth, FYA. As it turned out, instead of setting up a venue where you could have a drill team marching and parading, for example, Belmont's football field, no. They decide to have a dance in downtown L.A. at the Alexandria Hotel. Several things came out of that. We, Phil and I in particular, determined that these guys will never learn. They're stuck in a cocoon. They're stuck in a rut that they can't see beyond, they're so deep in it. And the fact of the venue being what it was, forced the Princessas to develop and use a routine that they would not have thought of otherwise, of working in a restricted space. And as it turned out, it worked out for both of us. So, one, it was a fundraiser for the community, and the FYA got to perform in a venue that they were not used to, and it came out well.

Singson

Right. And it was a learning experience for the FYA as well.

Mendoza

The other part of the experience was that come the day of the parade, Miss Universe, Miss Philippines was voted Miss Universe. Big celebration, first time, Philippines. Miss Philippines was Miss Universe. So it was just ironic that the FYA was there, and they marched in front of her float in the parade. What had happened as a side situation, was that everybody in the household, because everybody was housed and bivouacked in the Los Angeles area, they all got on the bus and were transported to Long Beach, but somebody forgot Fred Cordova, the leader of the FYA. He was left behind. How'd that happen? I don't know. We were at Long Beach when we found out, so I had to run to Los Angeles to pick up Fred, to take him back to Long Beach. So as it turned out, they had to operate without their--

Singson

Moderator.

Mendoza

--yes, their drum major, as it were. So it forced them, again, into a situation that they were not prepared for, but came out with shining colors.

Singson

That's great. I wanted to learn what the impact of FYA is for the Filipino Civic League or the members of it, and also, perhaps, what you're doing to Los Angeles.

Mendoza

Pride. One simple word, pride. It was the first time that such an activity was seen by the mainstream, that was Filipino, unique, innovative. It was just really something spectacular for us and really

stimulated thought in that direction of, we can do something Filipino and still be Filipino American.

Singson

But can I ask though, we've heard of Bayanihan [Dance Troupe], has done tours, Bayanihan, the dance troupe. Was that not in the minds of Filipinos here in L.A.?

Mendoza

Yes. They, coincidentally, and I'm glad you brought it up, they were brought to Los Angeles, connected with the Philippines Women's Club that I recall, as a fundraiser, and performed in Los Angeles, and that also was the first time ever, and, again, aimed at the mainstream community. So we felt very proud again about that. This was Filipino and, again, a source of pride, and again stimulating the thought of, "But what does that mean in terms of me being Filipino American? Does being Filipino make me less American? Am I truly Filipino?" And so for a lot of Filipino Americans, it stimulated the question of, what does it mean to be Filipino American, and can I be Filipino American, or must I be American or Filipino? And so they started questioning and putting it into personal terms. What does it mean for me to be Filipino American?

Singson

And this awareness, the FYA's impact, did it translate to some kind of formation of a group or activity, or what came out of this pride?

Mendoza

Only through the Filipino Civic League and springing from the Filipino Civic League and the 1965 event. Also, in 1965, to again put it in context, the Watts riot, okay. So that was occurring. As a matter of fact, it started the day that we said goodbye to the FYA and they went back to Seattle.

Singson

Wow. On that day when the Watts riot--

Mendoza

Yes, coincidentally. You can't blame that on us. So from that, it's 1965, it was around that time that I decided in my own personal life that I wasn't making it. I'm raising a family all the while that we were involved in the Filipino Civic League activities, our social lives, I'm married. We have two beautiful children. I'm trying to raise them the best I can with the job that I have, and in '65 I'm becoming more and more dissatisfied with my personal situation and finally recognize I'm not going to go any further than I am now. It seems impossible. I've got to go back to school.

As a consequence, in '66 I decided to go back to school. Now, I'm raising two children. I'm married, and how am I going to do this? So undoubtedly, I'm going to have to work part-time. My wife, who was also working part-time at the time, is going to have to continue working. Whether or not she's going to be able to work full-time we weren't sure yet. So with the support and help from my parents, I went back to school, held down upwards of three part-time jobs at the time, and it was in this time period, from '66 to '70--this is when we're generating, and this is an offspring of what transpired in the early sixties of Filipino American.

So as I'm going to school, I'm still personally maintaining this connection and starting to do research into Filipino. What is our situation? Nobody knows. There's no statistics. There's no data. Nobody keeps anything except discovering that Filipinos are included in "other". So for the first time I recognized that up until now, we've been "other", so that was impetus for me to start gaining more and more research. In that process and during that time, again, putting it in context, the same kind of thinking of, "What are we? Where are we going?", is generating as an offshoot and on the tail coats of the Civil Rights Movement of the black community.

Singson

Right, yes.

Mendoza

There's the "Yellow Power" Movement at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles]. There is the development of the organization of the Council of Oriental Organizations in Los Angeles. Roy Morales, who I knew sporadically from the mid-to-late fifties, when he arrived here--

Singson

I'm sorry, from where? Just to clarify.

Mendoza

From the Philippines. Yes, Roy's another case of, in the Japanese community he would be called Kibei, born in the United States, sent back to the mother country, and then brought back again. Roy was born here, went to the Philippines, was raised in the Philippines, and came here back in the mid-fifties, so that time period is missing from his life, in terms of his life of being in the United States. So Roy had connected with the Council of Oriental Organizations through his connection to Kay Kokubun, who was a minister in the same denomination of Roy.

Singson

Which is?

Mendoza

The Filipino Christian Church, being of the Disciples of Christ, I believe it is, that was established by Roy's father. Again, that's the connection. So Roy is a member of Council of Oriental Organizations. He's going in the direction of trying to develop data. He finds out that I'm trying to do the same thing, and a gentleman by the name of Conrad Salumbides was also trying to establish that Filipino inclusion, development of data, why no data. So all of that, again, making a cake, putting it all together. Council of Oriental Organizations then participates in the "Yellow Power"--we can't call it movement yet, because it was just students at UCLA who were starting to go in that direction.

Coincidentally, the development of the Yellow Brotherhood in the Crenshaw area was being formed, which was--Yellow Brotherhood probably started as the street gang in the Crenshaw area that was known for street gangs, and probably from that, the formation of Yellow Brotherhood that developed into more drug-resistant effort.

Singson

Okay. So the gangs themselves actually--

Mendoza

We're talking about simultaneous explosions that--

Singson

Can I ask, you seem to differentiate the Yellow Power, and just for the sake of clarification, and a separate sort of Filipino research. So who was involved--

Mendoza

Delegation, if you will, or contingency.

Singson

Right. So who is involved in the Yellow Power early movement in UCLA? Are they mostly Japanese, Chinese, or--

Mendoza

Essentially Japanese and Chinese, and that was the mainstay and the beginnings of the Asian American Studies Center. From that they held a--what did they call it--Asians Coming Together, I think it was, where everybody was invited, and that's where they started this whole idea of Yellow Power, and they had buttons "Yellow Power." So I still remember Conrad, myself, and Roy were there, and we were the only Filipinos. So, in essence, what I recognized later was what we were saying was, "Hey, us too. You're the Yellow Power Movement, and whatever things that you're saying occurred to the Japanese and the Chinese," and later on the Koreans, "happened to the Filipinos." There was more to that, but I can go into that later. But at that time, that was it.

As to reinforce the importance of Council of Oriental Organizations, they got stronger. Students at UCLA became stronger, developing more and more momentum, and it was still pretty much a Yellow Power Movement.

The formation of the EYOA [Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency], the poverty agency, was developed in the Los Angeles area. Now, this was to play a key role in the development of social-service agencies. Now, the basis for the Council of Oriental Organizations, again, was riding on the coattails of the Civil Rights Movement. "Hey, we also experience poverty," and so on, so they formed up a proposal for/from the EYOA, again, the poverty-funding agency, for an experimental program called Oriental Service Center, first ever social services. It established a principle that we had been fomenting all along, was that with the Asian community, it's going to be difficult to establish need first, and then the agency, rather than the agency first, which will--

Singson

Address?

Mendoza

Yes, I was going to say force, force need to bring out the actual need of the services. Once the Oriental Service Center was formed, they came out of the woodwork, and it was the first time ever that it was all Asian, and at that time the inclusion of Pacific Islander through the participation of a Samoan gentleman by the name of Ernie Mann, who was a member of the Fa'a Fatasi, which was an organization of chieftains in the Samoan community. So with his participation plus Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino counselors, there was the Oriental Service Center providing social services for the Asian-Pacific Islander community.

Singson

Well, just to kind of clarify this, are the students at UCLA really involved with this? Because it seems like this is sort of a grassroots outside of the campus.

Mendoza

Good point. It was in the community. UCLA was still Ivy League, the ivy towers, totally separated from community, and it remained that way until later years, when the position held by, ironically, Meg Thornton now, and previous to her it was held by Warren Furatani, of connecting UCLA as an academic institution with community.

Singson

Okay. So what were the issues that the students were concerned for during that time, at UCLA separate from--because it seems like you're at this time wearing two hats. You are still at UCLA, working with the other Yellow Power Movement, and then at the same time, you're also working on this Oriental Service Center. Is that right?

Mendoza

Yes. I was still on the outside. I still wasn't part of Council of Oriental Organizations. I wasn't a member yet of Oriental Service Center, as a staff member. That came later. So, in essence, I was still working with Roy and Conrad in developing participation, so that any time there was a meeting or something, we were there because we wanted to say, "Hey, us too. There's no way you're going to keep us out. And like it or not, we're here."

Singson

Sure. Right.

Mendoza

Now, I'm at UCLA under the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] program, because I couldn't get in. Even though I had a 3.6 at the time, I couldn't get in on a regular program. It was only because, again, I was doing a lot of volunteering while I was a student, in various organizations, mainstream organizations, including the advisory committee, community advisory committee to Belmont [High] Adult School. One of the counselors at the Adult School asked me--I was going to LACC [Los Angeles Community College] at the time--he says, "Where do you plan on continuing your

education?" And he says, "I hope you're planning on continuing." I said, "Well, yeah, I'm thinking about it, but I'll probably go to Cal State L.A. That's all I could afford." And he says, "Let me submit an application for you to UCLA." So, "Okay." Meantime I had an application working for Cal State.

Turned out UCLA accepted me under that special program, and I found out later they accepted me only because they thought I was Chicano; Mexican. I'm receiving all this stuff in Spanish. But I never went to any formal organizations, even though I was invited. I'm trying to recall the Mexican organizations on campus. I was invited to meetings. I never--I just couldn't relate to it.

So anyway, I'm at UCLA on an EOP program. Now, while I'm doing this, I'm still volunteering with Belmont Adult School, and I'm still working with Roy and Conrad.

Singson

Okay. So just to also clarify, Roy and Conrad were at UCLA at the same time that you were, and you were doing a social-service program? What was your major? What were you working towards?

Mendoza

Sociology at UCLA.

Singson

Okay. Right. And what came out of your research? You mentioned that you saw the need for research about Filipinos, the Filipino community. What came out of--

Mendoza

What came out of that? Nothing. There was still no data. Nobody was developing any data. Nobody was working towards it, because it wasn't popular. Of course, you as a Ph.D. student knows that. You're going to work on something that's going to be popular and is going to be accepted and is going to get you a good grade. So to this day, it's difficult to get anybody to work on something that's not

popular. It's going to be connected to their aspirations and achieving a form of celebrity or a grade.

Singson

Right. Okay, well, let's go back to Oriental Service Center. Did you actually become a member soon after? Because you mentioned that you were just sort of trying to get in the group, or whenever they had meetings you wanted to participate. Did you actually get involved fully?

Mendoza

Yes. The Council of Oriental Organizations had meetings, so I would attend the meetings and that was pretty much it. Oriental Service Center was formed and developed, established, and in the summer of 1970, the Council of Oriental Organizations--I should say the Oriental Service Center submitted a proposal for a youth program to participate in the Summer Youth Employment Program under EYOA, again which is the poverty-serving agency of Los Angeles. So I submitted for the directorship of that program. I got it. Now, this is summer of 1970.

I was determined to--let me preface this. Up until this time, for two years previously, the EYOA had funded, quote, unquote, "Asian" programs for summer youth--

Singson

For example.

Mendoza

--summer youth employment, youth to be paid to work during the summer. There were only two groups that had submitted proposals at that time, Chinatown Teen Post and JACL [Japanese American Citizens League], so, again, to EYOA, Asian meant Japanese/Chinese. The Oriental Service Center got the summer proposal. I'm running it. I'm determined to make it Asian. First time, I included the Samoans. I worked through Ernie to get the Samoan community to donate time to oversee the youth-

employment program of Samoan youth. I did the same thing with the Korean community, who up until that time had not been included.

So SIPA, for the first time, would be included, and this is when we started bringing together the elements that would make up the first SIPA, which, as an aside, was not meant to be an organization but a conference, a one-time-only conference, and later, later years. So it was the SIPA element that was to be the sponsoring group. What made it difficult is that those who were in charge to administer the program had to be volunteers, because there was only money enough to pay the participants. That was difficult. So with the inclusion of all these volunteers--now, people were willing to volunteer, and it was all young people, because at the time, it was the sixties. There was this, quote, unquote, "radical movement" of participation of young people, again, part of the Civil Rights Movement, of volunteers, people participating, putting yourself on the line. So that occurred in the Asian Pacific Island community.

Singson

So just to kind of clarify, SIPA was already formed as an aside at this point, before you wrote that proposal.

Mendoza

In 1969 we had the first SIPA conference. Again, all volunteers, and the planning that occurred in 1968 into 1969 was all volunteer. Where did we have it? At the Filipino Christian Church, because that was the only place where we could meet. We couldn't meet at the Filipino Community [center]. Why? They were suspicious of us. Again, we ran afoul of that, that same thinking.

Singson

Let's talk about the roots of SIPA. How did this idea come out?

Mendoza

As I mentioned before, the questioning spilling over from the Filipino Civic League and more and more with a lot of Filipino

Americans that I knew, this whole idea of what does it mean to be Filipino American, what does it mean to be Filipino? We don't know what it means to be Filipino. We know American, but we don't know what it means to be Filipino, or the fact that we epitomized the merging of those two concepts. In talking with Roy--and, again, this was what I called our Bituka conferences, where we would get together, comparing what transpired at the various meetings that we had attended, and we talked it over at the Nipa Hut, which was a Filipino restaurant, over bituka and beers. A lot of things transpired over those, what I called the bituka conferences.

So as it was, that was one concept that we tossed back and forth in terms of, "How can we generate this development of identity with the Filipino American youth groups or community? It's not going to do. They don't know how, they don't care." So we generated that thinking into thoughts of, "Let's have a conference," because conferences were very popular at the time. Okay, conference. This is in late 1968 into '69.

Because of the--again, to put it in context, in the generation of the Asian American Movement, it was becoming more and more aware of Asian American. There were two gentlemen who were staff members of the L.A. County Human Relations Commission, Alan Kumamoto and John Saito, who would figure in very, very closely with the early formation of SIPA. Were it not for their participation, were it not for their help and aid through resources available from the Human Relations Commission--

Singson

Financial resources?

Mendoza

Yes, that included, and financial only in terms of offering the site of the first SIPA conference. Why don't we put it on pause right now?

Singson

Sure, yes.[Recorder turned off]

Mendoza

So we were meeting at the--let's see, let me back up here. So Roy and I are becoming aware that, hey, why not? We can have a conference where we're going to bring together Filipino American youth that we know, and, in fact, encourage participation through other people that we know, and we'll have a conference. Okay. He knew Alan Kumamoto. "Alan, can you help us?" "Yes." Alan being the community organizer that he was, and for me, he's the grand master of community organizing, along with John Saito, who was his colleague at the time, so they both agreed to help us. We met at the Filipino Christian Church. More people were being brought in, Jeannie Abella and Joe Abella, mostly students and Filipino American street people, who are in the Filipino community at the time, who--

Singson

Attended the church?

Mendoza

No, they didn't attend. None of us attended church except Roy. It was just the meeting hall that we used. And so as we met, more and more people included themselves in the planning, and what it was, it was the planning committee, and more and more people included, and, again, through the planning meetings we developed the whole notion of and the name for the conference. "What are we going to call it?" "We'll call it SIPA," very obviously Filipino, identifiably Filipino, and standing for Search to Involve Philippine Americans, because the whole idea of "Pilipino" had not come about yet. Search to Involve Philippines Americans, that's all it was was a conference to get Filipino American kids to identify themselves, become aware that they are Filipino Americans, and to get them involved into generating more in terms of being Filipino American. That was the whole idea, to mobilize the Filipino American youth and to give them an ability and venue to be together as Filipino Americans.

Singson

Well, this is a good point to end, I mean just this first conference, but before we end this session, I just was hoping that you can describe for us what were the activities within that conference itself that helped you realize your goal while you were planning. So you were planning for this to be a means for the students to become aware. What in particular happened during the conference itself that you think made it successful?

Mendoza

Oh, several things. Again, the participation, volunteer participation of people who were not connected to University [UCLA]. Filipino Americans who were in private life, working, who were in private life or just on the street, a lot of homeless. Not necessarily homeless, they were just bouncing around at that time. "Crashing" was very popular. Undoubtedly, a number of the people were, quote, unquote, "illegal." I mean they had no papers or had overstayed their visa, and non-Filipinos as well. There were several people who participated who were not Filipino, who just believed in the idea of forming up the whole notion of Filipino American and youth. That developed out of it.

The first night we were there--oh, let me back up. Where did we have the conference? Camp Oak Grove, which was a probation camp of L.A. County that was secured and was empty at the time, but was secured through the intervention of Alan Kumamoto and John Saito of L.A. County Human Relations Commission. Again, the county tie-in. So subsequently, L.A. County was a party to the conference. So we're at Camp Oak Grove, a chance to get out of the city, okay, and in most cases, Filipino American youth first time encountering each other, and they were from various parts of the city and areas, so there was that first.

So we're at Camp Oak Grove. Friday night, usual camp fare, because the American cook was an American cook, and so there was usual probation-camp fare, which is pretty lackluster. Saturday night--and it was during Saturday was the big event, when we had

various workshops and again all with goals of talking about being Filipino American and what does that mean and identity and whatnot, plus special speakers, Larry Itliong and Phil [Philip] Vera Cruz from the Filipino Farmworkers Union, first time ever. We had tried to get Roman Gabriel as a speaker, who was quarterback for the L.A. Rams at the time. He just handed over the request to his agent and let him handle it, and the agent said no. Of course. "He's a big man. He has no time." Okay. That really killed it as far as me being a fan of his.

Anyway, so the fact of Larry Itliong and Phil Vera Cruz, we're getting firsthand information about the grape strike, how it was started by the Filipinos, how the Filipinos very quickly got overshadowed and taken over by Cesar Chavez and the Mexicans, and again it confirmed for us and cemented, if you will, what had happened to the Filipinos all along throughout their history in America. They got overshadowed, becoming, the overworked phrase is minority within a minority. But we get very quickly overshadowed. Which got me to thinking from that, why, why does that happen to us all the time?

Anyway, going back to the conference, so that was a first, and, again, a source of pride for the kids, finding out that, hey, it was Filipinos who were really doing something. Plus that evening, my ex-wife [Roberta Mendoza] and her friend [Frances Hernandez Blank], who was a very good cook, came up to cook for the kids, again, volunteers, Filipino dishes. The camp cook was watching this whole process. It was amazing for her, so she learned something from this. But the mood of the group, because of what had transpired during the day, plus the fact of a Filipino dinner, oh, the whole mood, the whole atmosphere of the group had just transformed. It was such electricity.

Which evolved into that evening where some of the guys had brought up a few musical instruments, a guitar, there was a couple of guitars, and a bass, if I recall, and they even got some spoons and stuff out of the kitchen, and they were jamming in the kitchen. This group transpired into a group later on called Barkada, okay?

Again from the SIPA conference. So a number of things came out of that. But the electricity generating just from that day carried on, and as a consequence, while SIPA was meant to be only one conference, it evolved into another conference and an organization.

Singson

And that's a history of its own, which we'll probably take up for next session. I think this is a good spot to end. Thank you very much.

Mendoza

Of course. [End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (June 20, 2011)

Singson

Today is the twentieth of June [2011], and we are recording our third session with Al Mendoza. We are here in Brea, and this is Precious Singson doing the interview.

How are you, Al?

Mendoza

Fine, thank you.

Singson

Very good. So on the last session, we ended with the formation, the organization of SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans], the first SIPA conference held in the late sixties. But I'd like to back up a little bit and talk about your relationships with other social workers, particularly Roy Morales, who played sort of a large role in Los Angeles, and you playing sort of a partnership with him. So maybe let's back up on how you met Roy and talk about what kind of working relationship you began with him in the sixties.

Mendoza

Okay. Let's see, that would be '65--look at my notes. Let's see, '65, right. We had the Filipino Civic League sponsored the Los Angeles trip [FYA's California Here We Come] and coordination there, so '66

and then into '67, '68. Roy contacted me regarding a meeting that he was having with Conrad Salumbidez and wanted to know if I wanted to sit in. They wanted to know if I had any Filipino data. The data that I had finally dug out, the only thing that I could find available, turned out they already had it. So what we just did was talked about general efforts being made throughout the activities of Filipinos in general and the Asian community at the time, and it was just a bull session really.

From then, Roy and I formed an unholy alliance, if you will. It seemed like we were almost constantly on the same wavelength, and because of Roy's contacts employment-wise--he was working as a counselor for an agency in Long Beach, and that was work-wise. I myself was a student. So what we were thinking about and doing was always in terms of volunteer, just activities, never gave any thought of recompense.

So the Council of Oriental Organizations was being part of a conference at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles], I believe it was, or UCLA connected was at the same time, coincidentally, starting an Asian movement that they in consequence started calling Yellow Power, the Yellow Power Movement. So this had to be '68, '69. Again, other things were happening in the Los Angeles area that just meshed into what was going on with Council of Oriental Organizations, UCLA, Roy. Roy's connection to Council of Oriental Organizations was through the several people that he knew, in particular Kay Kokubun, who was a minister of the same faith as his father when he started the Filipino Christian Church. So there was already that network, that social connection, and so Roy is sitting on the Council of Oriental Organizations. He brings in Conrad Salumbidez, who he already knew, and very possibly through, again, the Filipino Christian Church. That part I wasn't too clear on myself.

Singson

And how did he learn about you? Is it through UCLA, or is it your work or your service--

Mendoza

Roy knowing about me, okay. Probably through the effort, our outreach efforts from the Filipino Civic League back in the early sixties. Again, we tried to network with other Filipino organizations. It was at that time that we found that we were being identified as "that mestizo group." Okay? And we never really thought about it until we heard that. And when I say we, it was Joe Calderon, who was a close family friend, and I had known him since, oh, since junior high school. It's a situation of you know the guy, you know the name, and then in subsequent years you find out, oh, he's related to and knows--so it turns out that there's a social fabric already in place that you weren't aware of. Anyway, Joe Calderon. And we realized that, yes, most all of the membership, with the exception of Phil Ventura, were all mestizos.

I said, okay, which also got me to thinking as an aside that most of the original revolutionary group in the Philippines, again the same, we're almost all mestizos. I said, there's got to be something in that. Anyway, some more research.

Singson

So just sort of heading back to this idea of social work spurring these new activities that are coming out, or the organizations that are coming out. Why is it that people like yourself who went into sociology, Roy Morales, who was a social worker, and then this is sort of connecting it to Seattle, all the way out to Seattle, you know, the DPAA [Demonstration Project for Asian Americans, what is it about during these times that you think really spurred the movement to make these organizations or activities?

Mendoza

Reflecting back, it had to be the connection in context of the times. We're talking about the Civil Rights Movement, the activities in the South, Martin Luther King, the Brown Power Movement, if you will, in East L.A. and other areas of the Hispanic community. In those days, it was the Chicano community. So as far as it being a social

workers' thing, it had to start with Roy Morales. He was a social worker, had an MSW [Master's in Social Work] Because of my activities, I was already leaning towards doing that kind of work anyway, so that '69, '70, '71 I was accepted to the School of Social Work at UCLA after I graduated, so that was my intended direction. But that didn't pan out for various reasons I'll get into later. But it was through Roy.

Again, in the final evaluation, he played a very catalytic role as far as developing a momentum to where we--we being as people participated--really got into gear and generated a real direction and more of an organizing effort, so that Roy, I, Conrad Salumbidez--this is '67, '68--Council of Oriental Organizations, that developed into Oriental Service Center, which Kay Kokubun became the director, and that was the first ever social-services agency in Los Angeles that served Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and Samoan, first ever. So that was historically significant in and of itself. Roy served on the board. I started participating because of that connection, participating in the board meetings, and, again, networking and becoming aware of people, activities, so it just escalated and evolved from there.

Again, in most cases either Roy and/or as time ensued, Roy and I playing catalytic roles in bringing in and knowing other people and networking. The first example of the first connection with Seattle for me was through the Filipino Youth Activities in their California Here We Come Effort, and only because the president of the Filipino Civic League, of which I was vice president, was Phil Ventura, brother to Fred Cordova in Seattle. So there was that connection, and the connection they needed to think of making the effort at all to Los Angeles. So, again, the network is being established and expanded.

Singson

Okay. Let's talk about DPAA then. How did it begin, as far as you know, and how did it become established in Los Angeles and two other cities?

Mendoza

Again, the proposal was submitted to NIMH, National Institute of Mental Health--

Singson

Okay. By who?

Mendoza

--by Special Services for Groups, which was--I keep wanting to say C-3--a charitable organization at any rate.

Singson

Is it an Asian American organization, this charitable--

Mendoza

No. It ironically was formed because of what they called the Pachuco riots in Los Angeles in 1943, and from that the social work gelled into an agency. George Nishinaka was already a social worker, and when I say social worker, he was certificated. So he's director at the time. They submit the proposal with the help of Asian American Social Workers, people in Asian American Social Workers, primary of which was a man by the name of Jim Miyano. His name becomes significant because he is the first, or I should say charter director of the Demonstration Project for Asian Americans. There would be three locations, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Each location would have a director, an advisory board, and staff. There would be an overall board of directors, upon which I sat. Jim Miyano was the overall, again, director, headquartered in Los Angeles.

So, again, it was a very mixed-up time, for lack of a better word, because at the time, I was, let's see, 1970, where was I? I was just finishing up school, UCLA, last efforts there. So the networking that I'm developing at the time--I'm hired by the Oriental Service Center as a youth coordinator. I'm trying to bring in the tie in with the Demonstration Project. I'm hired as a youth coordinator. We have that first summer program, Summer Youth Employment Program. I, at the same time, write the proposal for a Services For Asian

American Youth proposal for Oriental Organization. The first Far West convention occurs in Seattle, okay. Now the Seattle tie in again.

Singson

Right. This has its roots in Los Angeles? I thought that the Far West--

Mendoza

No, it was in Seattle.

Singson

--was all in Seattle, right.

Mendoza

So we went, and I went because I was youth coordinator for Oriental Service Center, a natural tie in. Meantime, I'm also writing a proposal, so there's a lot happening all at the same time, okay. So the Far West Convention in Seattle in '71, and it's at that time that SSG, I keep wanting to say Special Services for Groups, but it's SSG in my own mind, they submit the proposal. It's okayed, so there's three organizations and three efforts, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle. Dorothy Cordova is the director of the Seattle--I keep wanting to call it a chapter, but this is not a chapter. It's--

Singson

Right. Its agency or--

Mendoza

Anyway, their agency.

Singson

The San Francisco one is headed by?

Mendoza

I've forgotten that and I shouldn't have, because San Francisco was critical, as history will show. And then there's Los Angeles. Now,

'72, okay, again time-wise, I'm leaving the job. Late '71 I leave the job with the Oriental Service Center. I then am hired for a new agency that's being developed, Asian American Voluntary Action Center, okay. Charter director. It's formally connected with the Los Angeles Voluntary Action Center, or Volunteer Bureau as it was popularly referred to.

Singson

Is it through the city?

Mendoza

No. They [unclear] it. It's connected to United Way. So I'm director there. At the same time--now, this is, oh, early-to-mid '72, again, all of these activities going on at the same time--I'm being recruited by the Los Angeles County Department of Community Services [DCS], because their Filipino coordinator is leaving. They're recruiting me to replace him. At the same time, the Demonstration Project for Asian Americans is recruiting for staff. They're recruiting me as the Filipino coordinator for that. Now I'm tossing, okay, which do I go with? So as luck would have it, I join the Department of Community Services L.A. County. That starts my L.A. County career. I'm then recruited to sit on the board of the advisory board for the Los Angeles as well as the national board, or the overall board of directors of the Demonstration Project. Okay.

This is working out. The overall director is Jim Miyano. I'm also very familiar with the director of the Los Angeles agency.

Singson

You mean the voluntary--

Mendoza

No. I've left them, okay? Jeannie Abella is hired as a Filipino coordinator for the Los Angeles Demonstration Project, all right, the Los Angeles agency. Is this still making any sense?

Singson

Yes, yes, yes. Okay, we're following it and then later on we can parse out.

Mendoza

Yes. I need to make drawings, really.

Singson

No, that's fine. I think this is making a lot of sense. So right at this point, just to clarify, you are hired in the L.A. Community Services Center.

Mendoza

Right, I'm working--this is my employment now, at L.A. County.

Singson

And then you're also serving in the national board of directors for the DPAA--

Mendoza

That's correct.

Singson

--and meanwhile, Jeannie Abella is sort of the--

Mendoza

She took the job that I was first recruited for.

Singson

Right.

Mendoza

Right.

Singson

As the L.A. sort of chapter.

Mendoza

The L.A. staff. As time proceeds, in San Francisco there was an apparent political rift, and some, I guess, politically connected people didn't like particularly the way the San Francisco project was being run, for whatever reasons, okay. There could be almost any number of reasons. It could be, and probably in all likelihood, boiled down to personal reasons. At any rate, the entire project is defunded. It only ran, oh, maybe a year and a half, year and a half, two years.

Singson

Okay. Well, let's kind of go back. What is the function, or what was the purpose of the DPAA when it was first proposed?

Mendoza

To develop and outreach social services for the Asian American community, because up until that time, there was only the one, Oriental Service Center. So, in essence, the general theory and the general reason for its formation was to outreach into the Asian American community to develop interest in not only activities, but social services, interest in social services, as well as community organizing in areas of social-service needs, okay.

Singson

So sort of in specific ways what happened in L.A., so were you outreaching to students or to youth, or what in particular was Jeannie involved in?

Mendoza

Yes. The Los Angeles group was, interestingly, developing more data than--I can't say either San Francisco or Seattle, because I'm not quite familiar what it was they had developed. But the Los Angeles agency, as an example, developed the demographic data for the Los Angeles area for the Asian American community, came out with a set of maps that showed the dispersal of the various Asian American communities. First time ever. Nobody's ever had any data on the Asian American community. Finally, for example, in the Filipino community, "Ah. This is where we all are." We knew

because of being raised in the L.A. area, we knew approximately where there were pockets, but nothing really formal. So just by virtue of that, they played an extremely important role.

Singson

And what was your input on this?

Mendoza

Only on the advisory board. We had to be very careful about distinct lines of demarcation, in so much as, "This is my role and I can't go any further," because of my employment with the Department of Community Services. So there can't be any accusations further down the road of, "Well, he was using county time and doing work that is questionable as far as being related to county work, his role as county." But that actually was the beautiful part about my position with L.A. County, because it was for community organizing, particularly in the Filipino community, of community groups. So on the one hand, it meshed entirely with what DPAA was going to do and was doing and what my role as Filipino coordinator with DCS.

Singson

Well, I'm not quite sure, if you can maybe elaborate why there shouldn't be any compromises, or maybe there has to be limits on your work in the community center versus your work at DPAA. I don't quite understand why.

Mendoza

Well, yes, as a county employee, you are limited in, or you have to be very careful about the role that you serve. I'm trying to think of some proper words that you can use as far as, there can't be any--

Singson

Is it use of resources, perhaps?

Mendoza

No. There can't be any even--oh, gosh, I'm having trouble with words today--any impression of collusion, any impression of

personal gain. There had to be the strict role of coordination and coordinator with the Department of Community Services. [Interruption. Recorder turned off]

Singson

Okay, we're back to recording, and we just sort of left off with you trying to parse out sort of your limits as an L.A. County worker. So let's just go through DPAA first, and then let's go back to your work in L.A. County and what came of it. So I'd like to really discuss even further what happened with DPAA, because sort of Seattle has its own history, and it's a little bit more well known, and L.A., I think, there really isn't much written about this, so let's try and maybe get on recording your own recollection of what happened to the DPAA here. So what came out of it?

Mendoza

Well, the DPAA here just fizzled. Example, Jeannie Abella was the Filipino coordinator when the agency folded, and she went back to devoting more time to SIPA, but there wasn't a specific leaving of SIPA. It was just working on SIPA in her spare time, and meantime, I and Roy doing the same thing. Regardless of what we were having to do for our rice bowls, as it were, there was still the connection to the development of SIPA.

Singson

And the DPAA then, really the most significant thing that came out of it was just the survey of the demographics over there?

Mendoza

Yes.

Singson

Okay.

Mendoza

Yes, specific data about the Filipino American community.

Singson

Then what happened to San Francisco and Seattle?

Mendoza

San Francisco just folded. We never heard very much more about it. But the people that were involved in its agency spun off into other activities. It was also at that time that there was more and more gang activity going on in San Francisco. The people connected with the Demonstration Project, as well as other agencies, started working more closely with each other related to, specifically, the gang activity.

Now, Seattle had an opportunity. Let me back up. The proposal and the project of the Demonstration Project for Asian Americans was under Region X of NIMH. I believe it's NIMH or the other department--I keep wanting to call it department of the federal government--was under Region X. It gets defunded. Technically, Seattle and Washington is part of Region IX, so it's an entirely different region, which means it's a different league, if you will. So they right away write and submit a proposal, doing the same thing, to Region IX. They get funded. That's why the Demonstration Project for Asian Americans, and I'll assume it's still called Asian Americans, still occurs and continues in Seattle. Dorothy Cordova, as far as I know, was still the director.

Singson

Right. Let me back up a little bit, because I think we missed in recording the writing of the project proposal for the DPAA and the role that Patrick Okura and George Nishinaka played a role in DPAA.

Mendoza

Yes. George, much like Roy, was a catalyst, and I tend to want to call him the godfather of social work and social-work activities in Los Angeles area. Because of his position with Special Services for Groups, the resources that he had available to him, the networking necessary for him to maintain that position, as well as his connection and networking with the National Organization [for

Social Workers]--George was pretty much one of the first bona fide social workers in the Los Angeles area, the fact that he was Asian American.

So he was what I'd have to call just an actual natural connection. He already had a close relationship with Pat Okura, and I think they both served in the 442nd [Infantry] regimental combat team of World War II fame, so there was already that personal connection, so they were very, very close friends, all right. The fact that they were in opposite posts served to expand on the network, if you will.

Singson

Okay. And how is Roy Morales connected to George Nishinaka, I mean in terms of social work?

Mendoza

Through the social work, yes.

Singson

I guess the question is, how is this DPAA, Demonstration Project for Asian Americans, different from your own or Roy Morales' work, I mean your own partnership with him, for concentrating or focusing on Filipinos?

Mendoza

Okay. I'm hired with the Department of Community Services L.A. County as the Filipino coordinator for the department. I'm trying to recall if they had a special name for the unit. Normally, we operated out of a service center, so I was assigned to the Echo Park Service Center, which existed at the time, with the focus on the Filipino community. My role was to link with, network with Filipino groups, develop Filipino groups. There was a side role, if you will, of diversion, which was a pet, say, project of the department, the diversion program being the diverting of identified troubled youth. Instead of being arrested, going through the system and becoming even worse by incarceration, probation, things like that, identify those at-risk youth and divert them into other programs and

developing other programs, instead of putting them in jail and then probation, so on and so on.

Singson

Right. Okay.

Mendoza

So my area of focus, of course, would be Filipino community.

Singson

Let's focus on this one. What is the state of Filipino youth at this time? Why was this kind of service needed?

Mendoza

Okay. The--

Singson

And just to clarify, what years were you working in the county?

Mendoza

Yes, this had to be starting in '72. So, again, I'm trying to put it in context. There are at least three, maybe four gangs operating in roughly the Echo Park area. There's also a--

Singson

Can you name the gang names?

Mendoza

Yes. One was, I think, Tau Gamma was one of them, and I can't recall if it was then or in later seventies that Tau Gamma became a gang of renown, shall we say, and named after, apparently, a fraternity back in the Philippines. There was Satanas [gang], which probably had more notoriety than most all the others. There was--boy, this really tests my memory.

Singson

I'm sorry. There's the Ungoy and the T_____ in Seattle, where they connected to--

Mendoza

No. There were no apparent statewide or interstate connections, so that even here there was just in the Echo Park area several gangs that were, say, antagonistic to one another. There was also a gang in Long Beach area called the Guam Boys [gang]. I'm trying to recall Wilmington as well, but at any rate, there was gang activity. There was the problem of youth being recruited into the gangs, the Filipino youth being targeted, because of the gang activity, being targeted by non-Filipino gangs as well as being wide-open targets. So that coupled with the fact and focus of SIPA being to focus on the youth, developing interest, developing awareness of being Filipino American, that there is a network and there are other Filipino Americans around--the whole reason for forming up SIPA starts to envelop Filipino Americans, so all of this was being generated, and the fact that there was such a response by not only the Filipino youth that were doing okay, but from the Filipino youth that were involved in the gangs as well, some, okay.

Singson

So in your own assessment as a county worker, why do you think were there gangs here? Was it a transnational migration from the Philippines to here? Or what are the reasons, in your own recollection of why.

Mendoza

It's the same as the formation of any gang in, say, Los Angeles area. I would say one of the more primary reasons was for protection, protection against, in particular, Chicano gangs, and also from other, say, rival gangs. So there's that protection. There's the camaraderie of the family, as it were. You know the guys in the gang, and they're going to be your family and your protection, so there's that element, which is extremely strong, extremely strong.

Singson

And why do you think were they so responsive? So both the people who are participating in the gangs and those Filipinos, Filipino youth who are willing to help in SIPA, and to sort of clean up the gang issue.

Mendoza

Yes. It wasn't really cleaning it up. It was just working towards, giving them options other than having to get involved in gang activity, which could be related to drugs, in the main, as well as any and all other sundry activities, burglary, for example.

Singson

And why do you think were they so responsive? What did SIPA offer to them?

Mendoza

Well, alternative activity. So SIPA, again trying to organize activities, much the same as FYA [Filipino Youth Activities], using that model of diversion of attention to, "Hey, let's go on a snow trip." "Let's start up a basketball team." "Let's do some volleyball activities." "Hey, we're getting together an eskrima class. Do you want to join?" So not only getting that thought into their minds, but also looking for the resources of people to do this. So that was primarily my role and worked perfectly with SIPA as the organization and as a group. The beautiful part about it was the fact that I was already a paid employee, so I can do this. It's harder for some of the others, because they're doing this volunteer, so there was always that effort of trying to get funding so that SIPA could become a bona fide and full-fledged organization and get paid staff, which can make all the difference in the world.

Singson

So I'd like to kind of concentrate on your own experiences in the L.A. County Community Services Center. What, in particular, can you recollect? What particular activities did you organize for the youth, and what were your experiences with them?

Mendoza

Oh, my gosh. Let's see. Again, part of the problem is there was so much overlap. To put it into context, 1972, not only was there the Demonstration Project For Asian Americans, but the formation and concurrent developing of the proposal and final funding of the Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center. We talked about the dearth of staff and attention in the Asian American community of social workers, people concerned about the social state of the Asian American communities, so that was the impetus for the formation of the Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center. With that title, just out of joking I called it Amtrac (AACMHTRC), because it's such a long, long title. That stuck, so we called it Amtrac ever since then.

Roy was the director. That lasted ten years, so you figure 1972 to 1982. Roy's the director of Amtrac. I sat on the advisory board, because it had to have an advisory board, community, a community connection. So I was connected to Amtrac not only in my function of Filipino coordinator for Department of Community Services, but also sitting on the advisory. So I wore two hats but serving the same function really.

Singson

Right. Now, is this a private organization, this Amtrac?

Mendoza

No, public funding.

Singson

Public funding, okay.

Mendoza

Now, what does it do? Recruits and tries to generate interest in students at LACC [Los Angeles Community College], UCLA [University of California Los Angeles], into going into social work, okay. It was not all that popular. Even today, it's not all that popular. Most of the Filipino kids, for example, they're going into

dentistry, nursing, doctors, law. Nobody goes into social work, and it still--I can't say it has a stigma, but can't seem to generate any interest in it, and yet it's so needed. So recruiting the students and paying them a stipend to have assignments into particular Asian Pacific Islander communities, either through agencies or through, let's say, what I call a general community agency, but with a specificity into a particular Asian American community. Okay? So there's that.

So you're being paid to learn, and you may be a Filipino, but they may assign you to a Korean agency, because you need to be aware of that need, the needs in that community, be aware of what they're doing, because in most cases, maybe you're already aware of what's going on in the Filipino community, so you need that other exposure as well. Or maybe it's not really going to work out for you, so we assign you to the Filipino community. Who you going to go to? SIPA maybe, maybe to Oriental Service Center. Okay, so we need not only the workers, but we need to start developing the agencies to which to assign them to. So, again, there is this generating effort that I think of it like throwing a grenade. You've got stuff flying all over.

So Roy, while all this is going on, he's directing Amtrac. I'm with the department, and I've got fingers and tentacles into other organizations and efforts. So we're still feeding off each other and still working closely together on almost everything. It's just like we form up unholy alliances on almost everything that's going on. We'll keep not only our alliances but support, okay. If he were, for example, in a meeting, he'd make a motion, I'd second. I'd make a motion, he'd second. Like I say, throughout most of our careers it was a situation of that kind of support.

Singson

Right. I wanted to go back to SIPA, because this is where we really left off in the last interview, and we talked about that first conference. And I think I want to follow through before we go on further into the seventies. I wanted to follow through what

happened to SIPA after that first conference and maybe just talk about how it evolved to become an agency from a conference.

Mendoza

Okay. Because of the interest formed at that first conference, the kids were really excited about it. Again, I'm having trouble, because I'm trying to put it in context of the time. Okay, SIPA is a loose planning group. We form the conference. At the same time, other things are developing in the Asian American community, where there needs to be representation of the Filipino community in the meetings and in the planning groups and so on. SIPA fits that role perfectly, but again, SIPA is comprised all of volunteers. So that's why it was always difficult initially, because we had to get people from SIPA involved on meetings.

Come, let's see, 1971, we have a second SIPA. It also brings SIPA into play when I form up the Neighborhood Youth Corps Summer Program. SIPA is the sponsoring group of the Filipino community, again, volunteers. So it played a perfect role there. By this time--

Singson

Just to elaborate, what happened in that Neighborhood Youth Corps program that summer?

Mendoza

The EYOA [Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency], the poverty agency in Los Angeles at the time, was disbursing the federal monies to--that was during the War on Poverty, so EYOA was the Los Angeles group that disbursed money into the various low-income communities and in this case all minority communities.

Singson

So not just Filipino?

Mendoza

No. As it was, because Civil Rights Movement, all national attention being focused on blacks, then for the Los Angeles area, "Hey, how

about the Chicanos? There are Chicanos as well." We had to stand up and say, "Hey, what about Asian Americans? We've got low income as well." So that's where the Demonstration Project information played a key role, as much as, hey, we could prove it now. So the--

Singson

The Summer Youth?

Mendoza

Yes, the Oriental Service Center, because it's in existence now, submits a proposal for the first time for a Neighborhood Youth Corps program, where before, the only way they served the, quote, unquote, "Asian community," was to give money to Chinatown Team Post and Japanese American Community Services, which were the only two groups.

Which reminds me, I have to edit and correct my last statement about the participants in that. It wasn't JACL, it was JACS, Japanese American Community Services.

So this proposal was submitted. That's when I was hired and for the first time there was the Neighborhood Youth Corps Program operating out of the Oriental Service Center that served Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Samoans.

Singson

Now, what did they do, in particular? How did they serve these groups?

Mendoza

A youth is hired and is paid for doing whatever activities that that group can come up with, legitimate activities. And so it was up to each sponsoring group out of each ethnic community to develop the program, a legitimate program that the kids were going to do during the course of their employment that summer. Busy work. So, SIPA was the agency for the Filipino community. There was another

Korean group that was sponsoring for the Korean youth. So each group had to come up with their own set of activities.

Singson

Right. So this is in 1971, or '70?

Mendoza

This is 1971, the summer of 1971, yes. I finally got the dates correct on that.

Singson

So what happened to SIPA after 1971? Did they still hold a conference?

Mendoza

Yes. There was the subsequent one or two after that first one in '69. A proposal was submitted--well, first, let me back up. In early 1972, they incorporate. SIPA incorporates--for some reason I'm blocked out on the term used for a charitable organization. I keep wanting to say C-3, but it's incomplete. [501(C)(3)] Anyway, SIPA is then incorporated, becomes a bona fide charitable organization and submits a proposal, and finally gets some funding out of EYOA, so now they're an operating agency. Okay? They don't call it SIPA. SIPA is just the sponsoring group. It's Pilipino Youth Services, PYS.

From that we started a suicide help line. That was the formal direction anyway. Plus the Summer Employment Program. I'm trying to remember what other--there was another program that they were developing. One was a basketball team, I think it was. Yes, anyway, so the whole idea was generating youth activities and programs.

Singson

Okay. And then sort of this went on until today--I mean, was there any differences in incorporation, after the incorporation of SIPA into an agency? Or sort of does it continue?

Mendoza

It evolved, bigger and bigger, and, again, it still had to have--I keep wanting to say CW-3, but that's not correct. Anyway, a charitable organization had to have the board of directors and an advisory board, so we were still tied in, we being Joe Abella, Roy, and myself. For a period of, oh, four or five years there, they called us--and they being the Filipino seniors that we knew in FACLA [Filipino American Community of Los Angeles] and the Filipino Seniors [of Los Angeles, Inc.] called us the triumvirate of Roy Morales, Joe Abella, and myself. So, yes, where one was, the other two were kind of thing.

Singson

Actually, since you've brought it up, I'm wondering now what the larger Filipino community, so maybe especially represented by FACLA, felt about this organization, so SIPA and this triumvirate of people. Especially we're just focusing on the early seventies. I'm sure it evolved, but especially during this time when things are happening and forming.

Mendoza

Yes. When we refer to FACLA, we're referring to the leadership of FACLA, the administration if you will, but in essence, the leadership. They were aware of SIPA, but again, there was that strain of relationship of SIPA being young kids, identified with young kids, and there's still the recognition by the administration, the leadership, of, yes, the SIPA is there, but they're still not quite sure of it, still suspicious of it as far as they'll accept it, but not accept it yet, if you will, if that makes any sense.

Singson

Well, it sort of doesn't, because FACLA, I mean not just the leadership, its members, are made up of families with youth. So how is it that they seem to be not involved with what is happening to the youth or to what SIPA is trying to do?

Mendoza

There's that division, because it's just like most Filipino families think, "Well, my kids aren't involved in stuff like that." Okay? Quote, unquote. And in most cases we could point out that, "Yes, your kids are. You just don't know about it." Again, when we say the FACLA leadership, we're talking about the two, three, maybe five individuals, but they're in a position of power as far as the organization.

I'll have to use a specific instance of SIPA having a car wash as a fundraiser one summer. The guy gives us one weekend, and there was a reluctant granting of use of the parking lot for the washing the cars and using the FACLA water. I don't think they really fully realized how much that entails as far as using the water, because they cut it off after a couple of hours, because, "Hey, you're using too much water." Well--. And the other folks using FACLA resented the kids being there and generally wanted them--"Okay, get away now. Leave us. Go away." The kids just, in between washing cars they were horsing around, and I want to say seniors, but they're not really connected to the Filipino Seniors of Los Angeles, Incorporated, which was part and parcel to FACLA--neighbors occupying the neighboring house, but separate from FACLA. So it was some of the other older people in FACLA that are really resenting more and more the kids being there, period. So it was finally cut off after about three hours, and it left a bad taste in a lot of people's mouths.

Singson

Right. I think this is sort of a good place to end, so the history of SIPA and this early seventies, your own participation in these different--your work at the L.A. County services and the DPAA, and the next time that we meet, we're going to start maybe even going through sort of larger--the FYA and everything else that happened.

Mendoza

Okay. Can I add one more thing that just popped into mind as far as activities of SIPA and my role connected with it? As Filipino coordinator and recognizing that we need to start developing

interest in being Filipino American, Filipino youth, SIPA activities, I started working on a Filipino training, leadership training series, okay.

Singson

And this is through SIPA?

Mendoza

Through SIPA, as the sponsoring agency, if you will. My role as coordinator was to develop the resources and the networking to develop this. So I bring in a lady called Esther Soriano, who became an activist in her own right later on. So this is the first time I bring her on the scene. She's working on a--Jeannie Abella--I wish I could remember all the other people who have subsequently gone on to other things. I've just lost contact with them. But there was quite a bit of interest at the time, so that there was a whole series of workshops with Filipino American youth, developing and working on the training of, what, how to identify a problem, as an example. What are the elements of a problem, how to deal with it, how to develop a network, so on.

Singson

Who's leading these sessions? I mean, I'm wondering if you can even name participants and what organizations possibly came out of these leadership sessions.

Mendoza

What organization came out of it? I don't know, because it would have to be related to the individuals who participated in there.

Singson

Right. So maybe we could perhaps look at, first of all, who led the sessions and the who participated in them.

Mendoza

Jeannie Abella, Esther Soriano, of course. That's where I'm having trouble remembering. There had to be four or five, because each

had a specific role that they served in coordinating the workshops. My role was overall coordination and bringing in resources as needed, and networking, encouraging the networking, but mostly developing resources, bringing in, for example, Allen Kumamoto out of L.A. County Human Relations Commission, who was instrumental in forming up the initial SIPA conference, and subsequently his role in community organizing with Human Relations Commission. So, again, there's that network that's expanding--

Singson

That's great.

Mendoza

--and developing more and more, but because of non-Filipinos who believed in the fact that there had to be more development in the Filipino community.

Singson

Something also came into my mind, and this is we sort of left off, especially in the first and second session--we were really bringing up the issues of this older generation, the first generation of Filipinos who came, which at this point are now called Manong, and then you mentioned during the world war you have all these new families, and there's sort of a division between those who were born in the U.S., that is, Filipino American-born, versus the new wave of Filipinos. And then here comes 1965 with a newer wave. What is the interaction like while you are making all these new agencies and, you know, the SIPA, for example; who were they catering to? And what was the interaction between the Manong and the students, for example? Especially in the L.A. area, let's just focus on that, because I know it's a large question, but at least in L.A.

Mendoza

There was no relationship between the Manongs and the youth, per se.

Singson

There wasn't any?

Mendoza

No, none. As far as the kids, that's the role that SIPA played and served in getting past any potential and possible divisions of Filipino-born and American-born, so that it didn't matter that this brother and sister or one individual or friends arrived here ten years ago. We were all Filipino Americans. That's, again, the outlook and the attitude that SIPA wanted to generate, that regardless of whether you came here ten years ago or you're born here, we still all Filipino Americans. There was still an element that looked to American-born as less and advantaged, if that makes any sense at all. They were less in terms of being real Filipinos, and advantaged because they were born here, not realizing that conditions here in the United States, even though you're born here, it was still just as bad as in the Philippines. Okay? So there was the American-born who resented that kind of attitude towards them, and the Philippine-born who wielded that kind of power, if you will, that, well, you're not quite Filipino. You're born here, you're not quite Filipino. You don't even speak Tagalog.

Singson

And in terms of issues, for example, Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz were the speakers of the first SIPA convention, and they at this point now are very much heroized by the activists, youth activists that came out of the sixties and seventies, and they are sort of the Manongs.

Mendoza

Yes, very much so.

Singson

So what is the relationship between the activists and how they looked up to the Manongs? Was it formulated during this period?

Mendoza

Yes, in terms of a lot of the kids, a lot of the activists, some of the activists are their own families, for example, or are relatives, were Manongs or farm workers. Again, those who were working at various service and agricultural endeavors, they were just at the lower end of the employment ladder. And the Civil Rights Movement in and of itself has a lot to do with changing a lot of the attitudes of a lot of people. And so the activists fell right into it, and, again, the context lent itself to what we as activists were trying to do, Larry Itliong and Phil Vera Cruz, for example, epitomizing the effort. We saw it with a great deal of pride.

Example, the grape strike, started by Filipinos, all of a sudden and also highlighted that fact that we were very quickly being overshadowed by Mexicans. The Chicanos were taking over. That in turn lent itself to the problem that we have encountered all the years of our existence in America, of being matched by the Spanish surname. So it all worked together of finally, we've got to break out of this, and we're breaking out of this and looking to guys like Larry Itliong and Phil Vera Cruz as being heroes and models for us to emulate.

There was also at the same time, as I mentioned, Roman Gabriel, Filipino mestizo, star quarterback of the Los Angeles Rams. Open up the sports page on any given day and Roman Gabriel right there. But he had no formal connection at all to the Filipino community. He didn't make an effort to make a connection. As far as he was concerned, he's just a football player, and that's when we started to encounter, during that Civil Rights Movement, encountering Asian Americans and, in particular, Filipinos who would say, "I'm not Filipino. I'm a dentist." You know, "I'm not concerned about the Filipino community. I'm a nurse." Okay, using their employment as a reason for not being active in their particular ethnic communities, which was extremely shallow, extremely shallow. And I hope that a lot of our efforts did something to change that outlook and attitude of, yes, regardless of what you do for a living, you can't get past the fact that you're Filipino American.

Singson

Well, I think that's a good time to end, and then next week there's a whole different set of themes and topics that still, sticking to the 1970s, I'm sure are all woven in the particular stories that we talked about today. So thank you.

Mendoza

Very exciting time period, yes.

Singson

Thank you very much.

Mendoza

Okay.[End of interview]

1.4. Session 4 (June 23, 2011)

Singson

Today is June 23 [2011], and we are here at Brea doing our fourth interview session with Al Mendoza. This is Precious Singson doing the interviews.

How are you, Al?

Mendoza

I'm fine. Thank you for asking.

Singson

Very good. Well, what we did last time is we talked a lot about the development of the Filipino identity movement, but I think it's really time to go back a little bit earlier and talk about the roots of the Far West Convention, which first happened in Seattle. This is something that a lot of the Filipino activists really also root to as kind of a main highlight, a great event that affected a lot of Filipinos during that time. So maybe you can help us recall, or if you could discuss your earlier participation, how did the Far West Convention start, and how were you involved in it?

Mendoza

It's an interesting point, because I automatically reflected on what generated into and what came out of the first SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans]. The interest and awakening that came out of the SIPA conference is paralleled by the Filipino People's Far West Convention in '71, now, the only difference being it's in Seattle. The Filipino youth who came from all over the West Coast, and it magnified a SIPA conference tenfold in so much as, of course, more people. A lot of leadership identified and developed, and general great feeling came out of it, so that there was a real momentum generated out of that conference.

Singson

Are you talking about the SIPA or the FYA [Filipino Youth Activities]?

Mendoza

The FYA.

Singson

Okay, okay.

Mendoza

Yes, it's the convention in Seattle. Yes, FYA was just a sponsoring group, but the convention itself was of and by all the Filipino youth on the West Coast.

Singson

Right. Actually, if I could just pause for a moment--

Mendoza

Sure. [Recorder turned off]

Singson

Okay, we are back to recording, and we just had a slight pause to turn off the music in the background. So we were talking about this first Far West Convention in Seattle, and I'd like to sort of first ask again, how did you participate? Were you in a panel, or how were

you involved in involving kids from SIPA or the other participants from SIPA?

Mendoza

Yes. There's one irony involved, for me anyway, at that time. I had been hired as a youth coordinator. I had already graduated from UCLA [University of California Los Angeles]. I had been hired by the Oriental Service Center as the youth coordinator. Now, at this time I'm almost thirty-five years old. I'm no youth. But, okay, I picked up the job, and I was operating the summer program, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, coordinating for the first time an Asian American program, and the Far West Convention is coming up. Flyers are arriving, I'm gathering more and more information, so I got the Oriental Service Center and the Council of Oriental Organizations' board to agree to send me, because it fit right into my work as youth coordinator. That's how I got to go. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to afford to go.

So that's how I arrived in Seattle and was more observer than really participant, because it was all the younger kids who were really generating and feeling this whole--the impact of being at the convention, the issues that apparently fit right into their psyche, and, "Where are we going to go from here?" They're generating all this, and in the process, leaders are being identified and generating, as it were.

Singson

Now, as far as you can remember, were there any differences or your own observations of the youth from L.A., the issues of the youth from L.A. and the issues of Filipino youth from the different parts of the West Coast? Or, for example, were there any differences of perspective in Seattle versus Los Angeles?

Mendoza

No. The universal drive, the universal issues identified were the same in Los Angeles, and that's what made it that much more remarkable for all the youth at the '71 convention, because, "Oh,

yeah, me too. Yes, I felt that way. Yes, this happened. Yes, these issues occurred." And that was the necessary element of the convention was, "Yes, we have common situations. We have common feelings."

Singson

And this Far West Convention came back to Los Angeles in 1974. Were you in any way participating in the organization of it, or were you once again an observer in the 1974 convention?

Mendoza

More helping staff, as well as observing, taking notes in workshops, and, again, helping my father in the kitchen. He was the cook for the two days. It was a whole, full weekend, and helping him in the kitchen, serving during the eating periods, and taking notes, observing, filling in wherever necessary.

Singson

Were you participating in any of the panels, or did you talk in any of the panels?

Mendoza

Not as a panelist. In that regard, more of an observer than actual participant, either on panels or moderating or anything.

Singson

Okay. Now, the reason why I think the Far West Convention in UCLA is also pointed at by activists is because it becomes sort of this event where the contentions between the anti-Marcos [Ferdinand Marcos] movement started really becoming more apparent in the Filipino-activist community. Was this something that you saw during the Far West Convention, or even perhaps describing earlier political contentions that you've observed?

Mendoza

Yes. I noticed right away alliances forming out of various individuals who may have participated, for example in San Francisco, may have

participated with one or several groups related to anti-Marcos movement and making linkages with the like groups and individuals here in Los Angeles. There was also the identified and identifiable left, extreme left-leaning groups, such as KDP [Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino] and others, who are aligned with the anti-Marcos group. I think because of that linkage, there was an equal resistance group of the older, established Filipinos, in particular Filipino Americans, who were born and raised in this country, and they don't feel the anti-Marcos importance as the other groups. And when I say the other groups, I'm talking, in the main, Philippine-born, Philippine-raised, and recently arrived here as students.

There were exceptions, of course. Esther Soriano, for example, was very much a part of the first couple of years of the SIPA Filipino Youth Services Development and Leadership Training Series, and became very vocal within the group and for whatever reasons attached very closely with the anti-Marcos movement. Again, only she probably could answer the reasons why she did. But that was very apparent, and it was brought to the attention of, I think, Fred Cordova, who was doing much of the coordinating for the convention, because he knew her personally and very, very closely related to Esther. So because of that, I think it added more fuel to the division and the resistance of the other group, and this really became more and more apparent and very much came to a head during the conference, so that issues were brought out by the anti-Marcos group that they were trying to insert in the convention, into the conference, into the workshops, that really wasn't that much acceptable, that much importance to other groups who had social-services issues and general social issues of an American hue. So, again, that's pretty much oil and water, if you will, for lack of a better comparison.

Singson

Well, so now I'm trying to understand this political division between anti-Marcos versus sort of Filipino-oriented issues. Are they mostly among activists? And so what does sort the larger Filipino American community think about this kind of division? Or is it a three-way,

when you have the mainstream, then you have anti-Marcos, and then you have those activists who want to advocate for more social services? Is that how this division is playing out? I'm not quite clear.

Mendoza

I wish you could very closely define the demarcation points from, this is anti-Marcos, social-services activists, and it's not that well defined, so that the best way you can put it is, you've got your anti-Marcos movement, who are fighting tooth and nail to get Marcos to step down in the Philippines. You've got social-service activists who, yes, recognize the situation as a foreign-policy issue for the United States, but in terms of priority, in terms of an issue that really must be addressed now, they didn't buy into the immediate importance of the anti-Marcos movement. Yes, it's something that is occurring. Yes, it shouldn't be occurring. Yes, we are anti-Marcos in the sense of we disagree with him, it's an oppression on the Filipino people, but it doesn't go beyond that, because, again, it's Philippines. This is America, and we've got our own problems here. So there's that division that becomes a division when the anti-Marcos people bring it up, say, in a workshop of a conference that they may be there, and only at that time.

Singson

Right. I see. Okay. So you would say that people--

Mendoza

Clear as mud.

Singson

So you would say that people still worked with each other and were in good terms, except for those times.

Mendoza

Yes, and made it more issue-oriented in terms of what was going on here at the time. For example, the Filipino Educators' Committee. There might have been some anti-Marcos people within the organization, but set that on the back burner, because other issues

such as employment of Filipino teachers was a burning issue, more of a burning issue for them, higher priority.

Singson

Right. Okay. Now, for you, how did you learn about the issues in the Philippines? Were you at all concerned about what was going on during this time in the 1970s, and how did you feel about the anti-Marcos movement?

Mendoza

Yes, I was sympathetic in terms and--I'm trying to think of a representative term for my feelings. It was like feeling much like the others. Yes, it needed to be addressed. Yes, Marcos was a dictator and took over, and the oppression that he initiated on the Filipino people, yes, that's a shame. But beyond that, say halfway supportive but in agreement with anti-Marcos people, saying, "Down with Marcos," there was a lot of sloganizing, a lot of demonstrating, but I still didn't see myself as part of that, because I was pretty much with a lot of the other American-born, who were not activists, who were not part of the movement. There's still the vast majority of American-born Filipinos in the Los Angeles area who are living day-to-day lives, who from time to time hear about the anti-Marcos movement, but are, in the main, thinking in terms of, "You're anti-Marcos. What are you doing here? Go back to the Philippines and demonstrate. Go back to the Philippines and fight for freedom and the elimination of Marcos and his henchmen."

So there's that generalized feeling throughout the community and recognized by other activists such as myself, that, yes, anti-Marcos, that's great, but at the same time, don't let it smokescreen and obscure what other issues are involved and of much higher priority as far as our own rice bowls and our own table.

Singson

Right. Okay. Now, just based on what I remember, Larry Itliong also participated in the 1974 Far West Convention. Do you remember any of his sessions or panel talks during this time?

Mendoza

No. No, I wasn't privy to sit in on--I'm trying to recall a lot of the workshops. I can't even recall any of the workshops. Like I say, I was bouncing around and didn't have the privilege and opportunity to sit in on a lot of the discussions.

Singson

Okay. Well, the reason why I ask is, you bring up the issues of Filipino American, their social concerns within the United States. What is it during that time, by 1974, that were the concerns of Filipino activists such as yourself, that you think are more apparent rather than the Philippines issues or Marcos issue?

Mendoza

As brought up by the Filipino Educators' Association, the education, or if I could choose to call it the mis-education of the Filipino children, the Filipino American history as being taught in the L.A. [Los Angeles] City schools, the omission of much of the true history of Filipinos, Philippines, and, of course, as it affect Filipino American children. The misidentification, and this was a pet issue of mine which I addressed later through the Filipino American Education Commission, of the racial and ethnic survey that's conducted, that was conducted by the [Los Angeles] City School District annually, and that was for education. The lack of bilingual services throughout the social-service system of the Los Angeles area and generally in terms of the lack of Filipino translators, the lack of bilingual translators in the court system, so it was part and parcel Filipino and at the same time Asian American, and whenever Asian American issues were brought up, we, in essence, were saying, "Hey, Filipino as well."

Singson

Right. Well, since you brought this up, the Filipino American Education Commission, let's trace its history, right. So what is it? Why was it founded, and by who or through what agency?

Mendoza

Helen Brown and Mila de la Cruz were the two individuals who were pretty much the generating force of the Filipino Educators. The main issue at the time was the hiring of Filipino teachers and the standards wrongly being applied to Filipino teachers.

Singson

Okay. Just to kind of give a little bit of historic background, who is Helen Brown, and who's Mila de la Cruz, and what time period are we talking about when the issue of hiring Filipino teachers became prominent for them?

Mendoza

Oh, that had to be '73, '74, as far as the Filipino Educators becoming prominent as a group. Helen I had known since, oh, back '67, '68, when she showed up at a number of meetings, and when I say meetings, it could have be three or four or five individuals at somebody's home. But I first met Helen through there, and she and I immediately shared a camaraderie, because neither of us was Filipino at that time, so there was that issue as well as the overall issue of mestizos.

At the time I met her, I called her the truant officer, because that was her role. She worked for the [Los Angeles County] Board of Education as a truant officer, checking out delinquent youth and so undoubtedly in the process bringing out issues, as she encountered them, of Filipino American youth as they came to her attention in the way of delinquency, okay. The undoubted alliance with her and Mila de la Cruz being like souls in terms of the issues of Filipino American education and teachers, the teachers in particular. Their main issue that they were addressing and saw the need for organizing was an equal opportunity in hiring as teachers.

Singson

And this Filipino--is it a commission, Filipino Education Commission?

Mendoza

Asian American Education Commission.

Singson

Commission. Is it within the school board, or is it a sort of a separate--

Mendoza

Yes. It coat-tailed on the already formed Black Education Commission that was formed up by the Board of Education, and the Mexican American Education Commission. They called them the Chicano Education Commission. In essence, the Asian American community, through leaders that generally came out of the Asian American Studies Center out of UCLA, many individuals in there were part of the effort of the Education Commission.

Singson

I see.

Mendoza

And, in essence, we were saying, "Us too." So they initiated a diversified and diverse Asian American group to address the need for an education commission, get it approved and recognized by the Board of Education, and initiate a process of election for a representative to sit on that commission. I was elected as the Filipino representative.

Singson

As the first commissioner?

Mendoza

For the first commission. And I served in that capacity, oh, for at least three years.

Singson

Is this right after your work at the county, or the services--I'm sorry. We were talking about this in the last session, the county services agency.

Mendoza

This is while I was serving as youth coordinator for Services for Asian American Youth.

Singson

I see.

Mendoza

So a lot of the groups that I mentioned, a lot of the meetings that I mentioned sitting on, were concurrent to my employment. My employment, the rice bowl on the table for me, was serve as the youth coordinator for--I got ahead of myself--for Oriental Service Center. Services for Asian American Youth was a program that I wrote a proposal for while serving as youth coordinator with Oriental Service Center, so while I'm sitting as youth coordinator, I'm involved in these various meetings, representing both Oriental Service Center and Filipinos in general in that meetings that I'm sitting in on, as well as the Asian American Education Commission.

Singson

Okay. Right. So as part of the Asian American Education Commission, what were your duties and what were your sort of projects?

Mendoza

Generalize the issues as brought up by other members of the commission so that, in essence, issues, situations, injustices were brought to the attention of the commission, discussed, and addressed. "Okay, all right, what are we going to do about it?"

One of the pet issues of mine at the time that, as it turned out, was to take almost ten years to fully complete and address the issue of the racial and ethnic survey of the L.A. City Schools. Annually, they conducted a racial and ethnic survey. There was one category of "Asian Americans" that they finally included because of the Asian American Education Commission.

Singson

So these are all Chinese, Filipino--are they categorized and they're just kind of ethnic groups?

Mendoza

Technically, it was to include all the--I keep wanting to say agencies--all the ethnic communities that were part of the Asian American, Pacific Islander American concept, all, what was it, thirteen ethnic groups. So they were trying to include this all in the category Asian American. But to most of the average teachers in the classroom, they recognized Japanese, Chinese, Korean. Again, they saw slant eyes. Okay, we know where we're picking. But they run across names like de la Cruz, Singson, Mendoza, Morales, Garcia, and right away there was a questioning. They didn't know what to do. In almost all cases, they were included in the Hispanic category, at that time Chicano.

So I took issue with that. The Education Commission, when I did bring it to their attention, said, "Well, that's a Filipino issue. We don't want to deal with that."

Singson

I don't understand.

Mendoza

They wanted to deal only with something that affected all Asian Americans, and I right away got my hackles up, because it did affect all Asian Americans in so much it was the accurate accounting of who was in the classroom, who was in that school, who was in the school district. So for me, it might have been the refusal, the initial refusal of the Asian American Education Commission to address that issue, that it became more and more of a pet peeve and an accepted issue for Helen Brown, Mila de la Cruz, and the Asian American Educators.

Singson

Now, just to sort of clarify because this is sort of a non-issue now, but at that time it was something that you felt that was important

for you to distinguish what Filipino concerns are, or what the Filipino students' concerns are. What do you think were Filipino students--what are the differences that Filipino students should be brought to the table, versus what other Asian ethnic groups were dealing with?

Mendoza

In the main, it was all issues that ultimately related to identity. You figure most of the Asian American youth then, and particularly Filipino American youth, are dealing with the issue of identity. We're talking of American-born Filipino youth, be it full blood, also mestizo--that raised a whole number of other identity issues--versus the identity of Filipino American youth who were brought from the Philippines, who arrived here and are still--they still have enough Philippine roots to pretty much know where they are. But now they're confronted with an American society that they're kind of wondering, along with the other Filipinos, "Where's my place in an American society?" So other issues emanating from that, in terms of living in an American society.

Now, the--I was going to say antagonistic--the downright dangerous confrontation by the gangs of a particular area, particularly in the lower- and working-class areas of Los Angeles, where the average Filipino American youth were having to address and being confronted with, in the main, Chicano gangs, okay. So, do we form up our own gangs? Do we join Chicano gangs for our own safety? What? So there were those issues as well.

Singson

And then you also mentioned having to advocate for bringing in Filipino history in the classrooms. You sort of mentioned that there's a different Philippine history that's being taught, and what did you want to bring to the table?

Mendoza

Well, a more expansive dealing with America's acquisition of the Philippines other than the one-, two-, three-sentence paragraph in American history books that talk about the "Philippine Insurrection"

instead of "Filipino-American War", dealing with the inclusion of Filipino Americans in American history as well, which was nonexistent.

Singson

And this is sort of in the high school level that you wanted this within the U.S. history curriculum? Is that how you wanted it?

Mendoza

Starting at the elementary level, very much so. Because, example, a Filipino arrived from the Philippines, you're talking five-, six-, seven-year-olds being thrust into an American system, an American school, American-born, whether full blood or mestizo, again thrust into an American system who totally ignores them as an entity, so developing identity problems from that, developing identity issues that are, "Hey, where were we? Weren't we included?" They talk about World War II, American G.I.s, and not one word is being mentioned about the First and Second Filipino Regiment that was very much a part of the U.S. Army, not part of the Philippine Army Constabulary and Philippine Scouts that came to issue in much later time here in the United States.

Singson

And then the other issue is bilingualism. Why did you think at that time--was it a very important issue to advocate for?

Mendoza

The need for understanding by the school system as brought out and fomented by the Filipino-American educators, that for the Filipino child from the Philippines in a first, second, third grade class, the term "palm," for example, for them automatically brought to mind a tree, not your hand. They used that as an example time and time again, of the difference in outlook by the Filipino child and the need to address that directly in the classroom, that is incapable of being addressed by the current education, for example, of the teachers. So that's why it generated into a much broader issue by the--and brought to mind by the Filipino educators.

Singson

So what came out of the Asian American Education Commission? What happened to the group, and did it sort of just dissolve? Or what were the projects that--

Mendoza

It kept going. My participation with it, by necessity, diminished over time of my involvement in other issues, groups, and situations, necessitated that I leave alone a number of the issues that I had addressed with the Asian American Education Commission, one of them being in 1974 I was appointed to the [Los Angeles] City Human Relations Commission, so that brought on another set of duties that I needed to deal with. Also by that time I had been--

Singson

Are we talking about 1977?

Mendoza

No, 1974.

Singson

Oh, okay. Oh, I see.

Mendoza

Tom Bradley had been elected in 1973. He at about that time had brought on some Asian American staff that aided in recognizing and bringing in individuals from the Asian American community. As a consequence, there was a Filipino position, and for lack of setting up a Filipino position, it was just a position on the City Human Relations Commission that had a Filipino sitting on it. At that time, when it was first initiated, it was Dolly--I keep wanting to say Dulcura, which was her formal name--Docena. She was appointed to fill in behind another individual who had left the commission. Her tenure lasted one year. I was then appointed to replace her in 1974. An issue which got blown into proportion and became quite an issue, as it turned out--

Singson

Why is that?

Mendoza

--evolved from that. Well, okay, let me back up. I was appointed to replace Dolly--she was Villaflor then, I'm sorry. It gets complicated, because when I first met her, she was Dolly Docena. She remarried in the course of history, over a period of five years, became Villaflor. So she's Dolly Villaflor at the time that she was appointed to fill in for, as it turned out, a little less than a year on the City Human Relations Commission. I was then appointed to replace her.

Singson

So your position is a more permanent position, that hers is sort of just--

Mendoza

Yes, for a four-year term. I was appointed to a full-term position. Mrs. Villaflor generated a force--I'm trying to think of descriptive terms for it--I wrote that both opposed my appointment as well as her dismissal from the commission.

Singson

Was it from the Filipino community?

Mendoza

Well, she had her little support group that tried to generate more and more support, as it turned out not very successfully, because more and more--as she encountered and sought to make groups aware of her issue, she's discovering that more and more people knew my father [Alfred Pulanco Mendoza], who said, "Well, no. Mendoza is very much already part of the Filipino community and very much involved in the community, plus the fact of his father holding a very high position in the Caballeros de Dimas Alang." So as the consequence, her efforts didn't go anywhere. So I'm sitting on the City Human Relations Commission, as it turned out, served

well for the Filipino community on a number of issues that generated later on.

Singson

Okay. So let's talk about this and just to sort of back it up a little bit, why was it important to have a Filipino, I guess, representative for the City Human Relations Commission? Is it something that Tom Bradley initiated, and was it the first time to have a Filipino there?

Mendoza

Well, yes, through his staff. Again, he wanted a diverse staffing, more representative of the community of Los Angeles than previous mayors of the city. So he wanted to change things around. That was pretty much part and parcel to Tom Bradley's focus, he himself being black, the first black mayor of a very cosmopolitan city. As a consequence--gee, I'm losing my train of thought here.

Singson

So why did he want the Filipino and the--

Mendoza

Yes. Finally representation and not only a recognition, official recognition of the Filipino American community of Los Angeles, but also an opportunity to bring issues of that community to the forefront and through official channels to any other parts of city government and the running of that government that was not afforded us beforehand.

Singson

Okay. So prior to Dolly, were there any other sort of mayoral appointments, or city council appointments perhaps?

Mendoza

Not that I'm aware of.

Singson

Okay, so you were sort of the first full term.

Mendoza

Yes.

Singson

So what did you do as part of this commission? It seems like you were a liaison between the Filipino community and the city. Is that what--

Mendoza

Yes. Again, to put it in context, I'm working full-time, Filipino coordinator with the Asian Community Service Center. That was initiated in 1973. I'm a member of the staff, Filipino coordinator full-time.

Singson

I'm sorry, for what?

Mendoza

Full-time. Oh, the Asian Community Service Center, under the L.A. County Department of Community Services.

Singson

That's right.

Mendoza

So, rice bowl. Now, I'm sitting on all these other groups, commissions, and other activities, as part and parcel to being a private citizen, as well as being staff of the Asian Community Service Center, so it's hard to draw a line. "Well, this is the work I'm doing here, and it doesn't affect this." It all affected each and every other group that I sat on, so that what I was doing formally in the Human Relations Commission was chairing the Affirmative Action Committee, of which there were duties and responsibilities that I had to exercise, and it still afforded me the opportunity to delve into other areas of concern.

As an example, in '77, '76 or '77, there was a massive arrest of Filipino seniors at the FACLA [Filipino American Community of Los Angeles] for bookmaking. They were all arrested for gambling; massive. I mean, there were ten [unclear] seniors arrested, handcuffed, the whole thing.

Singson

I'm sorry. Did you say bookmaking?

Mendoza

Bookmaking.

Singson

What does that mean?

Mendoza

For betting on horses. What Filipino seniors had been doing for millenniums. Ever since their arrival in the United States, they'd been gambling. Again, the Filipino senior and gambling are so closely linked that you wouldn't separate it. The cockfighting, for example, in the Philippines, how much of a national institution is that? So, again, Filipino seniors being who and what they are, they gambled. Somebody called in the cops, I won't say who. But the Filipino seniors were arrested. I found out about it because several of the seniors complained to me that that had occurred. So for the first time, I conducted a hearing on the arrest and how the Filipino seniors were treated, and a complaint was lodged with LAPD through the Mayor's Office. And there was some satisfaction in so much as it was brought to city attention how ill treated the Filipino seniors were. That never occurred before. We didn't have that channel before, and so for many of the Filipino seniors and for many in the Filipino community, it was somewhat of an accomplishment that, hey, we did have a voice and we were heard.

Singson

Right. So prior to this, what was the relationship of the Filipino community to politics? So what was their feeling about political actors, perhaps even political participation; was there any?

Mendoza

There was no really formal efforts other than as an individual, Monty Manibog in Monterey Park was elected mayor, first Filipino American mayor of a city.

Singson

When was this?

Mendoza

This was in the early seventies. The specific year escapes me at the moment. But that was the only thing. There were no formal efforts throughout the Filipino community in Los Angeles to participate in the political arena. This started changing, particularly since Tom Bradley became mayor, and more and more an awareness developing along with the general Asian American community of political awareness, political participation, so that in '75, '76, the Asian American Democratic Caucus was formed. The Filipino community participated in that as members of the Asian Democratic Caucus. So that was the first effort, really, of a Filipino political arm, as it were.

From that generated the--I wanted to say PALAD [Pilipino American Los Angeles Democrats].

Singson

Right. I've heard of PALAD.

Mendoza

Yes. I'm trying to recall the acronym--it escapes me. Anyway, PALAD. So it was the Democratic [Party] effort for getting Filipinos recognized politically. On the opposite side of that, of course, there were a number of Filipino American Republicans, but not so much in an organized arm or effort, at least none that I was aware of.

Singson

And your own participation? Did you participate at PALAD or the Asian Democratic Caucus?

Mendoza

Yes, and again as a member and making sure that the Filipino American issues were addressed along with other issues in the Asian American community. So it was an "us, too," pretty much generalized direction.

Singson

Okay. So just to clarify, sort of going back to your work within the Human Relations Commission and also the Asian American Community Services coordinator, were you sort of employed in two different offices within the city? Is that how--

Mendoza

No. No, I was not employed. That was as a citizen of the City of Los Angeles.

Singson

Oh. I'm sorry, which one?

Mendoza

City Human Relations Commission.

Singson

I see. Okay.

Mendoza

Okay? Again, my rice-bowl source is Asian American Community Service Center.

Singson

Right. Okay. I'm just clarifying that one.

Mendoza

Again, it's tough to clarify and fully define, because they're so closely linked and interrelated. So example of why it's tough to specifically state what year certain things occurred, because it overlapped. Planning for a certain event or a group may have started two, three years earlier and then generated into finally that group forms, but it took previous years to get to that point, so you can't really say, "Well, it started here." It actually started earlier, but this is when it blossomed into a fully accepted group or a formalized organization.

Singson

Which group are you talking about? I'm sorry.

Mendoza

Many of them. SIPA. A group that formed up in '73, actually starting in late '72, what I called the Filipino Rap Pack, rap, r-a-p. At that time, the whole notion and concept of rap, rapping instead of talking, instead of networking, we called it rapping. So I formed that up, that was emulating the Asian Lunch Bunch, which I was a part of, that got together occasionally, actually roughly once a week, got together over lunch and talked about issues in various fields of endeavor and other organizations and departments and social services within the City and County of Los Angeles. So I formed up the Filipino Rap Pack to do the same thing, affording an opportunity for others who were either in other fields of employment or in social work or interested in social activities and social services, or the lack thereof, to get together and talk about it.

Singson

And who was part of the Rap Pack?

Mendoza

Anybody and everybody, again, interested in the social services direction and social issues of the Filipino American community in Los Angeles.

Singson

Right. Let me just pause for a moment.

Mendoza

Sure.[Recorder turned off]

Singson

Okay, so we're back to recording for a quick pause on my part for coughing. So let me just wrap up this, because we were talking about early political participation of Filipino Americans, stemming from your own involvement with Tom Bradley's Human Relations Commission. Whatever happened to the caucuses that were formed, the Asian American Democratic Caucus and PALAD, at least during this time while you were on the Human Relations Commission?

Mendoza

Over time--and, again, you know, who can say when a group really stopped functioning and became pretty much, say, a paper tiger in the sense of the name being known but there was no power structure and no real leadership stemming from the organization and then finally going totally out of existence in terms of people's minds, so that over time it just really pretty much faded, okay.

Singson

So no political person came out of this group?

Mendoza

Yes, there were political efforts, and there was generalized support, but over time that faded, so that in Los Angeles, more so in adjoining cities and suburbs, more and more Asian community participation, involvement, and Filipino involvement. The development of that awareness and involvement and participation, I would like to think generated from the involvement, early involvement of political involvement by and through PALAD and other like groups that stemmed from that development.

Singson

I see. And then your own participation with the Human Relations Commission with Tom Bradley, when did it end, and why did it end?

Mendoza

Oh, that brings in a whole 'nother area. One thing that I had wanted to mention was sitting on the development of and as a vice president of the Asian American Employees Association with L.A. County. That occurred in 1974. At the same time, I was president of the SIPA board--

Singson

In 1974?

Mendoza

--in 1974, with the acknowledgment of my supervisor at the Asian Community Service Center. As such, I had responsibility for maintaining the activities and helping administer the contracts that SIPA had with funding agencies in the Los Angeles area.

Singson

Why was SIPA having trouble looking for somebody to head or to lead the group?

Mendoza

On the SIPA board, most everybody was like myself in being spread out as far as activities and involvement, so that it's just like a plate. You've got so much room and you've got it filled with different activities and different food, and all of a sudden there's no room. Something has to give. And so as a consequence, nobody could really take on that role at that time, and as a consequence, to maintain the necessary front of leadership, I took on presidency.

Singson

I see. Okay. And as the vice president of the Asian American Employees Association, what were your duties, and why was the group formed? What was the function of the group?

Mendoza

Much to keep up with the Black Employees Association and the Chicano Employees Association of L.A. County, they formed Asian American, in essence saying, "Hey, us too. Whatever issues that you have, so do we."

Interestingly enough, in '74 the existence of the Asian American Employees Association fell right into the massive layoffs that L.A. County was having to go through because of Proposition 13. Everybody was cutting--necessary to cut back on the budget. I was slated to be laid off because I was so recently hired. Issue was made to the Board of Supervisors, and at that time there was an Affirmative Action Office under Mike Ishikawa for L.A. County, and my issue of being laid off brought to their attention, and through that office, because my position was felt to be necessary, because I was the only Filipino coordinator in Los Angeles County and in the county service system--issue was made that, well, the only ones that could make an issue were those bilingual, whose language was necessary to that particular community and that particular service.

My issue was brought that I was bicultural and therefore necessary, because no one else could fulfill that post. It was supported by the Chicano Employees Association [of Los Angeles County], because it was the same issue that they had. Many of their representatives and employees were not necessarily bilingual, but were bicultural, so they latched onto the issue. As well, the Black Employees Association saw it as advantageous for them, and so they halfheartedly supported that. So as a consequence, my position was saved because I was bicultural and therefore necessary to the operation of the Asian Community Service Center. They called that the "Mendoza Exemption", and it became an established issue and exemption in L.A. County regs.

Singson

Wow.

Mendoza

Imagine that? [laughter] But as luck would have it.

Singson

Right. Now, you were going to talk about how you sort of--you were still participating in the Human Relations Commission, and did it end when Tom Bradley ended his term? Or how did you sort of get off the commission?

Mendoza

I had to resign in 1979, because it was an issue and situation of a full plate. I just was unable to fulfill many of the duties, increasingly unable to participate in meetings. What helped complicate it was the fact that in '75--let's see. In 1975 I was appointed to the California Board of Protection and Advocacy Incorporated, which was a required board to oversee the developmentally disabled services of the State of California. That was required by the Lanterman [Developmental Disabilities] Act, that in essence said, any state receiving funds for services to the developmentally disabled community had to have an entity, a board to oversee the operation of that service activity. So I sat as a public member on that board. That took a heck of a lot more time, in addition to these other boards, other groups that I was sitting with and other activities that I was participating in. Something had to go. Something had to give. So I gave up the City Human Relations Commission. Another Filipino attorney was appointed behind me.

Singson

Okay. And just for the record, what is his name?

Mendoza

I've forgotten.

Singson

That's okay.

Mendoza

You know, you're really taxing an old man's memory here.

Singson

Well, I think this is a good time to end this session, but I think just sort of as a final evaluation, and I mean this is based on your experiences, and you sort of mentioned that this is something that a lot of your cohorts are experiencing, when you talked about SIPA, taking over SIPA in 1974. How were you managing all of these different agencies, associations, groups that you were being involved with? How did you do it?

Mendoza

You ever juggle? Think of a juggler. You deal with whatever is in your hand at that time, knowing and thinking about the other objects that are in the air and that are coming. I was a family man. My children at that time were seventeen, fifteen, seventeen years old. My son was born in 1971, so I'm raising a family, I'm a husband, I'm a father, and employed by the Department of Community Services Asian Community Service Center. So, again, it's juggling whatever you've got in your hand at any particular time.

Anyone familiar with community organizing and community activist participation--there are three elements that come into play whenever you're working with a group. There's pre-planning, there's the activity, and there's evaluation time, and a lot of times all of that overlaps, either with the particular activity or group that you're working on, or another activity or group. So, again, the juggling and those elements coming into play, and, yes, you're right. Busy, but we learned to deal with it.

Now, again, I'm working in collaboration and partnership with Roy Morales, who's also doing the same thing. So, in essence, we're twins in that regard, and so much as we're working together in supportive roles, he's employed by the Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center. He's the director. I'm supportive in that role, but he's also supportive in the other things that I'm doing. So, again, there's this activism and activity and participation that's going on all at the same time.

Singson

So would you say that, for example, you and Roy, was there a continual network within the people and the agencies, so you were all working together, even with different hats; is that what you're saying?

Mendoza

Yes. Yes. And in the juggling, you're wearing a different hat, so you're juggling the hats along with the activity that you're involved in. But you're right in putting it in those terms. It was difficult and it was rewarding, but terribly busy, terribly busy, yes. So again, I wasn't the only one. Roy wasn't the only one. There were duplicate activities going on in other arenas and other municipalities, San Francisco, Seattle, San Jose. Again, many of the same issues are being addressed by other groups of like mind, so that those involved in the organizing and the activist activities are of the same situation.

Singson

Do you connect to them, to those in Seattle or--

Mendoza

Yes, and there was still that networking. With Seattle, no, not that much, and ironically not that much, except through Bob Santos, who I became acquainted with back in '69, '68, 1968, when he was part of the Asian American Social Workers, who was meeting down here. He was a member, and, again, that was my first opportunity to meet with him, and he's very much an activist in Seattle independent of FYA [Filipino Youth Agency], okay? Independent of Demonstration Project [for Asian Americans].

Singson

Right. Okay. So how did the networking become--

Mendoza

My gosh. It always stems from a personal relationship, I don't care with who or what. I'll use as an example Roy and I working together over the years. More activities, more general issue directions were taken from what I call our bituka conferences. We would meet at the Nipa Hut or lunch somewhere else and talk over a particular issue, over bituka and beers. And we started the concept, the thoughts, and then the generalized direction of the newspaper "Balitaan" at the bituka conference, he and I were just talking about it as, "Well, why not?" So he made contacts and I made some contacts. Manuel Difuntorum, who was with the Mayor's Office at the time, was also sitting in a couple of times, and so from his ideas we generated more and more, and thus the newspaper "Balitaan" was born.

Singson

I'd like to talk about that in a different session, because I know "Balitaan" is a very important--

Mendoza

That was just one of the issues.

Singson

Right, yes.

Mendoza

Yes, and one of the developments, but, again, stressing the importance of the social networking that was very necessary. So, example, in meeting Bob Santos just over drinks after the Asian American Social Workers meeting, again, maintaining that linkage when he goes back to Seattle, and he's involved in activities there, many of the social activities in Seattle, again, forms up alliances and makes linkages. So that kind of linkage-making and networking continues and expands over time.

Singson

Right. Well, that's a great way to end this session. Thank you very much.[End of interview]

1.5. Session 5 (June 29, 2011)

Singson

Today is June 29 [2011], and we are doing our fifth interview session with Al Mendoza. This is Precious Singson, and we are here in an historic building of SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans], an institution that we've already covered for a while, and finally we are doing this interview here in this historic place.

So how are you, Al?

Mendoza

I'm fine. Thank you for asking.

Singson

Very good. Well, since we are here, I think it's appropriate to start talking about SIPA once again. In past interviews, we've really covered your involvement with this organization or this agency and how really integral you were to the beginnings of it and to the continuation of it. So I'd like to ask if you can evaluate the changes that you observed since it began and through the 1970s. How did it serve the people in different ways as the 1970s wore on?

Mendoza

Hmm. That can get pretty involved. From its beginnings, the whole idea of SIPA was to get Filipino Americans involved, either in the community and mainstream, just to get involved in circumstances and arenas that govern their lives. I would say that overall, we accomplished it.

Over the years, starting in, oh, '72, '73, particularly the early seventies let me say, we like every other community-serving agency, particularly in social services, were running afoul of the funding crisis. Every body was affected. We were part of the overall scramble for funding and funding sources.

Singson

Okay. Just to clarify, are you on the board, at this time, of SIPA?

Mendoza

Yes. I was president from '74 and '75, so again, between attempting community projects through the arm of SIPA that we developed Pilipino Youth Services [PYS], we developed a number of projects, one of them being the basketball team and other youth activities, again mostly, again, aimed at youth. SIPA at that time was aimed primarily at the youth, but we still wanted a designated, delegated body for youth services and youth activity, so Pilipino Youth Services was developed, PYS.

Singson

And how would it be different from what the larger SIPA would do?

Mendoza

SIPA by that time, becoming incorporated in 1972, was to serve as the fiduciary agent, securing funds from whatever agencies, and that was its primary purpose was to seek funds to conduct activities, to conduct services, to develop new services as we identified them and pursued them.

Singson

I see. Okay. And in funding, you were talking about how funds are running out. Is this a sort of symptom of a larger--

Mendoza

Very much so. This was pretty much, I can't say the tail end of the War on Poverty, but it was running victim to the general changing of attention to the War on Poverty, so as a consequence, funding sources were drying up, and there was a constant battle on trying to find operating funds. So a lot of the activities that we were involved in was as volunteers. Many of the people involved in SIPA and in Pilipino Youth Services were volunteers. They had other jobs, bringing in--what I call filling the rice bowl and putting that rice bowl on the table. So working with and seeking volunteers to accomplish certain ends was always a difficulty.

This came to bear fully for me, as an aside, when I was the charter director of Asian American Voluntary Action Center in 1972, where I devoted full attention to recruiting and placement of volunteers. It's tough getting people to commit themselves from a day-to-day grind of working for a living to some social service that they're really not sold on, so finding and committing volunteers was always a problem and will continue to be.

Singson

Would you say there was a group of people, say, perhaps students or maybe an organization that you regularly relied on for volunteers in the past or during this time, or was it sort of a call out in a large way to the community?

Mendoza

Pretty much a call, but at the same time, those who were exposed to what SIPA was doing were attracted to it, and so a lot of the volunteers were the youth themselves. More and more of the youth from the first and second conferences, like Cas [Casimiro Urbano] Tolentino, like Florante Ibanez, many others from that first group were now starting to get involved more and more. They're getting involved in particular activities and directions that they see, but emanating from that first involvement of Filipino American and carrying on, and traveling on roads unheard of, that we couldn't even anticipate.

Over time--I'm talking through the seventies--SIPA had its highs and lows as far as participation, as far as leadership. So myself, for example, after '75, there were so many other activities that I was also involved in, I really couldn't devote a lot of the time I'd wanted to to SIPA. So others took over, others filled in, others became attracted to it, and so SIPA changed leadership, changed participation, yet there were other--those of the earlier days that were mainstays throughout its development.

Singson

Well, did the direction of SIPA change as the leaders changed, or was it still focused on the youth as the seventies--as we led on to the eighties?

Mendoza

It was still focused on youth. That always been the primary goal. I can't say so much today, but in the seventies and eighties it was still primarily youth-oriented, youth-focused, and, again, the main arm of SIPA as far as youth serving and youth activities was still Pilipino Youth Services, PYS.

Singson

Okay. Now, despite all this change in leadership, the lack of funding, the difficulty in finding volunteers, what do you think make SIPA sustain as an institution? What kept it going?

Mendoza

Undoubtedly, it was the belief, the feeling a Filipino American entity that was ours, has been ours, will hopefully remain ours, totally and uniquely ours. There is FACLA [Filipino American Community of Los Angeles], which is still in existence, but that leadership and the character of FACLA pretty much has not changed since 1946 that I'm aware of, and that's pretty much when it was incorporated. The whole operational character of FACLA has remained pretty constant for that matter, and it's pretty easy to enumerate those facets of character that I won't go into now.

But SIPA, by and large, while its focus on particular activities and service may have changed over time, the whole idea of it being Filipino American and ours has pretty much been the motivating force for anybody involved.

Singson

I don't quite understand how FACLA seems to have not changed--that's how you described it--and meanwhile, SIPA is ours, so I don't quite understand the comparison, so if you can discuss that comparison.

Mendoza

FACLA has always been pretty much FACLA. That's the only way I can describe it in so much as there was only two activities that FACLA was engaged in in the course of any administration, from year to year to year to year.

Singson

Which is?

Mendoza

The picnic, the July Fourth picnic, and the queen contest. That was it. The queen contest to raise money, for what? It never was clear, and much of the money spent over the years was on lawsuits, one faction in FACLA fighting another faction in FACLA. If they weren't fighting and contesting the election, they were fighting over something else. For a while, they had a diversion of the Filipino American Senior Citizens of Los Angeles, Incorporated, which they called FASCLA, so that diverted the attention as far as anonymity. But beyond that, once FASCLA pretty much dissolved, then they went back to the usual kind of activities, July Fourth and the queen contest, and pretty much the end focus.

SIPA, on the other hand, is us, Filipino American, but we've been part of the mainstream Asian American, Pacific Islander American sphere of activity, but also the mainstream of Los Angeles--

Singson

Okay. In terms of?

Mendoza

--so we have contacts with L.A. City and L.A. County administration. FACLA can't say that. Because of the networking, because of the context that has been made possible through SIPA, Filipino is known, Filipino is considered. Whereas before, we weren't even considered. Up until a certain point in history in the Los Angeles area, Asian and Asian American was Japanese/Chinese, not even Korean. So over time, we're now known.

Singson

Are you talking in terms of politics as well, or is this more of community organizing?

Mendoza

Politics as it affects community organizing. You can't talk about community organizing without talking about politics. It very much interfaces with it.

Singson

I see. Okay. So SIPA also--I guess in what ways did SIPA help in perhaps supporting politicians, or were there any kinds of activities that are sort of geared toward electing, perhaps, a Filipino politician of any sort?

Mendoza

Through endorsements, but not as much as you expect, because the Filipinos who were running for any particular offices or had any motivation to run for any office, have always been on the outskirts of Los Angeles City proper, in very suburb cities.

Singson

So what do you mean, then, in terms of how politics cannot be taken away when you talk about community organizing? How did SIPA play a role in both politics and community organizing?

Mendoza

Well, when you talk about community organizing, you talk about--for me, it was the development of services for a community, dealing with community problems that, by and large, were related to either non-service or non-awareness of service by entities that were responsible for that service, and by and large, those services were city and county or even state and federal, so the role in community organizing was getting those entities aware of needs, of community needs. What we did in community organizing was provide the

channel to these entities. "We are here, we have problems, and we want them addressed."

This takes me back to the old days when we were mau-mauing. We were banging on the desk, for example, of L.A. City schools, of various city councilmen, of, you know, "We have this problem. What are you going to do about it?" Again, it's a spillover from the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties.

Singson

Right. I think this is a good way, then, to talk about the survey or the--

Mendoza

Oh, Census Task Force.

Singson

--Census Task Force.

Mendoza

Census Task Force--let me back up. In late 1974 and '75, now, I'm involved in many activities. I was approached by a gentleman named Rutnam Swami, who was with the Cal State University L.A. He was, either by nature or because of his discipline, was concerned about the Asian American representation in the coming census. For whatever reason, he approached me about addressing that issue for the Asian Pacific Islander community and about the Asian Pacific Islander community.

Singson

So the upcoming census meaning the 1980 census.

Mendoza

The 1980 census. I told him I would not do it--and he had it in his mind that it would just be me and him addressing the issue. I said I wouldn't do it unless we involved the rest of the Asian Pacific Islander community, because it was an Asian Pacific Islander issue.

So I pulled together and networked all the people in--Betty Kozasa, Paul Chikahisa, Lillian Fabros--at the time Fabros; she's now Bando--so many others, and we started addressing the issue, pulling together various facets of the issue and conducting a press conference in 1975, and trying to get our message to the powers that be in Washington [D.C.], and responsible for the census, that the Asian Pacific Islander community is here, and what the issues were as far as being counted, that you can't just put it all in one Asian--and not even Pacific Islander. It was "Other" category--that it has to be enumerated.

So we carried that to a census conference that occurred in '77. Lillian Fabros wrote the presentation, as a matter of fact, and I've got a copy, addressing to that Census Bureau conference the issues of the Asian Pacific Islander community, particularly in Los Angeles. There was a concurrent group and movement in the San Francisco area that drew a lot more media attention, and as a consequence, they developed a direct route of awareness and attention to Washington, D.C. So as a consequence, the same issues were involved, but San Francisco was listened to more than Los Angeles. However, there was a task force, and we did get involved, and as a consequence, the local politicians became very aware of the necessity for the Asian American inclusion and the distinction of all the Asian American communities in that census, that there were thirteen separate ethnic communities, and the group and the category Other would not cut it.

Singson

So on the 1980 Census, did all these categories appear? And what else type of questions--

Mendoza

It took a while before it was finally included.

Singson

Oh, really. 5.

Mendoza

If you'll look at the census form today, you'll notice there is Filipino, there is other Asian American communities that are specifically defined.

Singson

Right. But it took a while?

Mendoza

It took a while, but that initial effort was a very large step, a very large step.

Singson

Right. Yes. That's incredible, here, that it all started here, too, in L.A.

Mendoza

And that was the important thing, I feel, of what we did in the sixties and seventies, was we initiated a giant leap, if you will, for what many, in fact, perhaps too many, today take for granted. Would many of the Filipinos who are enjoying professional status in many organizations and professionally in their fields of endeavor, would they have gotten their positions were it not for the efforts, the blood, sweat, and tears that go all the way back to the twenties, okay, and very much so that came to the forefront in the seventies, particularly the early seventies.

Singson

One thing that we didn't really talk about and I think it's important is the newspaper "Bayanihan Tribune." How did this start, and what was your involvement in it?

Mendoza

The "Balitaan"?

Singson

Right, the "Balitaan."

Mendoza

You remember me mentioning the bituka conferences that we used to have?

Singson

Yes.

Mendoza

Yes. "Balitaan" was born out of one of the bituka conferences at the Nipa Hut, which was the Filipino restaurant that we'd meet at, or go for lunch or just to have a place to confer. "Let's stop by Nipa Hut for bituka and beer." And it was at one of these that I and Manuel Difuntorum, who was one of the Filipino aides, or was the Filipino aide in Mayor Tom Bradley's Office, City of Los Angeles--so we had that connection to the mayor and to city government through Manuel Difuntorum. I can't recall how specifically it was brought to mind, but the thought and discussion of the only news that is brought to people's attention is Philippine news, and coincidentally, the name of the newspaper that was available at the time, the larger newspaper, "Philippine News." That was fine.

Singson

So, just to clarify, this is the "Philippine News" by Alex Esclamado--

Mendoza

That's correct.

Singson

--in San Francisco.

Mendoza

San Francisco.

Singson

And are you saying that there's also a "Philippine News" from L.A.? There's two separate ones?

Mendoza

No.

Singson

Okay, I see.

Mendoza

Got one "Philippine News."

Singson

I see. Okay.

Mendoza

It was the only really available newspaper, and information and "news," quote, unquote, in that newspaper was about the Philippines. That's fine if you're really interested in the Philippines and what's going on in the Philippines, and for some people that was the case. But here we are, Filipino Americans working in the Filipino American community, dealing with Filipino American issues as related to the mainstream of Los Angeles City and Los Angeles County in particular, but also the State of California, and nobody knows what's going on within. There was the development of the Filipino American Optimist [Club], there was the development of the Filipino American Lions Club, any number of activities as well as groups addressing issues like the Filipino American Accountants of California, who still were trying to get recognized and allowed to practice in accounting. My protégé Kevin Acebo was very much involved in that effort, but people didn't know about it. There was no instrument, no medium for getting out that information.

"Hey, why not? Maybe it's time. How do we do it?" And so we're just knocking around this idea of a Filipino American newspaper based out of Los Angeles that dealt with Filipino American news, Filipino American news.

Singson

Now, did you become an editor? Or what was your first position?

Mendoza

We were all of that. Roy, particularly, was editor in chief as well as assembler, I guess you'd call it. I was helping him, and he, in particular, was out gathering the advertisements, which was very necessary for a newspaper. This continued and I was involved on and off as time permitted. Again, this is in 1975, when I've got a few other things on my plate, Roy as well, and we're developing this newspaper. Now, "Balitaan" technically lasted until, what was it, 1980, 1981, when it was pretty much inactive until it was taken over by SIPA proper, and it became the newsletter of SIPA proper.

Singson

I see. Okay. In 1981?

Mendoza

1980, 1981, around in there.

Singson

I see. So "Balitaan" continued on.

Mendoza

Yes, as an instrument of SIPA. But for the period of '75 through '80, "Balitaan" was providing news to the Filipino American community, and we used various venues to distribute the paper free of charge. In fact, it was at one of those venues where I encountered one of the incidents of the kind of racism and lack of sensitivity, insensitivity within our own community, because a gentleman was askance that I was saying, "You know, the Filipino newspaper." And he looked at me and saw the paper, and he wanted to know why I was handing out a Filipino newspaper. [unclear] get called into question a number of issues right at the get-go.

Singson

There's another newspaper, "Ang Katipunan," which is circulating in the 1970s. This is from the KDP [Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino], and a lot of activists from the KDP and also the anti-

Marcos movement really point to "Ang Katipunan," that newspaper, as really an important tool for them. It's a propaganda tool to really spread what their positions are--

Mendoza

Their issues and their philosophy, yes.

Singson

Exactly. Did "Balitaan" serve the same way for--

Mendoza

Espousing a particular philosophy?

Singson

Yes.

Mendoza

No. It's just awareness of what's happening in the Filipino American community. That was its primary purpose. So as far as either fomenting or spreading any thoughts of a particular philosophy, no. No, not at all. The KDP, they did their thing, and "Balitaan," we did ours.

Singson

Okay. So I guess this is also a good time to talk about Helen Brown. We sort of touched on her a little bit, but I think it's a good time to fully involve ourselves with how you worked together, so perhaps maybe just a brief history of how you met and where this initial relationship first occurred.

Mendoza

Oh, that goes back. Late sixties, early seventies I encountered Helen, and I had mentioned that earlier. The only ways I worked directly with her was in a supportive role, as well as a few others, supportive of Helen and the Filipino educators. Where I worked directly with Helen in the strongest role was when I sat on the [L.A.] Human Relations Commission. I saw an opportunity to use

my role and position with the commission to address the Racial and Ethnic Survey, which Helen Brown was also, as a member of the Education Commission and the Filipino Educators, was interested in as far as getting an accurate count of Filipino students in the Los Angeles City School District.

She and I approached the superintendent of schools at that time, and I can't recall his name. But he was a staunch Republican, staunch conservative, and would insist that red is green, and there's no two ways about it. Red is green, you're not going to change my mind. He saw no reason why Filipino students needed to be counted. Besides, he used the old standby that L.A. city schools had been using up to that point of, "It's prohibited by federal law." I researched it, and federal regulations said an individual student could not be identified in any classroom. What was interpreted by that and what was ratified by L.A. city schools' own attorney was that as long as the individual student was not identified by name, he could be asked, "Are you Filipino?" Their own attorney said, "It can be done," that it wasn't against regulations. But the superintendent of schools refused to accept it.

Helen and I went to see him several times, and when I say several, I think it was up to three times, insisting, "When are you going to make a change?" He was finally relenting, and as it turned out, the next year when the Racial and Ethnic Survey was conducted, the Filipino category was included as an addendum, that there were x Filipino American students. Yet they still hadn't enforced the fact that the individual teacher could ask the individual student. Again, as most bureaucracies are, I mean, there was a heck of a lag. So for a number of years following, Filipino American category was made, but only as an addendum, only as a special category.

Helen kept knocking on their door, and as a consequence, using again my position with the commission as a name dropper, in early 1980 "Filipino" was finally included in the Racial and Ethnic Survey, and it's that way to this day. But that's what it took. It took almost ten years, ten years from when we first addressed the issue for it to

be included in the Racial and Ethnic Survey, which is required by federal law.

Singson

Right, yes. If you can just excuse me a second-- [Recorder turned off]

Singson

Okay, here we are back recording after a quick pause. We are just about to move on from your involvement, your relationship with Helen Brown, and something really occurred in '78 and '79 that you think is really important in the Asian Pacific community, and if you could discuss what this is and what its function is.

Mendoza

Yes. What came about was the Asian Pacific Planning Council, which was, by and large, as a group, the blossom, if you will, of efforts going back to the early seventies, of Asians Coming Together, which ironically was a conference that was conducted in '74, '75, called Asians Coming Together [Conference], again providing a platform for Asian American communities for addressing needs, addressing issues, processes and procedures, what direction, so on, so forth.

Singson

And is this sort of an umbrella group through the city? Or is it a private--

Mendoza

It was an effort, just a collaborative volunteer effort that blossomed into the Asian Pacific Planning Council in the mid-seventies, to become a platform, a forum for individuals working in the community to address community agencies and community groups, as well as an umbrella group and forum.

Singson

Okay. So in this forum, how is it held? How do individuals go to this forum? Is it sort of like a conference of some sort?

Mendoza

It was through monthly meetings. Ironically and coincidentally, Dennis Arguelles, who is a member of SIPA staff, was president of the Asian Pacific Planning Council for the longest time in the nineties. He would be another resource as far as what Asian Pacific Planning Council was doing. But at that time, mid-seventies into the eighties, it was the umbrella group and the forum for addressing issues, addressing needs, addressing service areas, and through monthly meetings, people would go to APCON, which was called Asian Pacific Planning Council, for, say, support for a candidate, a political candidate, or support for a proposal that was being developed for a particular service or a particular group in the Asian Pacific Islander community.

Singson

And your own participation in this, what did you do as this group developed?

Mendoza

Just a participating member. When I was on staff at the Asian Community Service Center, I was still the Filipino coordinator. All through these years of community activism and activity, I was employed by the L.A. County Department of Community Services Asian Community Service Center, so I had my duties and responsibilities there as well as the community organizing I was doing in the Filipino community.

In 1979 I was designated to open and initially coordinate and direct the Refugee Service Center that was started and got L.A. County approval through Supervisor Ed Edelman. From the moment of conception to blossoming of an opening agency, we took four months. This is unheard of in county structure and county mechanisms. I was designated as the temporary director, to get things rolling, and it took quite a bit to get organized the services that would be available at the Refugee Service Center. This

continued on and on, and I continued in an acting capacity for ten years. [laughs]

Singson

Oh, through the eighties. So let me ask then, what were particular needs that you addressed for the refugees? Is this mainly for the refugees from Southeast Asia? And I guess the question is, especially here in Los Angeles, were there a particular group of people or geographic area that you concentrated on?

Mendoza

Yes. As a county agency, I was responsible for Los Angeles County, four thousand square miles. No other service center in the service center system, of which there were eleven, had that same kind of responsibility, with the exception of the Asian Community Service Center, four-thousand-square-mile responsible territory. All the other service centers were responsible for particular neighborhoods. I was responsible for the entire county, for six languages of Southeast Asian refugees, okay?

So refugees were being brought into L.A. County through the State Department's contracts with various social-serving agencies in the Los Angeles County area, whose primary purpose was to house, find housing for the refugees, and help find them employment. Coupled with that and concurrent with it, they needed to train most, if not all, of the refugees, not only in terms of learning English, but training in a job. Where are we going to do that? Refugee Service Center. That was one of the primary motives for forming the Refugee Service Center to begin with.

Singson

And also employment? Were you helping in transitioning the refugees for--

Mendoza

My function was finding services, people, and networks to bring into the service center that would provide those services to the

community. One function of mine was to discover need, identify it, develop how it would be addressed, and then search for resources to be housed at the Refugee Service Center or they're using the Refugee Service Center to provide the services for that need.

Singson

How difficult were the issues of the refugees, especially during this time? Or to what degree was their transition--was it even harder than other immigrants, as you sort of evaluate or recollect their lives?

Mendoza

Yes. When you approach it from the base issue and standpoint of urgency, they needed to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. To teach a Cambodian, who in many cases, in most cases I should add, could not read or write in his own language, which was a Sanskrit, to learn English as well as to learn written English, was a tremendous, tremendous task. So to make this person self-sufficient, he had to learn English. He had to learn enough English to be able to get a job. What job for a man who was a fisherman in Cambodia? So a job market had to be developed, and in most cases it was assembly-line work, which was developed by the agencies subcontracted by the agencies that were contracted by the State Department. Okay?

And there were, as you might expect, tremendous, tremendous problems to complicate and multiply the problems in the Cambodian community to those in the Vietnamese community. Many of the--I keep wanting to say members--population of the Vietnamese refugees were, in fact, ethnic Chinese, so there is that ethnic-division problem occurring in the Vietnamese community. Also somewhat in the Cambodian community, but not as much. And we're not even talking about the Lao or the divisions of Lao needs with the Hmong, who were the Hmong people, who I have found out over time were very closely similar to the Montagnards of Vietnam, who in turn were extremely similar to the Igorots of the

Philippines. And, oh, my god, if you talk about a cultural migration, that intrigued me [unclear]. Anyway, that was just an aside.

So that was quite an engaging activity in and of itself, of getting the Refugee Service Center started. At the same time, I was involved in the other activities that, oh, my gosh, how am I going to do it? So a number of activities, such as the [Board of] Protection and Advocacy Incorporated board, as well as the Human Relations Commission, had to be dropped, because there was no way I could conduct both.

Singson

And, yes, this is also pushing forward to the 1980s. Also you mentioned there were some personal issues that you had to deal with?

Mendoza

Yes, going through a divorce, and that was rather involved and complicated.

Singson

Right. So HRC you had to resign from?

Mendoza

I had to resign from the Human Relations Commission. I had to resign from the board of Protection and Advocacy, which--

Singson

So you pretty much just stayed on in the Refugee Services Agency?

Mendoza

Right. Now, my work with Protection and Advocacy Incorporated I felt was important and provided an avenue for addressing a primary issue that had been part of the Asian Pacific Islander community since get-go, since the seventies and part of the Civil Rights Movement, of providing bilingual services. Protection and Advocacy and I should say the developmentally disabled--that's hard to say--

system in the state of California was providing services to the Asian Pacific Islander community, unbeknownst to them, as it were.

Because up until that time, as with many other social services and human services within the state of California, bilingual was equivalent to Spanish-speaking. By sitting on the Protection and Advocacy board, I finally got across by hammering home time and time again, of their own--I keep wanting to say concentration--their own bias in conducting activities by saying bilingual was equivalent to Spanish-speaking. They kept saying, "Bilingual this, bilingual that." I says, "What are you talking about? They're Korean American speaking Filipino?" which was [unclear], Tagalog, was what? So I finally got it across to them that bilingual is not synonymous with Spanish. They finally had to change their thinking. They finally changed that system to include other languages.

Why was it necessary? As it was with other social and human services throughout the state of California, you had to deal with families, not just the individual who had a particular human-service need. So where that individual may understand English, you couldn't always count on it. Their English may be not of sufficient level, and therefore staff had to deal in that language that wasn't always Spanish. You had to deal with families who definitely needed the language that was, in all cases, not Spanish. So we got that human-service system to recognize that there were more services needed in the state of California besides Spanish.

Singson

So one other thing that I think to consider in the 1980s, but this also rooted from the seventies, is PANA [Pilipino American Network and Advocacy]. So maybe you could talk about the roots of PANA first, and how it became more involved in the 1980s, or how it became prominent in the 1980s.

Mendoza

PANA is pretty much a brainchild of Roy Morales, and I, again, supported through membership with the group, outreaching to

others to participate in the PANA meetings. Essentially, it was like APCON, that provided itself a forum, provided itself an umbrella group to meet and address issues and to network.

Singson

And PANA's acronym, just for [unclear], the acronym for PANA is?

Mendoza

Pilipino American Network and Advocacy. So by virtue of that title and that name, that was its purpose, to identify issues, identify individuals, provide a forum, provide a networking avenue for Filipino Americans that were involved in other activities.

Singson

And in 1980s, you mentioned that this group became a little bit more prominent, or it sort of served its function very well in the eighties in terms of politics.

Mendoza

Was?

Singson

PANA. Was it--

Mendoza

Oh, yes. As the last part of its name, advocacy, it would get involved in many activities, as well as, say, endorsements of particular candidates, as a function of advocacy that, "There is this Filipino American issue. Do we or do we not advocate it? If we do, then, fine, what do we do?" So the fact of the PANA meetings as well as subcommittees that developed out of that, we addressed those particular issues. PANA was born at the Refugee Service Center, because I had a conference room which was open to community groups to meet. PANA was a community group, so they met at the Refugee Service Center.

Singson

Can you perhaps discuss a particular politician, for example, or a particular election wherein PANA really outstretched or flexed its muscles?

Mendoza

You know, for the life of me, I can't think of a single campaign that we really got involved in as a group. Individuals from PANA got involved in many, many campaigns, one of them being the election of Governor [Jerry] Brown. That was, what, 1980? At any rate, there was Asian American activity and involvement and advocacy throughout the state of California that we're finally feeling our political muscle, as it were. And so many, many Asian Americans got involved. The Asian Democratic Caucus was formed. The PALAD [Pilipino American Los Angeles Democrats] was formed to not necessarily counter, but to add an arm to the Asian Democratic Caucus as far as participating and involvement of Filipino Americans in the political sphere.

Singson

And this is just for Governor Brown's campaign?

Mendoza

No. You might say, by and large, aiming to it, but also seeing the opportunity to involve in other campaigns that developed.

Singson

Okay. Let me just pause.[Recorder turned off]

Singson

Okay. So before we paused, we were talking about sort of this growing political involvement of the Filipinos, beginning with PANA and its sort of advocacy for Governor Brown's campaign. Were there other local campaigns that came into fruition from this group, so not necessarily maybe from PANA, but from a group of people who you were working with?

Mendoza

There were a number of campaigns, but for the life of me I can't specifically identify any one of them. I know we were involved politically and were attending functions of various campaigns as representatives, but beyond that, Governor Brown was, I'd say, a mainstay campaign that many of us were involved in.

Singson

Now, why do you think were Filipinos more readily receptive to political action at this point? To participate in campaigns and maybe even getting into supporting a politician.

Mendoza

I would say the aging of the Filipino American population, as well as the incoming newer Filipinos, the later wave of more progressive-minded, involved, better educated Filipinos, who saw the need for various areas of participation and representation. From that sprouted community groups, more formal organizations like the Optimists [Club], like the Lions Club, organizations formed around the employment issues and professional organizations and groups and issues such as the optometrists of California, Filipino American Optometrists [of California], who were unable to practice in the state of California. So those issues and groups and individuals started participating more and more, and because those issues were directly linked to the political structure of the State of California, County of Los Angeles, the City of Los Angeles, you had that political involvement and awareness and participation.

Singson

Right. Just to wrap up the 1980s, and we've covered it really broadly, but how do you evaluate what took place in the seventies and its effect to what you've observed as you lived through the eighties? This is despite your sort of just focusing on one agency now, the Refugee Services.

Mendoza

I think the fact of the blossoming, if you will, of the Filipino American community in its becoming a part of the mainstream of

the city and Los Angeles County, and for that matter the state. Because of the networking that was done in the late seventies, early seventies, throughout, that more were participating and at least aware of needs of participation, of avenues for participation, and individuals may have become involved for a while and then dropped out. At least there was a participation, if only for a little while, and the awareness of being Filipino American, including themselves and doing something about it. Again, the whole idea of SIPA, Search to Involve Pilipino Americans. That was the whole idea of getting Filipinos aware that they were Filipino Americans, were part of the fabric of the mainstream society of the city of Los Angeles, of the county, of the state, and again, of the country, that we were here and we could become a part of issues, we could become a part of the fabric of the society.

Singson

And for you personally, you had so many activities, so many things overlapping, you know, one thing and another, one organization, wearing different hats. How do you assess your own involvement in all of this, and what do you think came out of it for you personally?

Mendoza

The fact that I'm seeing others involved now that were just part of the initial SIPA conferences and the early work, people just showing up in meetings for the first time, and I'm seeing them now as heads of agencies, heads of groups, as participating in other groups and indeed starting other groups, so that the network created Filipino American participation in issues and in, indeed, participating period, is very gratifying, that I feel I've done my work.

Maybe I was too involved in those days, and because of being too involved, spread so thin that maybe I wasn't as effective as I could be or should have been in various areas. But I felt that at least I participated, at least I did get involved, and I did give it a try, that as a consequence, we're here and we've accomplished.

Singson

And as a final question, do you see any difference to today's type of involvement, community organizing, versus what it was back in the seventies for you as sort of one of the main actors of the early Filipino community movement?

Mendoza

Oh, it's tapered off, undoubtedly. There isn't the busy kind of activity that was present and very much a function of the community back in the seventies. By and large, many of the issues that were issues then are no longer recognized as issues today. And yet, what I'm discovering in many areas is that the issues of the need for bilingual services that we were fomenting back in the early seventies, let's say 1970, '71, are still needed today. I'm hearing of occasions in [Los Angeles County] Health Services of L.A. County where they needed a translator, and a janitor was called in to translate for an Asian family. And, my god, that was a direct violation of federal regulations. I mean, by now, after all this, after forty years they still don't have a translator service? And I'm discovering that many of the services that we thought had come into play and were taken for granted today aren't necessarily there. So I'm wondering, if we really dug a little deeper, would many of the issues that we felt are now dead are really still there? And the other side of it is, they may still be there, but unless it's recognized by the community as issues, as needs that need to be addressed, nothing will be done.

Singson

Right. I guess that's a good point to end. Thank you very much for participating in the series.

Mendoza

Thank you. [End of interview]

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