A TEI Project

Interview of Casimiro Urbano Tolentino

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1.1. SESSION ONE (JUNE 28, 2011)

SINGSON

We are recording our first session with Cas[imiro] Tolentino. My name is Precious Singson, and today is June 28 [2011], doing our first recording session. How are you, Cas?

TOLENTINO

I'm doing fine. Actually, it should be the full name of Casimiro Urbano Tolentino, to make it distinctive from my son, who is also another Casimiro.

SINGSON

Okay. Very good. We'll make sure that the series title will start that way as well.

TOLENTINO

Good. Put a U or Urbano in there.

SINGSON

Yes. Okay. Sounds good. As in all good interviews, we will try to start from the very beginning and try to do some sort of recollection of your early childhood and also cover your family background, or at least from what you know about it from what stories your family has told you about it. Well, first of all, when and where were you born?

TOLENTINO

May 18, 1949, Manila, Philippines. They tell me I was born in Makati Hospital. My parents at that time, my mom was a teacher, Florencia Jose Urbano, then my dad is Ludivigo, but we call him "Lucio," Rubio Tolentino. My mom is from Solano, Nueva Viscaya. My dad is from Badoc, Ilocos Norte. A lot of it's really very ideal, I suppose, just interacting with a huge extended family. We lived in a house in 82 Angeles Street in Quezon City, a block away from the Chinese cemetery, and there were, at that point, most of the time four of us. I have an older brother [Lucio Tolentino], a sister Emilia [Tolentino], then Olivia [Tolentino] and then probably six or seven years later my sister Lalia [Tolentino].

SINGSON

And they were all born in the Philippines?

TOLENTINO

They were all born in the Philippines, and we lived really with a huge extended family, mostly from my mom's side, because my mom came from a family of fourteen, and she was a teacher. She'd already gone to college. My aunts and uncles, there must have been three, four or five of them, all raised at the house and all going to school. My dad at that time was partially going to school. He already had a degree in dentistry. He was also working at that point for the U.S. Army. He was already considered disabled veteran because he had gone through the Bataan Death March. He grew up in Badoc. They tell me that he was going to be a seminarian and be a priest. War [World War II] came and about the time that, I guess, when he joined the military and, I guess, through the interaction of the military, met my mom.

SINGSON

Interaction with the military meaning was he assigned to your mom's region in Philippines?

TOLENTINO

Yes. He's originally from Badoc, but he was assigned out to Solano, Nueva Viscaya, and he got to know, essentially, my godfather really well, and he introduced him to my mom. His name was Franco Arcebal, now a very active Filipino equity veteran person.

SINGSON

Here in the United States?

TOLENTINO

Here in the United States. That's another story of how I met him or renewed acquaintance with him. My dad, because he was part of the Philippine Scouts, which became eventually the U.S. Army, that gave him U.S. citizenship, but in order for him, I think, to finalize it, we as a family had to go to the United States, and that was what triggered us to going to the United States. We were all born American citizens because my dad was an American citizen. So my dad came probably about 1957, thinking that he was going to become a dentist here in California, and he was going to set it up for about a year. Unfortunately, foreign-trained dentists were not acceptable to the State of California's licensing boards. They kind of discounted his dentistry training and courses from, I think it was Far East University and from University of the Philippines, and they required additional courses, and internships would have been an additional two years. At that time he's probably about forty-five years old with five kids, so he essentially worked two jobs from the time he came to the United States. He started out as a clerk with the State of California and kind of just worked himself up just a few rungs, because part of the problem is he had a thick accent, and I think he always felt it was always impeding him. So he would always be reticent about trying to move on up in any kind of capacity.

SINGSON

Within the—

TOLENTINO

Within the State of California. He worked for the [California] State Compensation Insurance Fund.

SINGSON

Was this in Los Angeles already? Did you go directly to Los Angeles?

TOLENTINO

We went straight to Los Angeles.

SINGSON

Before moving on the story to your lives here in the United States, I'm really interested in the idea that you actually have a little bit of memory of the Philippines, because you were born 1949 and you had some years of living in Manila, especially after the war. Would you have any recollection of your life there?

TOLENTINO

Actually, there was a big mango tree in the front of the house, and we had pigs and chickens in the backyard. About three-quarters around us was still open land, and on one side a big apartment was being built.

SINGSON

So did you have any sense of what was occurring after the war, I mean, especially with your father as a veteran?

TOLENTINO

Not really. I think we didn't really see my dad that much other than he was going to work. Most of our interactions were with our extended family. They took us to school. They kind of took care of us. We were going, I think University of Santo Tomas, initially, all of us, and run by nuns and these Belgian priests. All I recall is very

large feet and they always wore very big sandals. But, you know, memories, I just remember playing in the huge yard, which was a large enclosed yard, with broken glass at the top, I guess to keep everybody away. Eventually, because they built a school about three blocks away, I think it was Church of the Immaculate Conception, and then the same Belgian priests started the school, and we started going there. It was always an interesting long walk, but always almost everybody within the neighborhood that we knew went there. We weren't really aware of whether there were public schools or not. It seemed like everybody was going to Immaculate Conception. We had the uniforms. We lined up. It must have been about five or six stories, because it was a long, long walk up, but it was the higher grades that did all the walking. Nuns who were very strict, rubber bands [demonstrates] to your lips if you talked too much, rulers striking if you did something wrong.

SINGSON

You were speaking in English, because your teachers were Belgian?

TOLENTINO

Yes. We were being taught English and, in fact, we were being taught Tagalog, almost like a foreign language. At home it was a combination. To this day it's tough for me to make a distinction, but my grandparents, who came there periodically, and almost all my extended family spoke Ilocano. So that's what we picked up here. Probably we picked up Tagalog from the streets. It was actually a big house that was made out of—I think it was made of brick and concrete and around it was another big apartment, but also scattered in between were a lot of the kind the nipa huts all around us. We always had kind of interesting times because of the weather. When a typhoon hit, we just kind of clustered. We woke up to about five feet of water surrounding the place. I don't think any of us were ever scared. We just thought it was fun.

SINGSON

Perhaps this is a good time to kind of juxtapose those memories to if you have any memories of your arriving here in the United States.

TOLENTINO

I think it kind of starts in the Philippines, because I remember my parents started talking about it. "Why is dad leaving?"

SINGSON

Oh, so your father went first?

TOLENTINO

Yes, he went first. He spent about a year ahead, because it took some time. My mom was pregnant with my sister, and we couldn't leave until she gave birth and Lalia was at least six months. I guess nobody can pursue it anymore, but she was only three months old when they came here. I think they somehow worked on her birth certificates to reflect a little earlier birth. But I know that there were these interesting big parties, because I think it was the first time any member of the family on either side would be going.

SINGSON

So it was a celebration for the rest of the family.

TOLENTINO

Big celebration. I just remember lots of celebrations in the Philippines. We'd always be going to Luneta Park for various speeches or carnivals. It seemed like almost every other weekend there was some festival, and I never could figure it out because it's also a very homogenous community. Every Christmas holiday, Easter holiday, all those holidays were always celebrated by the community. There was no distinction. We all celebrated it. All Soul's Day was another big—the Chinese cemetery, that was packed. So my memories really of the Philippines growing up is that we had tons of festivals and tons of celebrations.

SINGSON

As opposed to your moving to L.A. [Los Angeles], was it a different experience?

TOLENTINO

Yes. We flew on a plane. I think we were all raised—we really didn't know what to expect. I know my mom was crying, which I learned later, there's no real extended family for her here. She's the very first of her family. My dad had cousins who were helping him out, so they're the ones that picked me up, Pastor Valido, who also had a history of working as a farm worker, as a bartender, worked as a steward or a chef. Those are my uncles. They all had that kind of background, and they all lived in L.A., and they were all helping each other out and helping out my dad. We were this family from the Philippines that they were going to take care of.

SINGSON

Was there a lot of families already or youths that were about your age?

TOLENTINO

No, there was nobody our age. We were probably the first kids that they'd ever seen. They were all single men.

SINGSON

Let me just pause for a moment. [interruption]

SINGSON

Okay. Before we paused, I was just about to ask you about your experience as a young person and coming in, your whole family with young kids, and these older Filipino men, mostly single, encountered you.

TOLENTINO

Well, essentially, they were all somehow related to my dad. They were introduced as cousins, but we called them Uncle. We actually stayed on Bonnie Brae, I would say, about three houses just north

of the current FACLA [Filipino American Community of Los Angeles]. It seemed like there were a lot—and it was rooms with single men.

SINGSON

You mean the apartment that you were staying in?

TOLENTINO

Yes, apartments, but they weren't apartments. You have lots of single men living there. The person running it was Tata Lakay, which is kind of redundant, but that's what we called him. I remember him. He was much older than all the other men, and he seemed to be either kind of the patriarch, would tell us how to do things and what to do. So we stayed there for about three months, really just in one room, the five kids and mom. You could tell my mom just was not happy. We actually had fun. We were just kind of running around. We came here, I guess, in the cycle of time in which we'd left school, but here they were still in school, had about three or four months. I think we came, like, sometime in April. So my dad went around looking for different places to stay. What I do remember memorably is the apartment we finally got, and that was on Venice Boulevard. My dad, I think, had bought a car, a 1957 Plymouth, and I think he'd bought it from one of my uncles, and, you know, all of us fit in the car. There were no seatbelts in those days. We were going from apartment to apartment where there was a "For Rent" sign. I don't think we followed any ads, just the location near the schools. So this was really about a block away from the school, and we go up. I remember my dad—we were always dressed well. We didn't have the ties, but we were always like in coats or white shirts and stuff like that.

SINGSON

Do you remember if, especially during those times, they always had these housing restrictions, even if it's their housing covenants or discrimination against minorities?

TOLENTINO

I learned that later. At this point in time I'm nine years old. I think the places we went to they seemed to be very diverse. This is roughly Hoover [Avenue] and Venice [Boulevard], which is the first school [Venice Elementary School] we went to. But, anyway, we come up to this apartment, which it looks like a converted house. It's an old Craftsman, and it's one house that now looks like four apartments are built into it. What my parents were looking at literally was a one-bedroom. This old lady comes out, very just painted, lots of makeup, but a very animated lady. We stepped out of the car because it was so hot. So we stepped out of the car, and my dad was talking to her, and we could hear her say, "No, no, no. Too many kids. Just one bedroom, sir. It's only one bedroom." Actually, I think we were just kind of playing around. Then she looks over and says, "Are those your kids? Are these the ones that you—?" And then she said, "Yes. All right, I'll let you have it. They look like nice kids." And that's Grandma Langlois, and she literally became a lifelong friend to the family, especially to my mom, because she was the first introduction to—I think most of our interactions at that point were all these single men we'd run into. We'd go to St. Columban Church. A lot of other Filipino families were there. But Mom didn't know any of them, nor did my dad. So we almost kind of never really interacted, even with the larger community.

SINGSON

Is it because of where you resided eventually in Venice [Boulevard] and Hoover [Avenue], because you were too far away from sort of the center of where Filipinos gathered?

TOLENTINO

Probably. There just weren't that many Filipinos around, because even Magnolia Elementary School where we walked to school, it was really just a mix. We didn't really notice any blacks. Remember that we, as Filipinos, we had no idea of the mix of America. We just made the assumption everybody was white, and so we were surprised to see Japanese Americans or we saw black folks. We

didn't distinguish the Hispanics from the white students. Didn't seem to make that much distinction.

SINGSON

So I'm still trying to get a sense of where the Filipinos are. I was struck by your statement when you said there weren't a lot of Filipinos around. What do you mean by that? You mean young Filipinos or young Filipino families?

TOLENTINO

Yes. We were the only Filipino in that block. I think we were the only Filipinos in the school, even though it probably is not that far away from the historic Filipino town there on Temple [Street]. You just kind of keep going south for a couple of miles. I think the governing factor for my parents was the school, that it was within walking distance. And it was always just lots of fun. They had bake sales and they had events, and then because my mom had no idea, did not understand how to make cookies and stuff, Grandma Langlois was the one that baked the cookies in exchange for Mom making Filipino delicacies. She was the one that introduced us to apple pies and cookies, and we always thought this is what American folks ate. Grandpa Langlois, and we called him that, was retired, had a Studebaker and always just puttered around the house—his house was the back house—puttered around the apartments taking care of things. It looks like they were kind of a retired old couple, and in my eyes, I thought they were very, very old, but I think, in retrospect, they were probably only in their sixties or so. She told us wonderful stories of growing up in L.A. She was a native Angelino. She waitressed at various Thrifty Drugstores and Woolworth's, and then during the [Great] Depression, she sold apples on the streets and she told ties. She would get on the trolley. There was a trolley at that time going down Venice [Boulevard], and she said the businessmen would use that a lot, and so that's who she sold ties to.

SINGSON

What is their background? Are they from some specific ethnic background, do you remember?

TOLENTINO

I think they're supposed to be French, because it's Langlois. We never saw their kids, though they had three kids. At that point, I think they were all grown and moved out of L.A.

SINGSON

I see. Sort of based on experience, kind of just recalling and knowing what you know now after evaluating this race interaction, how would you evaluate that interaction, especially between your mom and Grandma Langlois?

TOLENTINO

Well, I think she saw us as immigrants who were trying to—they saw them both working really hard to get a better life for their kids, which is what I think they also did in their own way. I don't think she ever saw us as Filipinos, I suppose, because there weren't that many. So I don't think she felt threatened, nor was she affected by—I mean, if you'd asked her why the exclusionary laws, I don't know if it was a part of her train of thought. To her it was just this interesting family that she was interacting with, and for us, this is American people, and I thought that was very positive because they were both very kind and very tolerant of what we were doing. In fact, when we moved out after, I think, a couple of years, she said, "Well, I'll lower the rent," kind of thing and tried to keep us. But she said, "No, no, we've found a house." I mean, that was the dream for, I think, any Filipino family, was to get your own house to raise the kids.

SINGSON

And this is only after two years, so maybe let's sort of go back to your father's situation.

TOLENTINO

Okay.

SINGSON

How was he able to afford that house within two years of working?

TOLENTINO

As a box boy, then working as a clerk and working at the post office, it's because he got help from our uncles, all his cousins. They pooled together the down payment for the house, and it was them that—which I didn't learn till much later. It's interesting because they always had memories of my family, my dad's side of the family. They would always think that, like, my sister looked like my grandmother, Aunt Selma. I think my dad grew up with all of them. They all came from the same region, and they all came, actually, in probably in the mid thirties and forties but kept communicating, and I think remitted probably a lot of money, and that's why they remained single men. In fact, this was an opportunity for somebody from their area, from Badoc, to come and actually start to grow up here in America with a family. They had never seen families before, or especially from their particular group. No, my uncles were around a lot. Uncle Pastor was around a lot. He was the one that would bring things to us, I suppose, take us to Disneyland or take us to Pacific Ocean Park in Long Beach, the things that you think growing up. My dad was constantly working. My mom stayed at home, and she usually babysat not only her own kids but the neighborhood kids, and that was kind of her plan through. While we were there, we moved into South Central L.A., essentially, on Gramercy and Sixty-Fifth Place, and not very far away really, probably six blocks away from the Rodney King riots and not very far away from Watts. At least that was probably about two miles away.

SINGSON

Were you there during the Watts Riot?

TOLENTINO

No, actually, I had just moved at that point down to Montebello. But it was a unique place to grow up, because even then it was really diverse. There was probably only [one] black kid in the whole

neighborhood. But interestingly, we were introduced to—there was a large number of Mormon families, so we could never figure out who Mormons were, except for the wild rumors were on the streets. But they were great kids to play with. They were the ones who taught us how to play football and baseball, all in the streets.

SINGSON

Now I'm curious about you seem to grow up within this very diverse community and you're being introduced to different cultures and sort of being—now we use the word assimilated to mainstream America. But I'm curious to know about your own interaction with other Filipinos, especially now that we in historical narratives now talk about the arrival of the war-bride families, especially after World War II. During that time, 1950s, there will be a lot more families arriving. Did you have any interaction with them at all, with other Filipino families who perhaps through FACLA or other organizations that your family—or maybe religion, religious organization, church, or other institutions?

TOLENTINO

Well, you know, in those days there just weren't that many Filipino families. The only interaction we would have is really through the provincial groups. We were active in our church because we were part of the CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] program, but even then, though, we were really pretty much the only Filipino family around.

SINGSON

Can you talk about that? What is CCD program?

TOLENTINO

It was like a catechism program, which it was an after-school program. Every Wednesday you would go.

SINGSON

This was for your Catholic—

TOLENTINO

It was catechism, yes.

SINGSON

Through the Catholic Church.

TOLENTINO

St. Anselm's [Catholic Church], again run by essentially immigrant Hungarian nurses, who they'd tell us the stories about the Hungarian blockade and how they came to America. So I guess it was a natural consequence for them to work with immigrant families, and they did. I think they thought we were really in bad shape, but I didn't think we were.

SINGSON

Your family in particular?

TOLENTINO

Yes. Because like Easter or Christmas or Thanksgiving, we got boxes of food, you know, American food, actually, that all of us looked and we couldn't figure out how to cook it. My uncles would tell us how to do it. Cereals for us were not common, but there were lots of cereals and oatmeal. It was just very different American foods. The first time around we thought, "Oh, how neat." Then it kept coming and coming. They were helping out this family.

SINGSON

Is it mostly because there's a lot of immigrants in the area, or were you sort of particular, you think you were particularly—

TOLENTINO

I think they pulled us out, because I don't think it was an immigrant group. They knew that we were immigrants in the sense that we had just come from the Philippines, in their eyes. Just like the nuns had just come from Hungary, escaping communism probably about four or five years earlier. Where we lived was really kind of just a

very diverse group, I mean, still a white family to our right, who was a very active Democratic activist. Of course, we didn't quite know what the family did, but I think he sold insurance and she did the same thing. But she was always rabblerousing. Because my mom stayed home and I guess she was home, I think during the 1960 Democratic [National] Convention, I forgot their name, but she had dragged my mom over to it and made her a lifelong Democrat after that.

SINGSON

That's great. [laughs]

TOLENTINO

So there was one other Filipino family. They lived in this big, big house, probably, and they were—

SINGSON

In the same neighborhood.

TOLENTINO

—in the neighborhood. But it was kind of a mixture. We were kind of a cluster of small stucco houses, but as you go up the hill, the houses became very big, and they were very big, generous houses. This Filipino family up there, we interacted with them because they're the ones that took us to various places. But in terms of—

SINGSON

Places, what do you mean, places?

TOLENTINO

They would take us to, like, some Filipino event, you know, which I wasn't quite sure. All I know is we were dragged to it. The ones that we were active with were the ones that my dad was involved with. It was like Badoc provincial groups, Ilocano groups, and veterans groups, the military. For him it was specifically the army. These were all events occurring out in the South Bay. We would go to Wilmington. The Wilmington Filipino Hall is really much more

familiar to us than FACLA in L.A. We would go there at least once a month for some dance or dinner, and it's usually veterans or it's the United Sons of Badoc and Pinili or the Ilocano Association. My uncles, I guess, more uncles, uncles galore all over, single men, lived over there, and that's how they organized it, and it seemed like everywhere we turned, there was some relative of my dad.

SINGSON

Were their families already there? What are these parties like?

TOLENTINO

There were single men, but they also had lots of—I think for the first time we saw kids our age. They would be living actually down here right on Temple [Street], but then the events, they weren't going to FACLA. FACLA was not their focus. It was more the Wilmington Hall, because they all, I think, were tied in more as Ilocanos. Around Wilmington Hall, that's where quite a few Filipino families were, and those are the families we interacted with.

SINGSON

What does FACLA serve? So if it's not more to Filipino families, who did they serve more?

TOLENTINO

I think it was probably just a different group of Filipinos went there, probably from different provinces or who lived a little more physically closer to it, I suppose. Where over there in pretty much South Central [Los Angeles], when we moved to Montebello, we still continued, we kept going. I think for my family it's because there was a huge number of military families there. I remember interacting with the kids. We had to learn to dance, perform.

SINGSON

Did they have the queen contests too?

TOLENTINO

Yes, we had the queen contests, and my sisters were in the princess contests. I don't think they really knew what they were being involved in. It's just my mom would dress them up and, "We're going," kind of thing. There was not anything voluntary about it. But just really the families always seemed to get together. We just played with them and the focus was on education, where kids are going to be to going to school and stuff like that. It seemed like they all were well-performing kids. At least that's what our parents kept telling us. They would tell us the great things the other kids were doing. It was probably to shame us into doing better.

SINGSON

What I'm getting a sense from you is, on the Wilmington events, they sort of served as more of a social event, and no sense of political or any kind of economic, perhaps, networking. I guess my question is, looking at it back now, how would you evaluate that kind of networking that they did in the Wilmington group?

TOLENTINO

I think the networking was just mutual aid for them. If somebody had a problem, had a health problem or somebody died, the respective provincial groups helped out, would take care of the wake or take care of the lunch afterwards. I think most of these folks were working for either the post office, for government, a very low-paying job or as waiters or stewards or as cooks. For them it was just pure survival. I don't think [unclear], though you had folks there who, I'm sure, in retrospect were selling insurance, or real estate folks. I guess to some degree that was there, because when we moved to Montebello, one of our neighbors was a very active seller of California City land. Probably if all the owners of California City ever show up, probably over half of them will be Filipinos. She was such a good sales lady that they all bought vacant desert land that's still vacant desert land. In fact, when my mom died eventually, we kept it just because it was kind of sentimental, but the value of the property is far less than the property insurance that we were paying, so we sold it.

SINGSON

So there was some kind of support group?

TOLENTINO

I think it was folks who, like, sold the insurance, they were selling veterans insurance or church insurance, and I'm sure they were probably conscious that they had a target group of folks that they could sell it to, because there was kind of an affinity. Anything dealing with veterans or military, those kinds of insurance were easily sold.

SINGSON

So now it seems to me that you have a separate world of so here's sort of your Filipino interaction, and then while at home and going through your elementary it's a little more diverse. So we'll keep it sort of separate at this point and later on ask you how you developed your Filipino identity awareness or if there ever is such. So I want to ask first your life as a student during your elementary or your junior high towards high school, what was it like?

TOLENTINO

Well, elementary school [Magnolia Elementary School] was very different from what it was in the Philippines because you didn't have these very harsh nuns anymore. At least in our eyes they were very harsh. Or Belgian priests. It was Mrs. McIntyre. I mean, if you looked from the 1950s, she was always in high heels, was always dressed like Leave it to Beaver mother, and very friendly and was very tolerant of—we probably were at least thirty. They identified five of us for ESL [English as a Second Language] classes. So twice a week, twice in an afternoon, they'd pull us out for about an hour to ESL to teach us how to pronounce English words. Sh-sh-shoe, shoe, shoe. That's a c-h. I so vividly remember, very patient ESL teacher. And I think we were always kind of laughing, because it didn't seem like we were getting, I guess, maybe our diction or how we articulated improved.

SINGSON

Do you remember what other ethnicities were in that group?

TOLENTINO

Yes. I think there was Hispanic. I was probably the only Asian one there, because the Japanese American friend or student was pretty well—I mean, he spoke just like everybody else. We were just all a mixture of kids. It seemed to be 90 percent white and then a cluster of us who were different, I suppose.

SINGSON

Was that the same when you went to high school or junior high? I'm trying to get a sense of the ethnicity.

TOLENTINO

That's Magnolia Elementary School. When we moved to South Central [Los Angeles], you had more—it was a white community, pretty much, because the son of the congressman was going to that school, and everybody knew he was the son of a congressman. I mean, it's, "Don Wilson did this," "Don Wilson did that." He always won whatever awards or events. [interruption]

SINGSON

We are back from just a quick pause to have a drink of water. We were talking about your junior high school, and just for the sake of having it on record, what is the name of your junior high?

TOLENTINO

74th Street School.

SINGSON

And you were speaking about the son of the congressman who was—

TOLENTINO

Went to school there. It was a much larger yard, a much larger school than Magnolia [Elementary School], and maybe it's just because I'm now in fifth or sixth grade, it seemed like everybody

else seemed bigger, and I didn't. I remained the same. But as Filipinos, there was not much distinction being made to us.

SINGSON

What do you mean?

TOLENTINO

I don't think we were treated any differently.

SINGSON

I see.

TOLENTINO

And at that point because there were not very many of us, it was 90 percent white, and I don't think there was a single black that I can recall. No, I guess there was one.

SINGSON

And Asians?

TOLENTINO

There was Japanese Americans and Chinese, but we were probably a handful, about five or six of us.

SINGSON

So what you're saying is that you weren't considered Asian? You were considered different from the rest of the campus?

TOLENTINO

I don't think so. At least I didn't get a sense of being distinguished. Well, I guess in a way they do, because you would have the chairs in the classroom all the regular heights, and then there's an area with all the smaller desks, and that's where all the Asian folks were. There were probably about four or five of us.

SINGSON

You did very well, though?

TOLENTINO

I did well except in the area of music, because I think the music director didn't—he always kept correcting my pronunciation anyway. You got the sense that he didn't—when you sing these songs, he's hearing accents that he's not used to and he doesn't want to hear. At least that's the first time I noticed that he kept correcting me about the way you sing songs. Like, you know, "Swing low, sweet ch-chariot, chariot." At that point, I'm Casey, you know. But I'd say "chariot," or something, and he'd say, "ch-, ch-." It drove me crazy all the time, so I never really liked music because of that distinction. But also that we were always the smallest. Kids were growing taller and taller. But part of what they did, which the award I won, actually, there was a Fire Prevention Week and the local fire stations would come and talk about fire and then we'd go back to our homes and do things. You got credit for that, and they did a quiz, and I won the quiz. For the first time I beat Don Wilson, who always wins everything. He won the year before. But that got me a Junior Battalion Chief badge. It was like painted gold, which I'm still trying to find out because I'm now a fire commissioner. I said, "I got my gold badge before all of you guys. I got it in the fifth grade." Little did I know that that—I always had affinity for the fire department because I won that award. But anyway, it seemed like very normal growing up. Other than the music teacher, we did well.

SINGSON

Let me get a sense when you're in high school. What years were you in high school?

TOLENTINO

This is elementary. Junior high school we went—high school is probably 1962 till about '67. I'm in elementary school still.

SINGSON

Right. Yes. I'm going to move on to your high school years, and I'm going to try to integrate just a little bit of the Civil Rights Movement. I'm sure at this point since you're still in high school—

TOLENTINO

You missed the junior high school.

SINGSON

Oh, I see.

TOLENTINO

So within L.A. there's a junior high school. Seventh, eighth, and ninth is considered junior high school. The first two years I went to Horace Mann Junior High School. That's when suddenly there were lots of black folks. I think what happens is our school is probably in the middle, elementary school, because I didn't see any of the white students coming to Horace Mann. Horace Mann was just a large number of blacks for the first time that I've ever seen, and also more Asians, and the first Asian face I saw as a teacher, Mr. Murakawa.

SINGSON

What was he teaching?

TOLENTINO

He was our music teacher, and that's how I got back to music, which I hated over there. But here there was this very nice man, and I learned to play the clarinet. It was interesting because it wasn't till much later, probably about ten years later, I see him leading the Japanese American Symphony, and I said, "That's Mr. Murakawa." So I approached him after, and I said, "Mr. Murakawa, do you remember me? You were my teacher." At that point I'm probably twenty-two, twenty-three. "At Horace Mann." He goes, "Hmm. What did you play?" "Clarinet." He went, "Oh, yes, I remember you now." But, anyway, he was the very first Japanese American teacher I ever saw. He was a taskmaster, but I think because we were both Asian, at least in my mind—I didn't use the word "Asian," but he had a face I was familiar with—that there was an affinity and I worked harder than I normally would have.

SINGSON

What was the interaction like between the different races?

TOLENTINO

I remember in the background, if they didn't like Mr. Murakawa, it was like a "Ching Chong," you know. I'm thinking the first time I heard the word "Jap," which I didn't attribute as being racist. It just seemed like he was the "Jap teacher." That was the way the kids referred to him.

SINGSON

Then for Filipinos, were you the only Filipino?

TOLENTINO

Yes. I am pretty much all the way through the only Filipino. Or even my family. We're growing up pretty much in a very white world.

SINGSON

In this campus how did the blacks or the other Asian groups treat you as a Filipino?

TOLENTINO

It's hard to say. I don't think they made any distinction, because some really good friends were black. But I think we were slowly pulling away at that age, because they were getting very much bigger. Physically they could do things more that you could not do. I think they respected me because to them I was very smart, and my brother was very smart. I was following my brother, who was far smarter than I ever was.

SINGSON

Your brother is how old? How much older?

TOLENTINO

He's a year older, and he's a rocket scientist. He's a chemist, works for Aerospace. But at that time, it was also a time of a lot more fun things, because you had shop. You had electrical shop, wood shop. You had all these interesting things to do. And gardening. I did well

in all those shop things and drafting. I did great. Somehow I had those skill sets that I never thought of, but I thought everybody else had them too. Then we moved to Montebello, and I now go to Schurr Junior High School. It's a brand-new high school.

SINGSON

Is it a diverse school? What is the mix of race?

TOLENTINO

It's in Montebello. There's a lot more Asian faces. There are no blacks, lots of Hispanics and Armenians and Jews. Jewish, I thought they were just white folks that had Jewish backgrounds, because there was a—what was his real name? It was Kasumo Sakamoto or something. But they couldn't pronounce his first name, and I'm Casimiro Tolentino, so we were both—he was Casey Sakamoto. I was Casey Tolentino.

SINGSON

Were there any Filipinos in that school?

TOLENTINO

No. The only Filipino family we knew that were roughly our age were going to Cantwell High School. That was the Catholic school. We thought of them as the rich Filipino family that can afford Catholic school. There were two or three families that were Filipino families that were moving in, but they were moving in with babies. Christian Vivo, my mom took care of literally through through high school. I've forgotten other kids' names. They all lived roughly in Montebello. So there's probably four Filipino families at any one time, at least while I'm growing up through high school. [interruption]

SINGSON

So we just paused for a quick moment again, and I guess at this point I will want to kind of move on to your high school years, if this is okay. Especially during this time, we are sort of already feeling

the heat of the Civil Rights Movement. So, first of all, maybe you could talk about where did you go to high school?

TOLENTINO

I went to Montebello High School, which is just past East L.A. At that time, it was pretty much the same group of folks came from Schurr [Junior High School] and then also from, at that point, Eastmont Junior High School, really the only high school in Montebello. Montebello Unified [School District] covered parts of Monterey Park, Alhambra, Pico Rivera, East L.A. So it was a very diverse high school. Interestingly enough, kind of the leaders of the group was a Japanese American. Junior Iwanabe was constantly elected president of this class, that class, and eventually our senior class. There weren't any black families there. For the first time, I also began to meet Armenian families, the Burkhoffs, the Kaseroffs, the Bellakovs. I always inquired, and they always kind of shrugged, and eventually with time you learned that they're second-generation Armenian, and they all moved to roughly that same area and they were involved in bakeries and in waste management. So, a fascinating juxtaposition. There was a Jewish community for the first time, because I'm invited to bar mitzvahs. My good friend was Jewish, and he told me that his last name was Steve, Steve Lipton. Oh, no, it used to be Lapinski. But his dad was, like, a contractor. He wouldn't get any jobs if they knew he was Lapinski versus just Lipton. So I began to realize there was a distinction that was made.

SINGSON

So you didn't get any sense of what is sort of going on? Watts is very close by.

TOLENTINO

The closest we have is we saw the Watts Riot on TV, and I think my parents were very glad we moved out of the area, because I think consciously or unconsciously, I think that that community was changing from being an almost white dominant community to becoming a very black community. It was a black family that bought

our home. Our neighbor, a Mormon family started to move out and a black family moved in. The families to our right, which was a white family, they moved out; another black family moved in. And I think my dad, without ever articulating it, thought it was going to be changing and wouldn't be as safe. It was very safe in the sense that I delivered newspapers for $25 a month. I delivered every single day, rain or shine. No, I made $25, but I had like roughly twenty-eight customers that I did every single day. So I woke up at three in the morning, folded the papers, and delivered. This is the morning, which I don't think they would allow us to do even in a safe community, you wouldn't let your twelve, thirteen-year-old kid out there delivering newspapers. But I did and went back to sleep. Did that for many—it's interesting because we always played all the way through the night, and it was relatively safe. But I think when some of the families started to move out, it just was changing.

SINGSON

What were your thoughts, though? You see this on TV. I'm sure you hear about talks, if not in school, your family talks about it or your extended— 0:55:04.1

TOLENTINO

Once you began to see it on TV, though, I think I'm still in junior high or even high school, but you begin to wonder why—because you saw the sheriff hosing down those folks. But at that time, it was such a diverse community in Montebello, I don't think it touched—I think we always thought it was outside of our little community, because I wasn't treated any differently. And I was a smart kid, I suppose, and maybe that was the shield that kept me apart from everybody else. "He might be different but he's a smart kid." Plus, the friends I had, I suppose, he had great knowledge of the Jewish community.

SINGSON

You mean a best friend?

TOLENTINO

Yes, a best friend who was telling me about what they did and what the Jewish—for the first time I heard about the Holocaust. I had no idea any of this stuff was taking place. It was coming from your friend. It wasn't coming from the history books. All I can remember of World War II—and I don't think they even used the word "Holocaust." They just said that people were in concentration camps. One of the things that I think you notice is that it was the Asian kids were the smart kids and that almost all the football players were the big football player types, were very big.

SINGSON

You mean non-Asian?

TOLENTINO

Yes, they were non-Asian. And Armenians. In my mind I didn't make any distinction. The whites of Montebello were Armenians, which I had no idea. So they're Bellakovs, but Steve just looked like what an American should look like, blond hair. Cheerleaders, which when you look back in time, if you ever look at the Montebello, I would say probably of the ten cheerleaders, nine of them are Armenian or Armenian background, if you just look at their names. But to me that was white America. It wasn't Armenian America.

SINGSON

But did you get any sense of what was happening in the South, for example, the Freedom Rides?

TOLENTINO

No. I think it was a function of a lack of anything in our history books. I knew that there were distinctions because I knew that Steve went to Jewish school on Saturdays. There was a Japanese-language school on Saturday mornings. They all seemed to go to different schools. There was also an Armenian school. So this little community, actually, had folks watching out for their ethnic groups. There was a large Japanese American community because they had events that we would go to, and they were organized by JACL

[Japanese American Citizens League] or organized by a church group that were Japanese American groups.

SINGSON

You mean your family would go to or your friends?

TOLENTINO

We would be invited to go. But we never saw that. But in the meantime, throughout this whole thing we're going down to Wilmington for Filipino American events. Then roughly in, I think, the time that kind of formulated my interest in any of this was probably in English class and where we had an experimental block teaching. English was this terrific lady who literally made us read books that were banned by the—they couldn't get it so, she would buy it and sell it back to us. Like Catcher in the Rye. We were introduced to [F. Scott] Fitzgerald, to [Ernest] Hemingway, all these great writers, to the Theatre of the Absurd. They were terrific writers, and I think her contribution, she made us think about the world around us. Then at the same time we had block classes in which all of Tuesday was all social history, and then on Wednesday and part of it would be English and something else. But it was kind of an experimental group. We didn't have any textbooks. It was to get us to think. We had to have projects, which we goofed on because we had no idea what our teachers wanted to do with us. Maybe it was to give us the freedom to think. We tried, but we couldn't. They'd tell us in the library, "Look up Theatre of the Absurd." We'd look it up, and so what do we do with this?

SINGSON

So how do you think that this class or—

TOLENTINO

Because for the first time they raised issues about the Vietnam War. They raised issues about race and tolerance. We started reading—I can't remember the books, but they were introduced as part of essays, philosophy classes, what [Immanuel] Kant said, what [Thomas] Jefferson said. We only studied them as presidents, but

for the first time we were seeing them as philosophers, so it got us thinking. What triggered it more was the Vietnam War, because for the first time you knew people who died, because every Friday they would toll whoever died that was a graduate of Montebello.

SINGSON

This was during an assembly?

TOLENTINO

During the lunch hour. So initially you'd hear the one "ding," and, "I wonder who died," kind of thing. And they'd post it on the wall. But then I remember one luncheon it rang four times, and then somebody said Reggie was one of them. Reggie? I mean, he was in band with me. Now he's dead? It kind of hit you that real life began to intrude to this very quiet, at least, high school community.

SINGSON

Wow.

TOLENTINO

For the first time, we had teachers who were talking about other things other than going through the history just in a chronological way, but skipped around, followed the history of race, the history of—"Let's track what happened with the Irish folks." I remember talking about it. See, at that time I knew very little of Filipino American history. But it showed a pattern of immigrants coming to the United States to better themselves.

SINGSON

I wanted to connect that. We sort of left off this other world of Filipino gatherings. How did you bring any of these experiences to what you're experiencing now, especially when—

TOLENTINO

It's all in retrospect, really, and then from reading, because there were five of us always did things together. We all went to see the James Bond movies together. The three of us were in the band. All

of us were in Latin class. All of us were in this experimental group. Three of us were in drafting. So we all had these very common interests and we all stuck with each other. But I remember going to—it wasn't called Big Boy—Big Burger, and it was a celebration, I think. Steve [Lipton] was going to pay for hamburgers for everybody. Steve came from a rich family, you know. His mom picked us up in this giant Cadillac. So it wasn't unusual, because we knew he'd get the money from his mom. So there were four of us, and then I remember him going up front and saying, "Yes, I'll cover for all these guys," and I'm the last coming through. It's when I get to the—he's putting it on a pad, and so I come up and he looks at me, he goes, "Is he with you guys?" And they all said, "Yes," but it's like—but when you think about it in retrospect, it's like why is he treating me different? I mean, Steve said, "These are my buddies here," and I'm the only one in line. There're four of us in line, and that's us. There's nobody behind me. It's like that seems strange. And we all said, "That seemed strange," and we all kind of comment. They all kind of comment, you know. For the first time there's a distinction in any way.

SINGSON

And you were becoming aware of it?

TOLENTINO

Slowly becoming aware of it. Interestingly enough, I think it was because I did things so well and I fitted in so well that they kind of overlooked the difference of what they saw in me. I did just as well with them in drafting. I wasn't as good in clarinet, but I was terrific in English class, you know, so it was like we were kind of kindred spirits, and they never really—and because I think they saw me running around with these Anglo folks, that I seemed kind of normal.

SINGSON

Again let me—right before we head on the second session, we are going to deal with a lot of your UCLA [University of California Los

Angeles] experience, which is really the beginning of your political awareness. But before we go there, I'd like to sort of wrap this session up by perhaps giving us a sense of any type of early Filipino awareness. What was your sense of who you are as a Filipino, even if you were hanging around with other, shall we say, mainly white folks?

TOLENTINO

Yes. Actually, I grew up in pretty much a white community. The only distinctions we noticed, I think, is whenever our friends would come up. Well, it's interesting, because they didn't come to my home as much as I went to their houses. But it was always interesting because my mom would be apprehensive because she didn't quite know what to cook for those guys. She didn't call them "whites," your friends, because she cooked Filipino food, pansit, chicken adobo, because I would tell her about somehow Tom—I mean, his parents, they both worked. They always had TV dinners. TV dinners. And she said, "Oh, what are those?" And she didn't quite know what to do. She was always apprehensive, but a couple of times they came, they said, "Oh, my god, your mom cooks really interesting food."

SINGSON

So they were exposed to Filipino food.

TOLENTINO

Yes, they were exposed, and I was exposed to their world even more because I seemed to be there more. They invited me more. Just thinking through, these were very interesting friends, because I learned to fix a car with Tom and his dad, who was racist, of course. He called them niggers. He called them bucks. He grew up in Iowa and Ohio. His wife is a teacher and is always trying to hold him off.

SINGSON

And how did he feel about you?

TOLENTINO

You know, I think he didn't see me as threatening, like "those niggers," in his head. He thought I was Tom's friend who seemed to be very skillful in learning how to fix a car. I mean, he tinkered everything, and so we were always fixing a car with him.

SINGSON

So, I guess to wrap this up, I'm trying to still go back to that question of what is your sense during this time, as much as you can recall, of your Filipino-ness? Where does it lie?

TOLENTINO

I don't think I ever questioned I was Filipino. I was Filipino. I didn't call myself even Filipino American, I don't think. They would ask me where I'm from. I'd say I was born in the Philippines. And I don't think at that time there were that many Asian faces or Filipinos in Montebello that there was any sense of threat, I think, that there was too many of us. They just weren't there. Up to the point I think I graduated, we were the only Filipino family in Montebello High School. The only other one they interacted with, it wasn't me, it was my brother. It was like, "Oh, you're Lucio's brother." I followed his footsteps. They skipped him a grade. He was a smart kid. I think they expected that out of me. I'm not sure I quite fulfilled that, but we were smart kids going through school.

SINGSON

Maybe this is a good time so that we could jump the hurdle on the second session of already being at UCLA. Why did you pick UCLA? Did you have any other choices?

TOLENTINO

My brother went to UCLA, I was going to UCLA.

SINGSON

Right. And your major was going to be?

TOLENTINO

Initially engineering, which I hated. Then I became a zoology major and I remained. I got my bachelor in zoology. I think I was the last graduate of zoology in 1972. After that, it became a biology major.

SINGSON

All right. Well, let's end there. I think we'll wrap it up to this part of your life, and then in the next session we'll talk about your UCLA experience and your political awareness during that time.

TOLENTINO

Okay.

SINGSON

Thank you very much.

TOLENTINO

You're welcome. [End of June 28, 2011 interview]

1.2. SESSION TWO (JULY 5, 2011)

SINGSON

Today is the fifth of July [2011], and we are here again at Cas's [Casimiro U. Tolentino] home in Los Angeles. How are you, Cas?

TOLENTINO

I'm doing fine.

SINGSON

Very good.

TOLENTINO

Hot.

SINGSON

Yes, very warm, warm summer day in L.A. [Los Angeles]. This is Precious Singson doing the interview, the second session interview.

So what we've done at our first session, we really ended with you going in at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles] after your high school experience, and we really covered a lot of your childhood experience, which is, in summation, really a very diverse experience. You met a lot of people from different racial backgrounds. So heading into UCLA and having sort of this in the back of my head or the background that we talked about from the first session, what was it like when you saw UCLA in terms of racial diversity?

TOLENTINO

I think going to UCLA for the first time, actually, was with my brother [Lucio Tolentino], because he was already going there at that time, and he's two years ahead of me. But I'd just been going back and forth, not really ever being part of the whole campus, but I knew the southern campus well because he was a chemistry student. What I was amazed at was just the huge numbers of Asians that for the first time I've seen. There were a large number of Asians, but very few Filipinos. An interesting irony was that the only other Filipino that I knew was also a [Ted] Tolentino of Chemistry 1A, which is, I think, a great leveler of everyone who wants to be a doctor, which is what I was going to be. My first major was engineering, but the eventual goal was to become a doctor. I mean, that's what your parents wanted you to do, Filipino parents, anyway. But everyone, the first two years, takes chemistry, physics, biology, math, all the same courses, whether you're engineering or chemistry. So they're calling the roll at Chem[istry] 1A, and they're calling the last names, and they say "Tolentino," and I'm about to say, "Here," and they say, "Ted." Ted? Okay. There's a Tolentino named Ted. Then he says again, "Tolentino, Casimiro." We're on opposite sides of this hall, and the guy who was reading it, the TA [teaching assistant], looks back and forth, says, "You guys related?" I looked at Ted, who I got to know later, and I looked at him. I've never seen this guy before. Interestingly enough, we faintly looked alike, same glasses, same round face. So after, we kind of got acquainted, and I said, "So,

who's your dad?" And same province, and, sure enough, my dad and his dad were related by their, like, fourth—and we knew some of the same mutual friends. He was probably the only other Filipino I knew in the whole campus, other than my own brother.

SINGSON

I'm wondering if you can discuss how Filipinos perhaps interacted, or other Asian groups. Was there some kind of club or networking for the Asians that you noticed?

TOLENTINO

No, because the ones I was interacting with were all science majors. They were all going to become doctors. It was kind of a cutthroat kind of competition. There was no organized Asian American group that I knew within the sciences. There was Life, which was a biology student group, which we all joined, and I eventually became the president of Life, but it was more of a social group. It was kind of a sharing of old exams, that kind of stuff. Filipinos, we interacted because we were a very small minority. We didn't stand out. It was just Ted and me for the longest time. Eventually, you ran into other folks, too, who you just kind of looked at them, and they have Spanish last names. I think overall there's probably not more than five of us in the life sciences, because that's what I eventually evolved into. After two quarters of engineering, I became a zoology major. I was not going to become a chemistry major like my brother, because I didn't want to have to follow his—my life was like following his footsteps.

SINGSON

Let me pause just for a moment. [interruption]

SINGSON

So right now, I guess, is a good time to start discussing your initial involvement with community. So if you can talk about this and how did you first get started?

TOLENTINO

Well, there's a BruinWalk at UCLA, and pretty much the first couple of weeks you have people standing there trying to encourage you to join different groups and organizations. At the time that I went to UCLA there was a tremendous amount of emphasis on being involved at your community, and so one of the folks that I got involved with was the UCLA Tutorial Project. It seemed very organized. At that time, my time really was relatively free in the afternoons or the evenings. The first quarter you just had four-hour labs. I didn't have any biology classes, so I only had that four-hour lab, plus your regular classes, so I figured I had additional time, and I joined as a tutor for UCLA Tutorial Project. They had tutorials at two schools, at Anchorage Elementary School in Venice and the other one was Broadway [Elementary School].

SINGSON

So is this actually your outreaching to other, to outside the campus?

TOLENTINO

Yes.

SINGSON

If you can explain what this is and what the Tutorial Project is. This is your first year, I'm assuming. What is it that made you decide that this is something that—

TOLENTINO

I think who was recruiting there is the one that convinced me about just a few hours of your time. They needed a commitment of twice a week, and you would go to either Anchorage or Broadway. Anchorage was a very mixed community at that time. Venice at that point in time was kind of slowly a gentrifying place. Anchorage had a lot more Hispanic folks. If you go to Broadway, it was almost a completely black elementary school. The UCLA Tutorial Project at that time probably was over ten years old and pretty much the only community-related group that was available to UCLA students. It was organized in that they planned out kind of introductions to how to tutor, gave you basic information on English and math that you

will be covering, and you were assigned a kid, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. I started tutoring at Anchorage, and it was a fourth grader, this tough little kid who pretty much lived with his siblings, about three of them, and a single parent, a mother who didn't speak any English. They lived in the canals of Venice. At that time the canals were really very low-income places. They're not the huge homes they have now in Venice Canals. They really were pretty much where a lot of poor folks lived. So I'm trying to think of his name. I mean, he was my tutee for, god, about five years.

SINGSON

I'm sorry, "tutee" meaning?

TOLENTINO

He was the one that I was tutoring.

SINGSON

Oh, tutee. I see, yes.

TOLENTINO

So I helped him out with his math pretty much and then his writing. Very interesting dynamics because I just kind of was a very funny guy, and he didn't just quite know who these—well, to him it was like white folks coming to the community, and he was chosen by his teacher, and says, "Oh, how come I don't get a white guy?" And for the first time I'm noticing that there are distinctions.

SINGSON

Yes, actually, I wanted to ask. In our first session you were sort of slightly hinting that you weren't too in touch with the Civil Rights Movement, and now that you're here at UCLA, were there any stirrings of it, even sort of towards the tail end of it when you came in?

TOLENTINO

Yes. Because I grew up in Montebello, at least the high school, and there really was not very much organizing or any kind of focus on

politics. I mean, it was just kind of a suburban campus. UCLA over the first time I'm wandering around and you watch, on BruinWalk, anyway, the Meyerhoff Hall, kind of the free-speech part, and I'm just astounded by everyone and the different issues that are being put forth. For the first time, actually, it wasn't even an Asian American consciousness, but a lot of the major speakers, like there were anti-Vietnam War, were actually Asian American, and they weren't emphasizing the fact that they were Asian Americans; they were just against the war in Vietnam. At that time also there was a drive to pass at that point the different Civil Rights Acts, I suppose, in California. We already had the act, I think, which was passed about a year or two before I graduated. So I got more involved. College, or UCLA itself, was really a crucible for a lot of folks. For the first time you met a whole bunch of other folks. For the first time you're learning a history that you're completely not aware of.

SINGSON

Can you talk about these free-speech figures, people who just sort of, I guess, speak out against anti-war? How do they do it? What is it like living, if you can explain to us and give us a sense of how you hear these people?

TOLENTINO

Well, for the first time you're asked to think about other people's thoughts about the war, which I had never heard of. All I know is what you see on TV, that folks are getting killed and peers of mine were getting killed, and that you hear the tolling at our school [Montebello High School]. At the same time, I think if I didn't go to school and get that student deferment, I would be sent over to Vietnam. I mean, that was the reality of a lot of us. The free-speech part was that anybody can go and start talking. Most of the time, it was anti-war messages.

SINGSON

So people just take in a soapbox or—

TOLENTINO

Yes. Right in front of Bruin Hall, you go there at noon, and they would have speakers that are planned, but then usually—

SINGSON

Arranged by?

TOLENTINO

Arranged by usually like the ASUCLA [Associated Students University of California Los Angeles] people, Speakers Bureau. You would have a variety of folks showing up. You'd have, I think—oh, god, an anti-war activist who was a Vietnam War guy. He wrote a book, [Ronald L.] Ron Kovic, he was on there. I got to know Ron Kovic a little more because he became more active with the Asian American Anti-War Movement. I forget her name, but she was this fiery Asian American speaker, and you didn't see her in any other setting except every noon she'd be out there extolling her point of view, anyway, of the war in Vietnam. She's the one for the first time is raising these very issues of race, that the people going out there are—she didn't use the word "people of color." She said, "They're blacks and they're Chicanos or Hispanics are the ones that are going out there and dying." And then also kind of a growing sense of feminism about the war, that essentially what the war has done is that any Asian woman that they saw essentially was a potential prostitute and that's carrying over suddenly to our community and to our society.

SINGSON

So did these stirrings, especially the anti-war protests, translate to your own work as a tutor?

TOLENTINO

Eventually it did. You get to know them very well. We were like John Zanes [phonetic], who I'm still good friends with. In fact, they were good friends for pretty much the rest of your life, because you met them every Tuesday and Thursday. That was my timing. You meet down at Ackerman Union and then off you'd go and tutor your kid. You'd do it at the school for a couple of hours and you'd go

back, and then we'd all stop off at Tito's Tacos. That was the cycle. And you get to know the other tutors, because there was like usually about—they provided transportation, UCLA station wagons.

SINGSON

For you to go out in the community?

TOLENTINO

Yes. Actually, that is an interesting dynamic. But, anyway, yes, you picked up the cars. I was eventually given the responsibility of picking up the tutorial cars, because we were going so much, they really assigned out six station wagons to us, which we were always going out during the day or usually at night or late afternoon. And eventually got to know well a fellow tutee was, like ,Vicky — forgotten Vicky's last name. But you eventually became the executive director. I eventually became one of the coordinators of the tutors and eventually became the executive director of the Tutorial Project. Because at that point, you're discussing the dynamics with different folks. I mean, they're coming from different areas. John is from the Venice area, and they're all social science folks. So they were much more seemingly attuned to political issues than I was as a science person. I think another friend, Gordon, was actually another zoology student which I recruited. He's a year younger than I am. And Dick Rudd, who eventually became a doctor, but from Sacramento, he was this kind of a, you know, "This is my duty as a white person to help alleviate all the years of racism that we've imposed on the black folks," kind of thing. He didn't quite say it that way, but he was kind of our, okay, we understand but you're not saying it in a way that's—with little delicacy, actually, I mean. He was helping out the poor downtrodden blacks, bringing them up to our level, just because of this history. So at the same time, you're running into different people who are organizing, and suddenly I see a bunch of folks who, I guess they were going to picket the Administration Center, which is Murphy Hall, which is called the Administration Center, because Charles Young had announced the development of three Study Centers: the Black, the

Chicano, the Native American. What happened to the Asian American, is what a bunch of folks started to organize.

SINGSON

When did this roughly start?

TOLENTINO

Probably in ’68, ’69. So we started picketing the Administration Building. First time I saw a bunch of Asians acting in an organized manner. That’s the first time you meet your subsequent folks that you get to know better. I met Stuart Kwoh in the picket line.

SINGSON

How was this picket line organized? Because you seem to allude to the lack of sort of clubs that are racially organized except for the anti-war.

TOLENTINO

In the Life Sciences. If you know how UCLA is built, the southern campus is all the sciences and engineers. There was not much organizing at that level. The folks who probably organized it were probably—I was probably one of the handful of science people. But somehow they had pulled themselves together like a group, [unclear] history, social worker. Yes, I think those were all their majors. They weren’t really organized. It’s just that I think the fact that Asian American Studies wasn’t there was kind of what coalesced a lot of people.

SINGSON

So was it sort of word-of-mouth type of thing?

TOLENTINO

Yes. It was like people pass out flyers. I mean, there’s no phone, no phone trees. I mean, it’s you pass out flyers and you show up. There were signs already, you know, where Asian Americans are. So I saw the picket line. I just asked what’s going on, and they said, “Well, you read it in the papers as well. There’s no Asian American

Studies Center, and our history again isn't being taught," kind of argument. So we demanded to see Charles Young. He said, "Oh, no, no, no. We had plans. It's still just on the drawing board. But we just wanted to announce these other study centers. But we're working on it," and, sure enough, six months later they said an Asian American Studies Program was going to start. Alan Nishio, I guess he was the first coordinator of the Asian American Studies Center. So he pulled together a whole bunch of folks to help get it started. Franklin Odo was brought in as a lecturer for the first time. A coordinating committee was what governed Asian American Studies Center. I started wandering in there because they started developing community groups. Visual communications, VC, had its very beginnings because it's funded by the Asian American Studies Center. Yellow Brotherhood started there. That's when you saw Warren Furutani.

SINGSON

And Yellow Brotherhood is?

TOLENTINO

An anti-drug at-risk youth program, pretty much like SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans], except for the focus on the Japanese American community in Little Tokyo. From Yellow Brotherhood came probably the same folks that put together Gidra, which is an Asian American newsletter that was passed around. Do you know what Gidra is? The name of the monster. But it was mostly Japanese Americans who were doing all the organizing. You saw very few—I mean, there were just no Filipinos. Al Mendoza was hired in, I think as some research associate, and he was just there and then he left. I'm not sure how long. But I saw him in passing. But my involvement with the Asian American Studies Center is that because I was already at that point a coordinator for the Tutorial Project, they asked me to try and coordinate the Asian American Tutorial Project, so that's what I did. And I started tutoring at Castelar [Elementary School] also.

SINGSON

Wow. This is such an exciting time.

TOLENTINO

It is, actually. I'm just doing things just because there was a need for it.

SINGSON

I wanted to get a sense also of the community linkages to the Asian American Studies Center, because it seems like Yellow Brotherhood being somewhat similar to SIPA doing community work related to drugs and Gidra sort of stayed on campus, but Visual Communications is also a community thing. Your Asian American Tutorial Project is—

TOLENTINO

Remained on campus.

SINGSON

Oh, I see.

TOLENTINO

But essentially followed the model of the UCLA Tutorial Project, because that was what I was familiar with. We organized and recruited tutors, and then we put courses together to help them understand Castelar. These kids are all Chinese Americans, most of them. There's a degree of sensitivity to the fact that many of them, English is their second language. Almost all of them are brand-new immigrants. So those are the kinds of classes we had. Castelar was the very first that we dealt with, and pretty much what I did, too, because it was the focus for the first couple of years. The community came into place because of the people who began to work at the Asian American Studies Center. They all had ties to the community. Most of the Little Tokyo community, you know, Alan Nishio had ties to the slowly developing organizing out in the Little Tokyo community. The Manzanar group was starting out. Sue Embrey was there. She was organizing that. So we all had ties with each other.

SINGSON

What is the Manzanar group?

TOLENTINO

They, for the first time, were trying to do the reparations, but their first step was to essentially teach people about what happened. I mean, I didn't know about the internment, and a lot of people didn't. Even the Little Tokyo community had no idea. And part of the argument is the Niseis really didn't want to put too much emphasis on it. But she was one of the few Niseis that said, "No, we have to teach so it doesn't happen again." So she would schedule, roughly in April, bus trips to Manzanar, which would bring them pretty much—I went to one, mostly Japanese Americans. They were the first to kind of organize themselves. You know, VC [Visual Communications] is essentially a Japanese American organization. Yellow Brotherhood is, too. So they were kind of paving the way because they were in sheer numbers of Asian Americans were at UCLA. The Chinese were there, but they weren't as organized. The Chinese or the Taiwanese at that time were mostly TAs. They were foreign students. Other than the Japanese Americans, almost everyone you would see there that were Asian Americans were foreign students, and that's the way they viewed most of us. They would ask me if I was a foreign student. I said, "No." They said, "Aren't you Filipino, and weren't you born there?" I said, "Yes, but I immigrated at an earlier—," you know. So they always saw everyone pretty much as a foreign student. The International Student Center had foreign student groups. They had, I think, yes, a Chinese Student Association. A large number of Japanese Americans were studying here, and they were organized. There was a very small, I think it was, Filipino student group. I remember making an inquiry, but they never met. It was like they had names, but these groups really weren't existing.

SINGSON

Were they specifically for Philippine immigrants?

TOLENTINO

No, actually, they were foreign students. They were here because they had scholarships specifically to study in the United States and that they were going to go back. You literally did not see any—very few Filipinos, and the few that started to grow were all in the South Side. They were all pre-med. I mean, you see a Filipino kid, if he's not pre-med, then there's a problem. Everybody was pre-med. And probably the second year, chemistry and physics and math kind of cleared a whole bunch of folks. I think it was the most difficult part for most Filipino students, because we were all used to getting As and Bs, and then we suddenly, what I realized, our schools weren't up to par. University High, Beverly Hills High, I just knew the local ones. I mean, they had two years of chemistry. So Chem[istry] 1A to them was like a review, where it was all brand new to somebody coming from Montebello. I survived because I had a brother who was a chemistry major, but a lot of folks didn't, and there's one or two Filipino students I got to know and then dropped out but never told their parents.

SINGSON

Dropped out of school altogether.

TOLENTINO

UCLA altogether, because they were failing out.

SINGSON

So what was the initial stirrings then for Filipinos to get involved with the Japanese in organizing?

TOLENTINO

I think at that point it was mostly an individual approach. I mean, I was pretty much the only Filipino around the Asian American Studies Center. By the time I got involved, because I was involved in a lot of other things, and other people were organizing it. Al Mendoza was there for about a year, then I think he graduated, and I was the only one there. Then the year afterwards, I was already

like a junior, and they hired in Florante Ibanez, who came in as a community outreach. I think they realized that they were not reaching any Filipinos.

SINGSON

So it was basically you and Florante for a period of time?

TOLENTINO

Well, I was probably a junior at that time already, and I'd already worked in various community organizations.

SINGSON

These are including? What community organizations have you been involved with?

TOLENTINO

For the mainstream ones, we ran the Broadway Community Lighted Summer School, which was a summer program that the UCLA Tutorial Project ran through a grant from Alcoa Foundation. It was a ten-week summer program at Broadway. So two summers I ran that program. Then, of course, the ongoing outreach, I think, to various communities that was being organized by other groups that I would participate in, just because there was just literally no Asian American organizing other than what you saw up there at Campbell Hall.

SINGSON

So just to kind of clarify, what you're doing is reaching out outside of UCLA?

TOLENTINO

Yes.

SINGSON

To find this community organizing. But did you say the UCLA Tutorial Project is funding this?

TOLENTINO

Well, it was initially part of UCLA Tutorial, and then it was funded by an individual grant from Alcoa Foundation and also another committee, which I think the chancellor controlled, the Board of Urban Development, which consisted of faculty, students, and corporate folks. It funded programs that had outreach to various communities. That's how I got to know them, that's how they got to know me, and they were willing to fund it whenever, I guess, I was running the program. There was no very specific organizing of Asian Americans because all of us, or a good chunk, were the South Side [campus]. So the few, literally it's a handful of people running the Asian Americans Studies Center.

SINGSON

Did they try to reach out to the South Side students?

TOLENTINO

Yes, they did, because they knew that's where all the Asian American students were.

SINGSON

And how did they do that?

TOLENTINO

When they started the class, when Franklin [Odo] started to teach his class, there was an outreach to the South and flyers are passed out, trying to get them to take the Asian American Studies courses, which I think the prevailing attitude was, "Oh, yeah, we'll go. They're Mic courses. You're bound to get an A or B," which would help anyone who was in the sciences. So Franklin [Odo] did that. In the meantime, actually, what kept me interested in history was [that] Ronald Takaki was teaching at UCLA for the very first time. He had a routine or a ritual that was so, like, you just know how he did it. He walks in promptly at whatever. I think they were all eight o'clock History 7 classes. He'd walk in, look around, walk to the board, and you'd see his back for the next few minutes, because

he's writing on the board in a very staccato way, going "The eyes of the world are around you." Then he'd put, "The city up on the hill." I don't know if you've ever seen Ronald Takaki lecture, but it's a very stylistic way.

SINGSON

You mean there's no structure to—

TOLENTINO

No, just the way he talked and the way he would teach. He always started out with a quote, and then he would just say, "Any of you ever heard what these words mean? The words of the Puritans." Nobody would raise their hand. We're all freshmen, you know, and we're just trying to get through History 7. It's one of the requirements. It's eight o'clock in the morning, and probably half were probably science students who had to take it. So I'm one of those science students taking it, and I took it, actually, my very freshman year. But he made history so interesting, because he was covering for the first time very different areas of our own history, and for the first time I started to read different art books on pretty much American social history, what he was teaching, the history of blacks. You get the typical The Dispossessed by, I think, Oscar Handlin, or something. Then you also read the novels of black folks, or The Souls of Black Folk and then The Confessions of Nat Turner. So all those things were more—and they weren't history books, so that's what made the history [come] alive. But I enjoyed, actually, his style, because he would always have a quote, and then he had just his style. You need to kind of film the guy to understand how he taught.

SINGSON

Was he ever involved in Asian American Study Center?

TOLENTINO

On the periphery, from what I saw, because it was very tenuous, I think, to even get him in there, apparently. This is what I learned later.

SINGSON

But it seemed as if he was such an influential person for you, and I'm wondering how his influence continued on for you as you worked through—

TOLENTINO

Because I thought for the first time that history was actually very interesting. Already in high school I was interested because of the way our teachers at that point were doing it, but this one even kind of reinforced it. At UCLA in order to graduate you have to take so many requirements in social sciences. You have two history courses, one econ[omics], two English classes or whatever, but then you could take up to seventeen history courses or seventeen courses in one course of study, and then I think they required you to at least take English. So I decided at that point—and actually it's probably because I did well, the reading was easy. It was not much compared to my science courses. These things had no labs. They had teaching assistants who I thought were not interested in us.

SINGSON

Can I pause for a second? [interruption]

SINGSON

So we're back to recording, and before we paused, you were just talking about the influences of history and Ron Takaki on you, and I'm wondering how this translated in your own work as a tutor or as an organizer of the Asian American Tutorial Program.

TOLENTINO

I think my comfort level, in terms of knowing the history, increased a lot. So on my own, I was more interested in what was going on. So concurrently with all these events, I'm actually organizing—they're all running about the same time. I'm still working as tutorial coordinator for UCLA Tutorial Project, I'm putting in one day a week with the Asian American Tutorial Project, and then Unicamp, which is run by the University Religious Center had a special camp for

blacks and Hispanics, for those that were diabetic, so very special—camps for handicapped. So they approached us, actually, the Study Center [Asian American Studies Center], and Study Center sent it over to the Tutorial Project. "Can you organize an Asian American Unicamp?" That's when I recruited my sister, who at that point comes into play. She's a chemistry major. So essentially followed the same pattern except that now we're going to have Asian American counselors, and part of it we're going to be teaching, and part of their experience is to be able to see that especially for most of the kids came from Castelar [Elementary]. At that time, there's no real Koreatown, but those were high percentage of Asian American students. So we picked up a few Filipino Americans.

SINGSON

I'm sorry. Which school is this?

TOLENTINO

Castelar [Elementary] and then there's another school. I think one was in Lincoln Heights, and then there was a closer school. I think it might have been Rosemont. But you needed the contact. We didn't have much contact with the administration in those days.

SINGSON

You mean the administrations of the schools?

TOLENTINO

Of the school, which is how we were able to get in. We got into Castelar [Elementary] because the principal knew of us and had a comfort level with us.

SINGSON

I see. What does that mean, comfort level?

TOLENTINO

Well, I'm mean, these were students coming from UCLA and how do I know that these are tutors that will actually help my kids? What are their attitudes about students? Are you—the word isn't

"sorting." Are you screening them for their ability to tutor, ability to understand these low-income poor kids, essentially? And I think he felt comfortable with UCLA. So at the same time we're doing all this, there's another group that's organizing the UCLA Asian American Unicamp.

SINGSON

Maybe you could explain what a unicamp is.

TOLENTINO

Essentially at that time, they were probably ten one-week sessions during the summer, run by the Unicamp board. Initial funding comes from the University Religious Conference, and then at that time UCLA had a very huge, enormous Mardi Gras fair, and that was for Unicamp. The monies running the Mardi Gras was for Unicamp, and have earned tons and tons of money, and it's for the kids. So I became part of the Mardi Gras program also. I was helping out different—Life had a booth there, which is the biology student group. At that time, there were other groups I was kind of involved with and helped them run their programs.

SINGSON

So these are all different aspects of the Mardi Gras and Unicamp's outreach to high schools. So let's talk about them individually. Since you talked about the Mardi Gras, maybe you can explain what it is.

TOLENTINO

It was essentially a big fair. It had rides. It had booths. It was historically always run by the sororities and fraternities. For the first time when we got there, actually, different community folks had started to have booths, but it was for the kids. Logos were for the kids, a big flower, and it was for Unicamp. The emphasis was it's for Unicamp, because all the counselors going to Unicamp were UCLA students, essentially. At that time, they had very specific programs targeting handicapped, blacks, and Hispanics, even though probably a good chunk of the folks participating came from the black community and Hispanic community. Unicamp itself was run by the

students. There was a Unicamp board of organizers, just like there was a board running the UCLA Tutorial Project. I was just one of the counselors. They saw what we were doing, and they wanted one with an emphasis on Asian Americans. So they approached the UCLA Asian American Tutorial Project, and it fell to me to help out again. These are all concurrent. I mean, I am doing all this with probably three or four organizations in place, and so I organize one. I recruit my sister. She becomes the first head counselor for the Unicamp. One reason is because she was a counselor for the Girl Scouts.

SINGSON

You mean back in—before?

TOLENTINO

Yes, in her days in high school. She was active in the Girl Scouts. She was a counselor in training, CIT. So since she felt very comfortable in it, that was her comfort level, interacting with Asian American groups.

SINGSON

What did they do as counselors?

TOLENTINO

Well, have you ever been to a summer camp? It's a typical summer camp. They run arts and crafts. The kids go out. There's a Unicamp out there in Big Bear, UCLA Unicamp that they run, and I think it's owned by University Religious Conference, which is the different religious groups that run it, so it had kind of a religious basis. There were cabins. Counselors were there. They taught them arts and crafts, took them on hikes, fed them. They had chores. So it was really just a fun thing to do.

SINGSON

As far as you can remember, what are the reactions of the participants, the people who [unclear]?

TOLENTINO

The first time we went out to recruit, I mean, all of us, even though my sister probably might have a different experience, the folks that I went out to recruit and talk about a camp, no one actually did quite understand it, because it's not part of the experience of Asian American kids or Asian American parents. They had no idea what we were talking about. There were Chinese-speaking counselors-to-be who came along, so actually as the only Filipino, it seemed like it's a Chinese program because they were using Chinese language. You could see like there were two or three kids, just because of their darker skin, they were Filipino, and I think just like I thought I felt in my day, I felt always out of place because there didn't seem to be a large group of us around. So when it was my turn to talk about it, I clearly told them I was Filipino, "Like some of you," and I'm looking at them, "were probably born in the Philippines and being going to camp is probably not part of your experience, nor was it part of mine. I never went to camp myself. The experience I'm trying to relate to you is because the camping that my sister went through, but it's a place to have arts and crafts and fun things to do." I think the emphasis was you would have counselors who looked like you, and so they could relate to you.

SINGSON

What did they get out of this, the kids?

TOLENTINO

One is probably a positive self-identity, that there are actually folks who look like them and seem interested in them and seem to have the same backgrounds, and that they were doing well and that they're trying to encourage them to stay in school, encourage them to interact with each other, so increase their comfort level of being with each other and, for the first time, just being an emphasis on being Asian or Chinese or Japanese, that it wasn't so negative, because you suddenly had very positive role models. I think that was pretty much it. We were role models for not only the Tutorial

Project, but for Unicamp. For the first time, I think, for the Filipino kids they saw a Filipino as part of a program.

SINGSON

Would these kids go to the Mardi Gras, too, and get exposed to UCLA?

TOLENTINO

That's part of the program also, is that Unicamp week is your kids that went to Unicamp get to visit the campus. But, remember, we were just starting out, so we wouldn't have kids for the next two or three years. All this is really just the very beginnings of participation by Asian Americans. We were very novel. I mean, there just aren't that many. For the first time, they're seeing individuals. So that organizing translated. I'm a junior. Come senior year, Florante is a little more comfortable, and he approaches me about trying to get a Filipino student group. There was no Asian American student group at all, but the talk was that we need to pull our own group together first, so they can try and relate to each other.

SINGSON

Okay. I don't quite understand. So there aren't any Asian American groups?

TOLENTINO

Student groups. I mean, nothing that said "students." They were already activity specific, Little Brotherhood; Yellow Brotherhood, which became AADAP [Asian American Drug Abuse Project]; Visual Communications if you were interested in film. There was no distinction that you were Asian American students. Most of them were Japanese Americans. So there was no student group.

SINGSON

So before we get to the formation of the Filipino Student Group, I wanted to ask first how did the students participate in these, in Visual Communication and Yellow Brotherhood, which is geared outside, is it sort of similar to your experience?

TOLENTINO

Yes, but they had an interest in a certain area. There was no film program really at UCLA, but you had folks like Bob Nakamura. God, I can't even remember their names. There's like three or four of them. They were just interested in doing films to try to make sure we reflected accurately the history of the Asian American, for them specifically Japanese American. They wanted to film Manzanar. They wanted to film the history of the Japanese Americans here. I think if they had knowledge of the Chinese American experience or the Filipino experience, which they did try to do, they would have, but what they were comfortable with and what they knew about was the Japanese American experience. So if you were a student and you were interested in that, you kind of funneled into that. Interested in writing, there's Gidra, which was designed actually to be an Asian American newspaper, but the people running it were Japanese Americans, so the focus of the articles, the focus of the direction was Japanese American.

SINGSON

So did they get credits as a student or are most of these geared towards outside?

TOLENTINO

No, it's all volunteer. It's all volunteer. All the stuff is being run by volunteers. No one's really getting paid. I got paid for UCLA Tutorial Project when I became a tutor coordinator and when I became an ED [executive director]. The UCLA Asian American Tutorial Project was not paid for about three or four years until we pulled together kind of an organization and then we appealed to ASUCLA [Associated Students University of California Los Angeles], Associated Students. They're the ones we were getting the funds from. It was funded by UCLA students through their student programs. There was a community support commissioner.

SINGSON

Through ASUCLA?

TOLENTINO

ASUCLA. He was a member and he ran for it. You have to win it. I can't remember. But, anyway, he was the person that you had to convince to fund you, essentially, but because I had already prior knowledge of his work, of working with UCLA and this is how you do it, that's how I got funding for Unicamp, I got funding for UCLA Tutorial Project, and other programs.

SINGSON

It's the same way for Visual Communications?

TOLENTINO

No, Visual Communications was being funded by the Asian American Study Center. They had separate funding, but there was an emphasis of trying outreach to the community. So Visual Communications says, "We want to outreach using film, and we will write books, we will do study aids, and we need this." So the funding wasn't for anybody's salary; it was always for the tools. I eventually became part of that coordinating committee. I remember where VC said, "We need this kind of a camera plus this lenses," and we all talked about, whether or not we should approve it or not.

SINGSON

This is within Asian American Studies?

TOLENTINO

Yes. Asian American Study Center was run like a cadre. There was about ten of us which were part of the coordinating committee. I mean, this is the teachings of, I think, probably Mao [Tse Tung] and collective decision making. That's the way Allan [Nishio] wanted to run it. "Allan," I said, "I don't make the decision. It's this collective group."

SINGSON

As far as you can remember names, the initial cadre, participants, members?

TOLENTINO

Allan was on it. I was on it. Mary Isuzuka—Mary Gao now—her sister, Amy Tachiki. Franklin [Odo] was in there. Eventually the Asian American editor, Lowell Choon Hoon. I don't think [Don] Nakanishi was there at that time. And I think Bob Nakamura. So we were just kind of a group. We would meet periodically to consider funding.

SINGSON

How were you chosen, or did you volunteer to do this?

TOLENTINO

I think it evolved where they wanted to make sure that it was a representative group, so they pulled people and they asked people who were active in the various groups. My ties were UCLA Asian American Studies Tutorial, Unicamp, pretty much just overall the community stuff I was involved in. I remember writing an article for Gidra. I remember writing, helping out write the background for an Asian American study which eventually didn't get funded, but the Filipino section of it, history of the Filipinos in America kind of thing.

SINGSON

So, sort of like a column?

TOLENTINO

Yes. So I was involved in all those. It was just because of my own interests. At that time you're not really thinking of organizing. It's just I'm participating in lots of different things. Then eventually Florante got hired in and became part of that coordinating committee. I was slowly pulling out because I was involved in other things, getting more involved. I became the executive director of the Tutorial Project itself. I had—at a certain point it varied, between four hundred and six hundred volunteers that I had to coordinate, and I had four tutor coordinators I had to deal with. Interestingly enough, probably three of them were my fellow tutors of my freshman year. So it was easy to manage them.

SINGSON

They were friends.

TOLENTINO

That's right. They were all friends. So I was more focused on that. I was more focused on, I think, being active with the community support groups, pushing for funding other groups that were trying to develop.

SINGSON

Within UCLA?

TOLENTINO

Within UCLA. This is all ASUCLA student programs. For the first time you're seeing people of color actually getting positions and running for elections. Otherwise it was always run by the fraternity folks who ran it, but now slowly you had folks that had more community interest in what was going on.

SINGSON

So you're supporting, for example, MEChA [National Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán]. How did you do that?

TOLENTINO

Well, they would need to approach the community supports commissioner, run through, help them out, write a program, write a proposal and so what was needed and the funding for it. So you'd help them out, because I had already worked on Tutorial Project and we were pretty much in the regular loop. Exceptional Children's Tutorial Project [ECTP] was evolving at the same time. That focused on handicapped folks. Kenyon Chan was the organizer. I don't know if you know Kenyon.

SINGSON

Yes.

TOLENTINO

Kenyon is some high mucky-muck somewhere now. When we all started, he was the executive director of ECTP, I was executive director of Tutorial Project, we're both Asian, we have peripheral ties, but this is our interest. His interest was on the handicapped kids, I was interested in working with community kids, and at the same time we participated at the Study Center. But we never saw it as organizing Asian Americans. I mean, we were just slowly participating. There weren't that many of us. It was just by, I think, happenstance that the two executive directors of the two largest programs were Asian American.

SINGSON

So let's go back to that part of the story where you and Florante started thinking of forming a student group as opposed to these community—

TOLENTINO

I'm running the program. I'm the executive director. I have a little office. It's actually Room 406 and 409.

SINGSON

Why did you have two rooms?

TOLENTINO

Well, because we were so huge. We took literally about half of Kerckhoff Hall. The unique thing is literally ten years after I leave, that becomes UCLA Samahan's [Samahang Pilipino] office. It was like the organizing occurred with suddenly Filipinos traipsing into my office, and all the other tutors said, "Who are all these Filipinos?" "Oh, they're Cas's friends." And a few actually were tutors. I was recruiting them to be tutors.

SINGSON

So at this point there's a lot more Filipinos coming in? Is that what you're observing?

TOLENTINO

Yes, a lot more. Jennifer [Masculino-Tolentino] came in because there was an affirmative action program. It was called EOP [Educational Opportunity Program].

SINGSON

What year was this, do you remember?

TOLENTINO

Probably 1969, ’70. Sheila Tabag, Jennifer, a bunch of people were recruited out of Carson Banning [High School], and so you saw them in for the first time. In fact, I was brought in because some folks were not doing very well. There were Filipinos, and a counselor, who is a tutor for Asian Tutorial Project, she knew I was interested in Filipinos, so she said, “Can you help me talk to a few of these folks?” And that’s how I got involved with the EOP project and how they got to know me. Florante got to know me because I was all over the place. But I’m also trying to get a biology degree or a zoology degree.

SINGSON

I’m sure we’ll get to that part in a bit, but I wanted to know or clarify, was EOP just starting at this point?

TOLENTINO

It was already, I think, in place. It probably, I think, started in ’65. But for the first time they were recruiting in areas where there were larger numbers of Filipino Americans.

SINGSON

Do you know what initiated this?

TOLENTINO

I think just because the EOP program saw that there were Asian Americans coming in, but not Filipino Americans. Then they were able to identify Banning and Carson area as a large number of Filipinos that might have the ability and try and recruit them. Their program, EOP, was going out to those campuses, the high schools,

and encouraging them to apply, taking them on there, spending a week at UCLA, encouraging them to apply to UCLA.

SINGSON

So now here come more Filipinos stopping by the Tutorial Project Office.

TOLENTINO

Well, eventually, but essentially I'm running, on my own, programs. Within Tutorial Project, actually, you have Asians. Part of our spiel was that you show community background and stuff, that will help you get to grad[uate] school, help you get to med school, help your political career, because some were budding politicians.

SINGSON

So how did the student group begin?

TOLENTINO

Essentially because Florante and I were just talking each time, and there was no Asian American student group. There was nothing organized, other than that we were all involved in different groups. Florante had an emphasis on—I guess he felt that part of his work at the Study Center was to try and bring better representation of Filipino Americans. So in talking, we said, "Why don't we pull together a Filipino American group and get to know each other." It was going to be pretty much a social group as a resource pool for all the other programs. I said, "Well, you know, I really don't know any other Filipinos except this distant cousin, Ted Tolentino." I really didn't. There was no other Filipino. Well, actually, there was probably a couple of others who were in my chemistry classes. So he says, "Well, I know a few that have come through the EOP program." And that was Jennifer and Sheila. And I said, "Well, you need three student reg[istration] cards to get it started, and we've got that, so that's all you need to get it started." I already knew how to kind of do it because I had done it almost every year for ECTP with Kenyon, for Tutorial Project, for groups I don't even recall. But I always kind of showed them, "Here's what you need to

do. Get me these reg[istration] cards." You have to sign off essentially that it's a responsible group. So down we go and we sign up. Sheila Kuehl is our assigned student dean. Sheila eventually—that's an interesting history herself. She became a state assemblywoman, state senator, the speaker pro tempore.

SINGSON

What is her role again?

TOLENTINO

She was the student dean that was assigned to us, who we reported to with problems. She's the one you would talk to about trying to get facilities. She's the one that you needed the support of if you wanted funding. So we pulled a meeting together, and it literally was pretty much Jennifer and Sheila pulling the first meeting together.

SINGSON

What did you guys talk about?

TOLENTINO

Well, essentially, first of all, you have to get them, so they walked around passing out leaflets. What do you call them? There was no Xerox machine.

SINGSON

Mimeograph?

TOLENTINO

It was expensive. Yes, like this ink thing. It was very messy, and then you had a one-time deal to do it and then kind of hand-lettered "Come to meeting." I think it's like "Are You Filipino?" kind of thing. Anyone she spotted that looked Filipino, she gave a—and several of them were just Hispanic or they were Japanese or Chinese.

SINGSON

So what's the response like? How many people attended?

TOLENTINO

It was a potluck they organized. Jennifer and Sheila knew other folks who they knew were coming, so we organized it so we all had one dish or two to cook. We had no idea how many people were going to show up. So I cooked a dish. Jennifer cooked a dish. About fifteen people showed up, all wondering what's going on, but they stayed because there was food. College students and food, they will stay. So we just talked about organizing, you know, putting this together, getting to know each other. There wasn't saying, "We're going to go get Samahang Pilipino." It was like we wanted to see whether—I think our first name was Filipino Students Organization, and we just told each other of our backgrounds and how we can help each other, that there are other groups around that help each other how to choose majors, how to work through. In those days there weren't really established ways of knowing which professors were good and which ones were bad. It was all word of mouth.

SINGSON

Just a fact, what year was this?

TOLENTINO

19-probably-72. I'm a senior at that point.

SINGSON

When did it eventually become Samahan?

TOLENTINO

Probably about two meetings later. The reason is because we decided that we were—everyone was very enthusiastic, so we need to let them know that Filipinos are on campus kind of thing. And interestingly enough, our first event was to participate at the UCLA Mardi Gras. I think we were organizing in February, Mardi Gras was in April, and that was a big event. Everyone said, "Why don't we do Mardi Gras." So we started meeting, focusing on Mardi Gras. Everybody was actually very enthusiastic. We were going to sell

lumpia. Jennifer's uncle could get access to frozen lumpia that we would cook. Jennifer's uncle is down in San Diego. She gets hold of him. By the next meeting, it's all by telephone calls, yes, he can do it. He can bring so many frozen. But how are we going to get funded here? So that's when we got an initial funding from UCLA, and it was essentially just seed money to get the foodstuffs. I think Jennifer was in charge, with Sheila, of organizing Mardi Gras. I think because there was specific tasks to it, everyone just had a task and they did it.

SINGSON

What did you do besides sell?

TOLENTINO

You have to, first of all, to put together a booth. So we made it a bahay kubo. We had to get the—we participated in the mask, so Dale—

SINGSON

I'm sorry, the mask?

TOLENTINO

They had walking masks, you know, like mascots are now, like Bruin Bear. So there was a parade, a festival of the masks, and that was one thing you had to have, and then you can win prizes. You can win prizes for the food, for your booth. It was a big to-do. It was like for three days at UCLA, covered all of the intramural field. But I think probably by our second or third meeting, people said, "Filipino Student Group doesn't sound good." At that time people wanted something that gave a little more emphasis that we were Filipino. There were very few of us who could speak the different dialects. One of us—what is his name? He was an insurance agent. But, anyway, his dad was a consul or an assistant consul, but he stayed on. But, anyway, so we're literally going on the board. What are we—well, it's Filipinos coming together. He comes in with Kasamahan ng UCLA Pilipino. So that's what we used, Kasamahan Pilipino at UCLA, and I think a year later that's what we used

anyway. A year later, we dropped off the "Ka" because somebody said you don't need that, so we just became Samahang Pilipino. Then eventually became UCLA. So that's what we had, Samahang Pilipino. We didn't sell the lumpia very well. No one was really buying it because they couldn't figure out what it was. We were all dressed in barongs, and Jennifer, Sheila, and a whole bunch of other folks were dressed in kind of native costumes, which were just the tops and a skirt. Well, interestingly enough, the rooster became the mask. The cock, they all called it. Dale Siscon organized it and did it. He was really an artist. But he was a wrestling guy.

SINGSON

You mean he participated in wrestling on campus?

TOLENTINO

Yes. He was recruited. He got a wrestling scholarship. But he heard about us and he joined, and he was actually an artist. He was an art major. So he took over doing the mask. We had no idea what he was making until that day that he showed up with it, and it was this huge cock, this rooster. But everybody else, out of the blue, about a week before we're putting the stuff together, we saw that they were cutting all the palm trees. So we asked—they were mostly Hispanics—"Can we use those?" "Well, how much do you need?" "See that?" We had the frame. "We need to cover that, top and then the sides." "Oh, okay. Well, we'll bring it over." They did. They brought it over, and they said, "We have to put it up," and they put it up for us.

SINGSON

That's great.

TOLENTINO

So it was the nipa hut. We won the Best New Booth. We won the Best Booth, the Best Food. We won the Best Mask. And each time they announced it on the night, Saturday night, who the winners are, they could never say our name right, [demonstrates], and we would shout out, "Kasamahan!" We were so happy. Our first one we

won was the Best New Booth. We figured we'd win that. Usually it's some fraternity or sorority that would win it, but, my god, we won like four of the major prizes, and so we made a big entrance into UCLA suddenly.

SINGSON

Was there a lot of more students who started joining after this, in fact?

TOLENTINO

One is there was a lot more who showed up for our meetings. We discovered people actually could cook, and they brought the food. I mean, it was almost like a natural thing to them to do, from the hot dogs and spaghetti. Remember, they're students. Nobody really had any money, but they were able to bring scrimp adobo and rice and stuff.

SINGSON

It was important for the meetings.

TOLENTINO

It was. I mean, they all expected food for all the meetings. So that's pretty much what we did for that. We became more of a social group because we always tried to get together. Then the following year they began to participate in a lot more events as a group.

SINGSON

Meaning as opposed to individual?

TOLENTINO

For the first time, yes, there were lots of things you could do at UCLA as a group that we began to participate. There was like a talent show sponsored by URC, the University Religious Conference. They asked us to participate. We did. We did a dance. Interestingly enough, one of our folks there was a dancer, so she did it, and she taught Jennifer and Sheila how to do the long fingernail dances. All of us were just kind of just astounded that she could do this,

because she was actually very, very good and everybody was impressed.

SINGSON

That's great.

TOLENTINO

Then we would participate at that point in symposiums. We went to San Diego for a conference [Panahon Na], a pre-conference for the Far West Convention.

SINGSON

Which year was this?

TOLENTINO

Probably about '71 also.

SINGSON

So it was in Seattle?

TOLENTINO

No, the one we were prepping for, I thought, was in Stockton. But you're right, it could be Seattle. We were prepping for a forthcoming Far West Convention.

SINGSON

Which is in Stockton in [unclear].

TOLENTINO

Because I was already the UCLA executive director, they said, "Well, how do you get down there? Nobody has cars." We used the UCLA Tutorial Project cars. I was so afraid they would discover my misuse of these funds. Nobody discovered it. I'm only telling you now. God knows what my liability is for it now, but who knows? Essentially UCLA Tutorial Project funded Samahang Pilipino. They used our mimeograph machine. They used our Xerox machine. They used all our electric typewriters. I would let them in in the evening to do all

this work. And we used the cars all the way down. We took three of them all the way down. I mean, how do you get all these students, who we couldn't figure it out? Gas was pretty high. I said, "Well, I can get the cars, but you guys have to keep it quiet." They just assumed that I got it, and probably about three-quarters of the folks that we took down had no idea where we got the cars, other than that's Cas's Tutorial Project and he knows how to get the cars. And we did.

SINGSON

I'm going to keep Far West separate, because it's got its own history. But I guess just to wrap things up with this experience of founding Samahan, I wanted to kind of go back again to this initial discussion about the lack of Filipinos, towards there's a lot more Japanese Americans, and how this Filipino group associated with Asian American Studies Center and the other Asian—

TOLENTINO

Essentially because Florante and I were involved, that we organized Samahang Pilipino, we took a more active role in doing events, like the Asian American Studies Center would sponsor a symposium or a teach-in, sponsored by UCLA Asian American Studies, and they'd add on the other groups like VC [Visual Communications] or Yellow Brotherhood and UCLA Samahang Pilipino. And we really were the only student group around. There was no APA [Asian Pacific American] student group, no Korean student group, none of that. It was just not part of the frame of mind.

SINGSON

So would you say that the other groups sort of looked to Samahan to—

TOLENTINO

They did, because they saw how active we became and how in coming together were able to do things together. Because the following year, we started the Filipino Community Center, and literally was the model was the UCLA Tutorial Project model.

SINGSON

This is within campus?

TOLENTINO

No. The Filipino Community Center was in Wilmington. We had two afternoons, which we would send—at that point I got funding for a Filipino Community Center with their own cars, with their own set of resources, essentially office stuff to keep it going, telephone, you get a phone, you get an office. We suddenly became part of the Study Center because we were like VC or Yellow Brotherhood. We were a program.

SINGSON

But this was initially the beginnings of it was outside campus and then it became part of Asian American Studies Center, is that what you're saying?

TOLENTINO

No. The Asian American Studies Center was the supportive group, but we ran it literally just for about a year from funding from UCLA, and that was Associated Students. It's, again, modeled after the Tutorial Project. So for two afternoons we put together a place for high school students to come in for tutoring or for counseling, and we also had activities like going to the snow, going to UCLA. There was another Samoan group called Omai Faatasi. They covered the other days. So you saw for the first time, at least, Filipinos and Samoans working pretty much in the same place. Omai Faatasi was happy because there was a place for them.

SINGSON

You want to pause for a moment?

TOLENTINO

Yes. [interruption]

SINGSON

So we're beginning recording again, and we just sort of left with this sharing of office between Omai Faatasi and—

TOLENTINO

Sharing of responsibilities of running a community center. They would bring in—they were trying to pull together. Omai Faatasi was like a grassroots community group that focused on Samoan Americans. We were UCLA students coming in and running a kind of tutorial counseling program.

SINGSON

But you're essentially serving the same group of people?

TOLENTINO

Almost the same area of people. The Samoan students would go to Omai Faatasi days, but it kind of interrelated. The only change really is who the counselors were. I'm still trying to get a zoology degree, at the same time I'm taking Franklin Odo's course for the first time, which was the Asian American Experience course, which I think all of us that went to Asian American Studies had to go through. But because I already was active with UCLA Tutorial Project, it was Henry Empeno was the coordinator for the Community Center, and although we'd get fifteen to twenty people in our meetings, it was pretty much run by probably about six or seven people, and that's why it lasted only about a year. It was tougher and tougher each time to get people to go out. It's not going to Venice. Venice is just probably a fifteen-minute drive. To go all the way to Wilmington meant it took all afternoon. It was a huge time commitment for folks.

SINGSON

Just to clarify, the community center is also there's a sharing of responsibilities between you guys at UCLA and at the same time also the community folks at Wilmington from Filipino communities?

TOLENTINO

Well, they provided the space. They happily charged us money for it. Community centers are always in dire straits, so they're happy for us to take part of the room that we controlled, put up books and posters and a place where people or at least high school students knew they could talk to college students, essentially.

SINGSON

I see. But there are no responsibilities on the part of the Philippine community?

TOLENTINO

No, other than we had hoped that they would outreach so that the members' kids would come and let them know, and we thought that because we were there that it gave us some degree of credibility, because at that time there's this Anti-War Movement, there's the Civil Rights Movement. They viewed college students in askance. They thought we were crazy radicals. That's exactly what they thought the first time around, because we fitted—we all had longish hair. We just looked radical to most of them.

SINGSON

Did the program change some of their perspective about you?

TOLENTINO

Probably for some, but the others said when we started fading out, because it was too tough to keep going, they thought we were radicalizing the students and that we were all anti-[Ferdinand] Marcos folks. There's just growing—hadn't announced yet martial law, but already the discussion of pro- and anti-Marcos was coming into the community. We never got that much more because we did programs, we did trips, we took kids on campus, but it was just so hard. We couldn't recruit anybody else to keep it going, just the long distance. It took literally in those days probably an hour and a half to get to Wilmington and spend a couple of hours, then try to get back. I mean, the whole commitment took a long time. So the people that were running it, really, they got so much pressure about, "I've got to do this, I've got to do that, I can't spend all day,"

and so we started losing. When people saw the time commitments, it was just—so we started. People asked us how come we didn't apply for funds again. I said, "Because, frankly, we can't get the volunteers."

SINGSON

Just to wrap this session up and talking about Samahan, going back to the Samahan, the student group, what do you think became its effect for you as a founding member?

TOLENTINO

Well, we didn't even see ourselves as founding members. We just thought we helped organize this group. What it did is, though, it encouraged the members who were attending to participate more in their community, participate more with the different Asian American groups that were running. If you want to be a counselor, Unicamp counselor, you can do that. Tutorial Project, if you guys want to work for the Tutorial Project I work for, it's great. It will help you on your résumé, get you to grad[uate] schools, kind of talk. I think they became more aware. There was a greater comfort level. I think also not quite radicalized them, but gave them a better sense of who they were as Filipinos, because we ran into a lot of Filipinos, at least Jennifer tells me—I didn't because I wasn't passing out the leaflets—that they were Filipinos who said, "What are you guys doing this for?" And then you'd get kind of the rumors like, "Well, why don't we invite this person?" And they go, "Well, I don't think he wants to be identified as a Filipino," or that, "He's not comfortable," which is one of our early discussions that people would just be frank and said, "I'm not too comfortable. Are we creating, what, a Black Students Union here or a Chicano Student Union?" which were politically based and politically born. In order to get folks together, we said, "It's going to be you guys organizing it. If you want it to become a social group, that's fine. If you want it to be more political, that's fine. It was going to be governed by you." We were using the model of Allan Nishio and a Coordinating Council. Responsibilities fell to groups of activities. Somebody's in charge the

potluck, so they call people and make sure there's a good mix. Jennifer and Sheila were in charge of doing the Mardi Gras kind of thing. They did the Mardi Gras. I was in charge of just figuring out how to fund this group in a very sly way. I was using the resources of another established group, but it didn't bother—well, it bothered me a lot in those days, but nowadays, I go, well, I did it for a good cause. That's the way I rationalized it. I'm taking Franklin Odo's course for the first time. I'm learning in a more formal way the history of Asian Americans. Then he spent, I think, one lecture on Filipino Americans, and he says, "This is it. Two weeks on Japanese Americans, another two weeks on Chinese Americans, another one on social history, and this is all I have on Filipino Americans. There's nothing." He essentially said, "You're going to have to write it, because I have nothing."

SINGSON

I'd like to leave the Philippine history course in another session because it's got a history of its own, and I think it's a great way to end this session with Samahan and your thoughts about its effect on the students. So any last thoughts about what the impact of Samahan as a student group is within UCLA during its first year?

TOLENTINO

Well, the impact was for the first time they realized there were Filipino students who were not foreign students, because we all kind of said, "We're not foreign students," because that was usually the first thing that they would see, because that was most of the students' first contact with Asian Americans. They were those TAs they couldn't understand with such heavy accents. Then the Filipinos they'd run into, they're all born in the Philippines, and so they assumed that because you're born in the Philippines, you're a foreign student. No, we were valedictorians, we came through the high schools, and we had different backgrounds, and our parents are from the military. Almost all of us there actually had parents in the military. Probably a good chunk were from the [U.S.] Navy. So we were kind of teaching ourselves. "Your dad was in the Navy?"

"Yes, my dad, too." Then that's when you begin to realize that there were the commonalities of history, commonalities of interest, not from learning it from a course. It's like talking to each other. "You know, we went over to Great Lakes." "Oh, we were there, too." They would relate events and stuff, and they had all relatives in various—San Diego seemed to be where everyone could relate to. So you could see that there was a homogenous group of folks that came from the [U.S.] Navy, for example. They all had the same interests, the same groups, groupings, and the same kind of experiences of traveling various places, and they're all, "Yeah, my dad's a steward." We all were stewards.

SINGSON

That's great. Thank you.

TOLENTINO

You're welcome. [End of July 5, 2011 interview]

1.3. SESSION THREE (JULY 12, 2011)

SINGSON

Today is July 12 [2011], and we are here at Cas[imiro] Tolentino's home, and we are doing our third interview. How are you, Cas?

TOLENTINO

I'm doing fine.

SINGSON

Very good. This is Precious Singson doing the interview. So what we did and where we ended in our last interview, we were going through a lot of your UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] experience and establishment of Samahan [Samahang Pilipino], effects of Samahan and the impact of it. There was so much more that was happening during this time period that I want to start this session with more of that. Maybe we can start with your senior year, which is one of the most important things, I think, that

occurred in 1972 is the establishment of the first Filipino course. So if you can discuss your—

TOLENTINO

Well, no, actually, the Filipino course wasn't until my first year of [UCLA] law school.

SINGSON

Oh, okay, I'm sorry.

TOLENTINO

My senior year I'm taking Asian American Experience courses with Franklin Odo, and I took about two or three of them along the way as a junior and a senior, and then, I think, in the spring I became a TA [teaching assistant] for Franklin Odo. Part of what I think he hired me for was to kind of expand the Filipino American experience. So I did some research for him, not finding very much. You found a lot of doctoral and master's theses, ironically coming out of USC [University of Southern California]. You found a lot of old out-of-date books on Filipinos, like I Have Lived with the American People, with Manuel Buaken. We found old hardbacks at that point of Carlos Bulosan's America is in the Heart. Actually, bits and pieces of those books essentially worked their way into my teaching a course. My senior year, in addition, I was the executive director for UCLA Tutorial Project. At the same time I was also helping develop Samahang Pilipino.

SINGSON

Should I pause for just a moment? [telephone interruption]

SINGSON

Okay. We are back to recording, just for a little telephone-ringing break. You were talking about your senior year.

TOLENTINO

Part of it, not only participating with UCLA's different activities, Samahang Pilipino, participating at that time with they called it pre-

conferences at San Diego, San Diego State [University], and at that point it was to kind of to develop an outreach to the local area essentially to develop a Far West Convention. In those days, the Far West Conventions were very independent, so you always had to keep reinventing the wheel, which is probably one of its great weaknesses, because it was so dependent on a new group of people each time trying to do it.

SINGSON

Just to clarify, this is happening in San Diego, but the next conference is in Stockton. So why so far away?

TOLENTINO

Because the way it was organized was that there would be local pre-conferences to develop, I guess, panels, to develop a greater fellowship, I suppose, with like San Diego and L.A. [Los Angeles], and San Jose and San Francisco were supposed to get together, and the Seattle folks and Portland folks, and also the Central Valley. That was why we had a San Diego one. That led to actually a lot of Samahang Pilipino for the first time learning about their own history, because it was like a mini Far West Convention. So there were a lot of panels on history, on identity, on consciousness, on Philippine history at that point, and there are specific issues such as labor, employment. There were discrimination cases. For the first time, they raised issues dealing with the use of the Filipino dialect by nurses.

SINGSON

You mean use of the Filipino dialect by nurses as in while they're working?

TOLENTINO

In their hospitals, because you would occasionally hear them speak using their dialect, and so issues were raised, and I think for the first time people were—at least fellow Samahangers were introduced to at least ideas and issues. But for many of them, they didn't really quite know how to deal with it.

SINGSON

Well, just, again, even clarifying more, this is almost like a convention in itself, but it's not a preparation for the organization in Stockton, is that what you mean?

TOLENTINO

No, not at all. At that point they pulled a few folks to—it was for some of the folks that were going to be parts of panels to get input, to see how people were doing in certain areas, because usually the Far West Convention was a networking to share ideas and to share issues in your respective campuses. So that was a way to pull it out at that point. And because, I guess, in terms of the timing, it was very difficult for other people to attend. It was always the Labor Day weekend of that year, and so I remember going on my own.

SINGSON

To Stockton.

TOLENTINO

To Stockton, and just spending one day and that was pretty much it.

SINGSON

Is it because of lack of resources to go to Stockton for a lot of people?

TOLENTINO

Yes. Essentially that would have been too difficult for a UCLA station wagon to go up north. Going to San Diego was a little easier. We just weren't organized over the summer, really.

SINGSON

As students.

TOLENTINO

As students. There was no real organization there in L.A. that was also planning to go up, except for a few handful of social workers like Royal [Morales] or Al [Mendoza] and those guys or folks who worked already within the respective Asian communities.

SINGSON

Since we're talking about Far West Convention, let's continue talking about this, especially because the Far West Convention occurred in 1974 at UCLA, and then later on we can talk about your involvement with the Los Angeles community-based organizations such as the Services for Asian American Youth [SAAY]. So for now let's discuss Far West, since we're already on this issue. How were you involved and were you at all involved in the 1973 convention in San Jose or after the Stockton experience?

TOLENTINO

Not really. I mean, I was attending. That was pretty much it. I was not on any panels, so I didn't do any preparation or organizing with respect to areas.

SINGSON

As a participant, is it possible for you to describe the differences between the 1972 and the 1973 Far West? You mentioned that each Far West is organized by different people.

TOLENTINO

I think at that point if you'd been to enough of them, they began to be cyclical, so that there seemed to be a new generation each time that had to be retaught the history of Filipinos, retaught the history of the Manongs, the different waves. Issues were raised again, and I think people began to sense that we need to be able, one, to get an institutional memory. At the same time, we shouldn't forget that there's always new folks coming in, but it was always very frustrating because we were always doing, at least preliminarily, the same thing, and we couldn't seem to move forward. We were an ongoing Chautauqua of Filipinos.

SINGSON

So by 1973, this is only the third year of the Far West?

TOLENTINO

Because the repetition began or at least it seemed to be repeating itself each time. And in between, there were really pretty much mini teach-ins that are patterned after the Far West Convention. Samahang Pilipino, I think in partnership with the Council of Oriental Organizations [COO], with the Filipino American Political Association, we did mini conferences on issues that were pretty much like what were covered at the Far West Convention.

SINGSON

And this is what year?

TOLENTINO

Probably about the same time Samahang Pilipino was kind of organizing, or the year right after it, and it's the same time that we put together a Pilipino—well, we spell it with a "P"—Pilipino Youth Center. So we would take the youth over there, and they'd work on pulling together a teach-in. In those days, a teach-in was essentially a loose term, but the word was picked up from the anti-Vietnam War issues. You would have teach-ins with a concentrated amount of discussion about certain issues. So there was a discussion, for example, a teach-in specifically of the lack of Filipino empowerment within the political process or within the already organized social service centers. That was actually drawn from when SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans] was pulling together or different conferences when individuals wanted to somehow focus on trying to focus on Filipino American youth. But before that took place, I worked an organization called Services to Asian American Youth, SAAY, an organization developed by COO, Council of Oriental Organizations, and funded by them to try and organize the Asian American youth into programs. I was a youth worker, which means I was just an outreach person. I was trying to get them to come to different programs that SAAY was pulling together. But the first

three months really was just setting up the protocols, the procedures for running this program.

SINGSON

Just to sort of clarify, how is the Service for Asian American Youth set up? The Council for Oriental Organization set this specifically for youth, and you were chosen?

TOLENTINO

No, it was actually set up for folks that were already social workers. I can't remember his name, but he was a Japanese American activist. I think Al [Mendoza] was hired in also as like an assistant director. There were about four us that were what they called youth workers: a Filipino, which was me; a Chinese American I don't recall; the Japanese American was the director already; and a Samoan youth. So our task was trying to get involved with different groups at that time, like for Filipino groups in Carson and Samoan groups in Carson-Wilmington area, and we were supposed to be bringing them in, and we were developing programs at that point.

SINGSON

And this is specifically for youth.

TOLENTINO

For youth.

SINGSON

What came out of this for you?

TOLENTINO

Not much. [laughs] There wasn't much for me. I was getting very frustrated with what I thought kind of a lack of progress. It seemed like we were more focused on setting up kind of rules and policies, which I thought we could do within a shorter period of time.

SINGSON

What were the rules and policies that you're developing? What were the goals of your particular segment for Filipinos?

TOLENTINO

Well, it was an outreach to the youth to give them information about education, about training opportunities. It was also to talk to them about issues, issues dealing, I guess, with family life, with their history, with their identity. So it was really a big task. Part of my own concern was there was very little leadership. I mean, I was a student, and I didn't see myself as kind of the guiding person. I was looking to the upper folks with more experience, and I just felt I wasn't contributing much. So after six months, my time, it was all a part-time job. It was a part-time job. I was finishing off UCLA. I was finishing off, I guess, being a TA. That was essentially to pay for my college costs and tuition. Down the line, what happened was that after SAAY another job opportunity came up, and that was to go to Washington, D.C. for HEW's [U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare] Office of Asian American Affairs, and we were a brand-new bureau led by—the lady's name was Toyo Biddle. She was the director, and at that point she had only a secretary. Her task was to go out to the community and get input, and then she essentially mau-mau'd, you know, Tom Wolfe's Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. The term is to "mau-mau" her, essentially put pressure on her on issues. She said, "You have nobody there on your staff that has any experience with our community, including yourself." So said, "Well, give me the folks and I'll be happy to hire them, because I have the ability to hire," I think she said, "like three program associates. So give me the names." I think part of that was the group from COO, various other community activists, and so they said, "We'll find a name for you." One of the names was mine. At that point I was telling them I can't work within SAAY and I'm going to phase out.

SINGSON

Is this just about the time when you're about to graduate, because you're leaving to Washington, D.C.? Right?

TOLENTINO

Yes. I'm about to graduate, and then I'm also starting to take classes on getting a teaching credential, and that was really just pursuant to all my activities dealing with Tutorial Project, running a summer school. Also right along the same time is I'm a member of the Board of Urban Development, which is funded by different foundations and it's headed by the Chancellor. It's both faculty and students, and they would fund very specific programs. They would fund like the UCLA internship. They would fund the Exceptional Children's Tutorial Project. They funded the UCLA Tutorial Project. Then specifically through that board Alcoa funded a summer program of three summers. I led the second summer. It was because of that, I guess, my leading that, I was able to join the board or they invited me to join the board. Essentially, we reviewed programs that—because it was urban development, it was to tie in the UCLA community in general, to tie in kind of within an urban setting and to be more active in their urban community. That was the board. Other activities along the way, I'm a member of the UCLA Judicial Board, which really doesn't do anything until there's an election problem, and we had a couple of very difficult election problems.

SINGSON

This was still in your senior year?

TOLENTINO

All my senior year. About the same time, there was an increasing need—you know, Asian American Studies folks both had undergrads and grad[uates] students, and several of the people that worked with us with the UCLA Asian American Tutorial Project and Unicamp were also mostly MSWs [Master's in Social Work], and they wanted to organize the grad[uate] students. We organized. There wasn't much we could do. We have to do it in terms of we have already all these organizations we organized. I was very happy to organize, help organize it by pulling different groups, and I was elected the first president for a year.

SINGSON

Just to clarify, you're not a graduate student, but this was an association for graduate students?

TOLENTINO

I'm actually in the UCLA School of Education in a credentialing program.

SINGSON

I see. So this is after your senior year already?

TOLENTINO

Yes. So at that point, I do get a job offer, and so the plan was for me to go, I think, beginning like July first. At that point, I leave, actually, the UCLA School of Education. I only lasted one quarter. I didn't care for the courses. It seemed like many of the professors had never been in a classroom. I'm sure they had experiences otherwise, but they didn't seem to know the students out there, based on my own experiences with the UCLA Tutorial Project. At that point there was a decision that we would be hosting the next Far West Convention. So at that point meetings were put together to meet not only with the local UCLA community, with the UCLA community plus whoever we could pull together from the general L.A. area.

SINGSON

Before we go here, there's so much that we ran through leading up to your position in Washington, D.C. I do want to talk about your experience while in Washington, D.C. So let's just sort of parse it out first. I just wanted to clarify the Chancellor's Board of Urban Development. What came out of that and how is it different from your experience in the UCLA Tutorial Project? Because it sounded as if it had the same outreach to the community.

TOLENTINO

The focus was to look at different urban concerns and how to respond to it. It discovered that it could help by funding different groups. The board was faculty and students and the chancellor. I mean, it was not a working group. It was just a board that made decisions when proposals were made by fellow board members. Its major funding, actually, went to the internship programs in Washington, D.C. and in Sacramento. It funded those almost regularly, since it lasted probably—at the time I joined, it was going on its sixth year. It discovered that it could fund, for example, the summer project of the UCLA Tutorial Project. It funded, I guess, clinical programs. I recall, just because I was a zoology major at that point, it would fund Ph.D. research projects that the departments couldn't afford to do. And a lot of it was focused on academic assistance or assistance to academics within the UCLA community.

SINGSON

Your presence on the board, do you think you steered some support—

TOLENTINO

For the first time, they actually were thinking outside of UCLA internships, traditional kinds of places, the Education Abroad Program. They would fund studies in one area that one year. My presence was—because I think they had black members and Hispanic members, but I was probably the first Asian American one and probably the first Filipino who had more of a community background.

SINGSON

Was there anything, sort of a pet project, that you wanted approved, or was there anything specific for Filipino—

TOLENTINO

No, I was busy doing other things. There was no real pet project, other than I would, in terms of setting goals for the following year, let's see if we can expand our community outreach outside of the

black community. There's really no outreach to the Hispanic community other than it was incidental going to the Venice area, but also outreach into the disabled community, outreach into the Asian American community, and other groups that were starting to come to UCLA.

SINGSON

So you mean outside community groups looking to UCLA for funding? Is that what you mean?

TOLENTINO

No. It was to help assist, for example, like UCLA Alumni Association wants to outreach, but they didn't have the resources, and I just tied it into the board's mission as outreach into our urban community.

SINGSON

The other thing that you mentioned is the UCLA Asian American Graduate Student Association. What came out of that? What were the goals of it, and, at least while you were there, what was the effect of it?

TOLENTINO

The organizing, really, for that first year was just to try and pull grad[uate] students together, get them to a meeting to talk about what issues that they could address. There wasn't much the first year.

SINGSON

Was it because there's not a lot of graduate students?

TOLENTINO

There weren't too many Asian American grad[uate] students, though we weren't limiting ourselves to that. But it was just not part, I think, of the view or vision of many of the Asian grad[uate] students who are mostly in the sciences. They were the math TAs [teaching assistants], chemistry, physics. I think they were more

focused on their studies. So the focus actually was the MSW [Master's in Social Work] candidates just organizing themselves more because many of the students were now social workers in L.A., especially Asian American ones coming out of UCLA's MSW program, though you still had a handful coming out of USC [University of Southern California]. Always just trying to get a voice. Because there was a Graduate Student Association, which also funded similar programs, it was to try and develop programs and get funding for that group. But it took a lot of organizing, and I think all of us were in other kinds of groups, and we just thought we'd put the idea forward and see what we could do. Other than outreaching, that was about it. I think we held one or two meetings for that year, and that was about it.

SINGSON

So now let's move forward to your position in Washington, D.C. How long was this position for?

TOLENTINO

I lasted only about two and a half months, because in the meantime, while I'm doing all this, I'm applying to UCLA law school, encouraged by two very good friends who eventually became lifelong friends. That was Stuart Kwoh, who's now the executive director of the Asian American Legal Center. So Stuart and I helped co-found that group down the line, another six years later, along with Mike Ang. But they helped me. They talked about law school, and they knew what I was interested in—it sounds like a cliché, but changing the world, contributing to increasing the Asian American or bringing forth Asian American issues and doing something about them.

SINGSON

So this wasn't in your mind while you were in the field of zoology?

TOLENTINO

No. Law school was the furthest thing from my mind, but I was looking at that point for effectually what I had learned during my

four and a half years of trying to contribute, I guess, to various activities. I'd participated in enough teach-ins, participated in enough organizing that I wanted to continue that kind of work out of UCLA. Stuart and Mike had organized the very first Asian American Law Student Association, and they had begun to be more involved in the outreach of Asian American students, and there were very few at that point. They didn't have any Filipino students, so they encouraged me to apply to take the LSAT [Law School Admission Test], which I did, and actually I did very well, first of all, for a zoology major. [laughs] It was actually just the skill of reading, English and reading, which I developed outside of being a zoologist, actually. While I was at Washington, D.C., essentially you just need jobs to keep surviving.

SINGSON

What was your position? What were you doing?

TOLENTINO

I was considered a program associate, but my first tasks were a very glorified clerk, actually, because for the first time we were again setting protocol and policies for this office. What did this office actually do? So what we evolved in is that many of the funding proposals that dealt with Asian Pacific American communities came through our bureau. We didn't actually review it ourselves, but we gave the task over to consultants. For the first time, my great contribution is I hired consultants from pretty much the West Coast, folks that eventually actually contributed much more, you know, Ford Kuramoto, Royal Morales, those names are just familiar, and two or three other folks that were very active in their respective communities.

SINGSON

As consultants?

TOLENTINO

As consultants to review funding proposals. And they were paid. We'd fly them in for three days or five days. That's all they did, was

review proposals and write the recommendations. They hadn't really done it in the past, but the consultants hired by Toyo Biddle were professors coming out of the East Coast because those were her contacts. She assumed that Asian Americans in New York and in Boston had a very similar experience, plus her own experience of growing up in Boston and in the Washington, D.C. area kept reminding them and I think was part of this schism that, well, they're just so overwhelming back in the West Coast and that we would offend somebody if we chose such-and-such kind of thing. But I thought I convinced her that, you know, even you take that risk if you want to make sure that your program or eventually whatever is funded had a community input and a community support, then you have to say Ford recommended this, Royal recommended this, a whole bunch of folks recommended it. Ling-Chi Wang's, I think, name came up from San Francisco. Ron Takaki's name came up. And they all were hired as consultants. So then, interesting enough, one of the early funding proposals, it was interesting because this R&P Associates wrote a lot of the proposals for the Asian American group.

SINGSON

Who is R&P Associates?

TOLENTINO

Research and something. They were based out of Virginia, but essentially they were another set of consultants who wrote on behalf of these groups.

SINGSON

You mean grant proposals?

TOLENTINO

Grant proposals, because they had experience doing this. They knew what HEW [US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] wanted. They knew the format. So somebody like the Cordovas, it was their program. What I noticed is that, boy, a lot of this came from that group. They would hire them to consult for like 10,000, I

suppose, maybe even less in those days. "Write us a proposal. Here's what we're thinking of," and they would draft the proposal. And it's usually on their letterhead, but it's on behalf of. So I remember the proposals coming out of Seattle, and I think if it was reviewed by anybody else coming from the East Coast, they would have no understanding of the context. For example, the proposal for the Cordovas—

SINGSON

Do you remember what proposal exactly was this one?

TOLENTINO

Part of it, I think, was to develop like a Filipino—they didn't call it a community center, but a center for specific programs on Filipino, preserving Filipino American history and collecting research in Filipino American history to be archived. I think it eventually evolved into F___ and other groups like that.

SINGSON

Do you remember if it was approved while you were—

TOLENTINO

I think our consultants recommended it. They gave it priorities. Yes, it was funded. We founded groups out of San Francisco. We funded Chinese Americans for Affirmative Action, CAA. We funded groups coming out of L.A. For the first time, HEW was funding community groups in the West Coast. So that was my small contribution. Subsequently I'm leaving. I give them my two weeks' notice, and they said, "Why?" I said, "I'm going to law school." "Why didn't you tell us?" I just was frank with them. I said, "I needed the job, and if I didn't get to law school, at least this job kept going." But at that same time, two other folks popped into place. As program associate, a person named Phil Chen came out of San Francisco, and Juanito Tamayo Lot. That was Juanito's first job out of school, and she was the program associate, and that's how I met her.

SINGSON

That's great. She replaced your position?

TOLENTINO

She was one of the three. I mean, what I did, though, was set into place these protocols of where things go, what's a funding proposal and how to keep track of them, and who to send it to review, and I'm sure they expanded it further beyond. Mine was just two and a half months' worth of trying to figure out what this position did.

SINGSON

So I guess this is a good time to go to the Far West Convention in 1974, but I would like to backtrack a little bit.

TOLENTINO

No, this is now in—oh, I guess so. You're right. I went to law school. The Asian American Grad[uate] Students, at that point also the Asian American Pacific Law Student Association, and then I'm also teaching for the first time the Filipino Experience course.

SINGSON

Okay. If you could just pause for a moment. [interruption]

SINGSON

We are back to recording. So at this point, let's start discussing your entrance to UCLA law school, and just to kind of clarify, do you know of any other Filipinos within the law school or the graduate school? What is your sense of the Asian American population demographics at UCLA law school?

TOLENTINO

We were very small. The Law Student Association, which included the Asian American Pacific Law Student [Association], I think the times I was there was only about twelve.

SINGSON

Including any Filipinos?

TOLENTINO

Included myself as a Filipino as a freshman. Subsequently two other folks, Vincente Navarrete—I think that's Vincente. Who else? And then Jessie Quinsaat, came in actually at my recruiting, and I recruited them during the time I was my first year in UCLA law school and then also, I guess—all I know is I spent a lot of time using CRLA's [California Rural Legal Assistance] phone, trying to talk to all these potential folks.

SINGSON

CRLA meaning—what's—

TOLENTINO

California Rural Legal Assistance. They're still around. I eventually joined their board. They provide legal services in the rural areas of California. The focus at that time was on farm workers. Secretary of State [Edmund G.] Jerry Brown [Jr.] was very supportive of CRLA. President [Ronald] Reagan was not. They clashed. In fact, they kept threatening to defund CRLA. I didn't quite know the impact of it, but apparently participating with CRLA kind of was a very radical thing to do, I guess. But that translated into people seeing me as more radical than I thought I really was.

SINGSON

Why is that?

TOLENTINO

Because you're participating with an organization that is very controversial, I suppose.

SINGSON

Because of the relationship between Jerry Brown and—

TOLENTINO

No, it's because for the first time they were pushing for farm worker issues, the use of the short-handled hoe, the use of pesticides, the

use of providing health facilities in the fields, and then also of their right to organize.

SINGSON

How did you join CRLA?

TOLENTINO

I applied for a clerkship. What was interesting, actually, was that they wanted only second- and third-year students, and then I rationalized that I would be a second year when I would be working for them. So I applied and got accepted. I still vividly remember the first day I was there. Everyone treated me very nicely. We started talking about what kinds of courses you took, and I said, "My first year I took the typical stuff." And then the question was, "And in your second year?" I said, "Oh, my second year I'll be taking it in the fall." "You're first year?" They were shocked because they thought they had hired a more—I guess they assumed you were more experienced the second year. Calls were made to the headquarters in San Francisco. "Did you know?" And they said, "Well, we can't hire you, because you misled us." I said, "I didn't mislead anybody. Here's my transcripts, and there's nothing in there that said—it shows you my first-year courses, and that's it. I don't think I ever made a statement. It just said that was one of your requirements. So I applied, and you guys accepted me. And, besides, I'm considered second year at this point."

SINGSON

This is the internship through the summer in between your first and second year?

TOLENTINO

First and second year. Then if you go back, I'm prepping then at that point, while in Washington, D.C., expanding on my research on Filipino Americans and their history, which is easy to do, because at that point I had gathered so much research and information from reading the proposals of Filipinos, it was easy to make copies and

just read them and help prepare for them. I was preparing a course, actually, for someone that the Studies Center would hire to teach it.

SINGSON

You mean the UCLA Asian American Studies Center?

TOLENTINO

For UCLA's Asian American Studies Center, because they were the ones that were very supportive about developing it. There were other Filipino lecturers out there that were willing to just come and spend one semester, but I guess the one that they had considered—I don't want to embarrass the persons, but they didn't show up. So at that point, if you wanted to get that course taught, I would have to do it.

SINGSON

So, just to clarify, you were the one preparing for the syllabus but someone else was going to teach it?

TOLENTINO

I essentially was putting together an outline that would need it to be covered for the course, and it was actually part of my own work as a TA for Franklin Odo, but about probably the tail end of, I don't know, mid August, after preparing all this and sending it over to them, they said the person had other commitments and could not teach it. But it was already part of, I guess, the curriculum that the Studies Center was pulling together.

SINGSON

So what was your experience like, leading the first course of Philippine Americans?

TOLENTINO

Well, one, I had to first convince the—I guess there was an Academic Senate group who I had to get their imprimatur. I was a zoology major, but I had told them that I did very well in taking all these history classes and I had the support at that point of Franklin

Odo, and they pulled out other folks that knew of my work, but I can't remember their names, but history professors. I'm not sure Ron Takaki was one of them, because at that point Ron was tenuous, himself. He was controversial. But, anyway, eventually got approved by strangest—because it wasn't completely a panel of the Academic Senate coming. There were psychology professors, a geography professor. Oh, I know, an Asian American psychologist was very supportive. I don't remember his name. But I still remember the geography professor just very, very skeptical, I guess.

SINGSON

Why is that?

TOLENTINO

"Why do you need to teach this course?"

SINGSON

You in particular or the course itself?

TOLENTINO

Me in particular, because I went to talk to them. If they wanted to talk to me, then—he, actually, in general, I don't think he saw any value in any of these ethnic studies courses, because he said, "That should be covered by the history department, and if they're not doing a good job, then you should be working with them to try to do a better job." Essentially, I just said, "It's not being taught and it's one way of getting our history out." He said, "What's so unique about your history?" Then he went through like a quick recitation of Philippine history. I said, "No. My course is dealing with Filipino American history." My starting point for me was the Ilustrados coming in the early 1900s, evolving into kind of the Manongs, the military, and then now the other professionals who were coming in currently and then the Navy folks too.

SINGSON

Now, as far as you know, were there other Filipino courses in other areas? I guess the question of developing this course seemed to come out of zero, out of nothing?

TOLENTINO

Pretty much. It was probably started with whatever Franklin [Odo] had, which wasn't much. It dealt with my own interests and motivation in looking for it. There were no other courses in California.

SINGSON

How did the students react to this? What was the experience like for them, and for you reacting to the students?

TOLENTINO

I think for some of them they saw it as a Mic, Mic courses.

SINGSON

Can you explain?

TOLENTINO

It's short for Mickey, which means like the jazz course was a Mic course. Another, a psychology course, was a Mic course. So when you referred to them as Mic, it was like don't do much and you'll pass. You do a little more, and you'll probably get an A, kind of argument. It was an interesting dynamic group of folks. It ranged, about thirty-five people applied and got in. It was kind of a mix. It was probably only about a third were Filipinos or Filipino ancestry. The other ones were mixed APA [Asian Pacific Americans] groups, a few Hispanics. I don't recall any black students, and probably about three or four white students. One white student in particular, part of the first class was just why are you interested in Filipino and give us a little experience with Filipino Americans, which is probably easy for Filipinos. "Well, I'm born that way." But for the other APA, they had taken, all my other former students, the Asian American Experience class, and they wanted to learn a little more about Filipinos, because Franklin Odo had spent one lecture. An interesting

one was a white female student who said that she's always loved the Filipino people. They've always been very helpful for her family, because, essentially, her dad was a commander in the U.S. Navy. "You cook so well. You wash the cars." Essentially they were very good servants.

SINGSON

What was your reaction?

TOLENTINO

My reaction is that, I mean, that's her point of view, but I could see the Filipino American students looking and said, "Well, yeah, that's your experience with us," because probably all of them except for one were from the navy, and their parents were stewards. So a couple, I remember, "So was your dad a one-steward or two-steward family?" "Oh, I think they had two," in a very naïve way, which meant he was really high up in rank.

SINGSON

What came out of this, the first class, the Filipino course, and, I guess, leading to how Letters in Exile was developed?

TOLENTINO

Because of the lack of and really a dearth of any kind of writings on Filipinos, I Xeroxed articles and essentially passed them out, bits and pieces of articles coming out of Commonwealth magazine, bits and pieces from Roots: An Asian American Reader, a UCLA Asian American Studies Center publication, like interviews with Philip [Vera Cruz] and parts of Bulosan's book. Bulosan at that point was not even published or was out of publication. And Buaken was out of publication. Nobody could contact him.

SINGSON

I'm sorry. Who?

TOLENTINO

Manuel Buaken, I Have Lived with the American People. Then part of the assignment also ongoing was that it was an oral history where they would essentially interview their own families and get their understanding of Filipinos, if you were non-Filipino. If you're Filipino, find out the motivation for coming over. In general, pretty much oral history stuff, just ask questions. Usually there's no particular goal other than just getting facts into place. So then there was at least a spread. Some folks were grouped to working with those in the navy, those in the military, those who were interested in the Manongs. Part of the course was that it was twice a week. One day of the week was to bring in somebody who would relate their experiences. For the first time, Philip Vera Cruz came on campus, any campus, and he was a great speaker. He would essentially preface it, "I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here, but let me tell you about the farm workers."

SINGSON

How did the students react?

TOLENTINO

They were quite amazed by seeing a much older Filipino, very articulate, had a very powerful voice, very powerful ideas, and you could see why he was a leader. So he invited folks to come up to the Agbayani Village that we were putting together, and that was the impetus for us subsequently going up there as a class.

SINGSON

So just to sort of parse out, I mean just to go back to how the Letters of Exile was published—

TOLENTINO

It's actually after the class. Letters of Exile consisted of not only the reads in my class but the essays written by the students. In there you'll see the essay written by Florante [Ibanez], Agbayani Village. How to Survive in a Plantation Colony, I think was with the U.S. Navy groups. That was Sheila [Tabag], Jennifer [Masculino], and Jessie Quinsaat.

SINGSON

They were taking the course with you?

TOLENTINO

Jessie was a TA [teaching assistant] for me. Well, what happened was Jessie eventually kind of took over as the editor. But, anyway, along the way, there were just interesting pauses of history, because the white female with a navy background was a member of the Navy ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps], and part of my lecture was talking about how we were so limited to stewards. About that same time, that same year, Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt changed it so that Filipinos coming could actually apply beyond a steward classification to other classifications. But I think I used the word "racist," used the word "discriminatory." She reports that over to her commander, who writes a letter directly to Chancellor [Charles] Young. Chancellor Young writes it over to, I think, either Allan Nishio or whoever was the head of the directors at that point, and they wanted me to respond. I said, "That guy's just a lecturer like I'm a lecturer. Why doesn't he write to me?" And I refused to respond back. I said, "If you want to respond, you write the chancellor and you say direct your concerns to me." I told the young lady, who got wind of the letters, I said, "You know, if your lecturer in your Naval Studies wants to come to the class, explain his position, no problems."

SINGSON

And did he ever come?

TOLENTINO

No. But letters, because of the students learned about it, there was an exchange of letters in The Daily Bruin, if you ever could track it down. But it was like the reference was—

SINGSON

Let me pause for a moment. [interruption]

SINGSON

Okay. Just after a brief pause, you were mentioning there's a little bit of exchange in The Daily Bruin on this little controversy occurring in the class. So what eventually happened?

TOLENTINO

One of my students had written kind of a short letter indicating that one—they cited my name as was accused of distorting history. But the history is even more distorted because there's a lack of recognition by the part of a Naval Studies lecturer of equal status to a lecturer in Asian American Studies and that there was concern about what was being transmitted and then just factually said that I invited him to the class to respond and he failed to do so, didn't want to do so. Part of the [unclear] which was very funny was that they considered it a political football, and subsequently there was a reference to the political football being tossed about always seemingly not to come to the lecturer, which was me, but going straight to the chancellor, another kind of a slight to those of us who teach, and a condescending attitude towards the fellow lecturers at UCLA.

SINGSON

But not specifically for Asian American or ethnic studies?

TOLENTINO

Specifically because of the slight to the lecturer, to me, actually, to Professor Tolentino's teaching the course, that he didn't want to communicate with me directly. Why is it that you want to ignore? And that's why there's a need for ethnic studies, because we're always ignored, and this is another example not only of ignorance, but of ignoring the history of Filipinos by refusing to address it.

SINGSON

One of the other things that you mentioned—this is while we're on pause—is that teach-ins also occurred during your first year.

TOLENTINO

Part of it, interestingly enough, I think what happened was because my course generated interest in the L.A. area, that's when for the first time I met Helen Brown. Helen came to one of my classes, and I didn't know, but you could tell she was an older lady at that point. Rest in peace, Helen, but I thought you were old, an old lady coming into my class [unclear] student, and then she approached me and asked me if she could talk to me a little bit more about what I was doing, because she was working on some pretty similar stuff within the L.A. Unified School District. So actually I told her, "Well, it's tough during the week, because I go to school, but you can meet me some Saturday afternoon," and I arranged that time. At about the same time I get a phone call from a professor at Cal[ifornia] State [University] Dominquez [Hills], Mila Aquino. She's a teacher at the School of Education and was trying to develop a Filipino curriculum. So I gave her the same time and they both showed up at the same time, and so for the first time they met. It was always interesting because they quickly organized the Filipino American Educator's Group, and also for the first time Mila had contact with L.A. Unified and had no idea what Helen was doing. So she became a resource and a consultant for Helen in trying to get Filipino curriculum into the L.A. Unified School District.

SINGSON

That's great.

TOLENTINO

So while they're organizing, they wanted to put together a conference on Filipino American educators, so we participated as a partner. I was on a panel about teaching the courses, and that was considered like a teach-in. Then, for example, we had another one where it was the Filipino American Political Association led by Larry Itliong.

SINGSON

In L.A.

TOLENTINO

He was based out of Delano, [California], and it's kind of a statewide group, but it seemed to be more what we called the establishment kinds of folks. The editor of Philippine American News was the head of it.

SINGSON

You mean Alex Esclamado?

TOLENTINO

Yes. So they helped organize like a conference on political empowerment, and so we participated, part of the L.A. area, and we helped organize, trying to get a place actually through the help of Royal and COO, Council [of Oriental Organization] for—

SINGSON

That's right.

TOLENTINO

It covered pretty much the same area. A lot of it was history and lack of participation of Filipinos in the electoral process, and then there was also a discussion on what we can do for the future. We can never get past that, though, because it needs somebody to follow up, and we were students, and, in my mind, it was too tough to follow.

SINGSON

Just to clarify, this is while you're in that same quarter that you're teaching the Philippine history courses?

TOLENTINO

No, this is probably more like the quarter after. I didn't really have that much time, teaching the course and trying to be a first-year law student.

SINGSON

So we'll move on, and so now you have the internship in Modesto.

TOLENTINO

After my first year, okay, then I clerked for CRLA [California Rural Legal Assistance], and I'm still informed through mail and other stuff the development of the San Jose [Far West] convention. I really just attended it. So on the way to San Jose essentially was—I was in Modesto and I told them, "Stop by and I can show you around Modesto."

SINGSON

I'm sorry. Who were you talking about?

TOLENTINO

Florante Ibanez, Rose [Estepa]—what is Rose's maiden name? Florante's future wife, Rose Ibanez. Jennifer Masculino [Tolentino] and Sheila Tabag. Pretty much the founders of UCLA Samahang, and then Rose who Florante had met at the San Diego convention. They were on their way to San Jose, and they saw a shorter route rather than going all the way up [Interstate] 5, catching, I think at that point, [Interstate] 580 coming back down. They saw a route that took them into the mountains, and they had a flat tire. You have to also know that Florante had this gray van that we used everywhere in addition to the UCLA station wagons. I mean, it was Florante who took us everywhere because he could pile quite a few folks in his van, and most of the students did not have cars. So if I couldn't get a UCLA car, it was all piled up into Florante's van. And it broke down, got a flat tire. So they spent a couple of hours trying to figure out how to fix a tire, and they were late for the San Jose one. I came, subsequently, because it was still a workday for me at CRLA.

SINGSON

From Modesto then traveling to San Jose.

TOLENTINO

To San Jose, which wasn't very far.

SINGSON

Again, your sense of the Far West [Covention] in San Jose, how is it different from the previous Far West? And then this is towards leading into the next Far West in ’74.

TOLENTINO

There was more participation at that point, I thought, of folks from Southern California. The other conventions seemed to be more populated with folks coming out of Seattle, or the Northwest, and Stockton. Seattle and Stockton were the most active in terms of these conventions. But I think for the first time you saw a lot more San Francisco folks, San Jose folks, no participation, actually, from the Central Valley, very little, and a large number from Los Angeles.

SINGSON

Why is that?

TOLENTINO

I think it’s because at that point there was better organizing and better outreach, because the San Francisco people, actually, specifically from San Francisco State and Berkeley, organized a lot more.

SINGSON

They were the ones leading the organization?

TOLENTINO

Well, the San Jose State Filipino group—usually it’s a local Filipino group that organized it, but I think most of them were assisted by PACE [Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor], Pilipino American Coalition, I guess. I can’t remember. Filipino.

SINGSON

In San Francisco State?

TOLENTINO

San Francisco State. So I think that brought in more folks from that particular area, and because UCLA Samahang Pilipino was better

organized, it brought in more. San Diego was at that point also organizing.

SINGSON

Then since we are talking about the Far West Convention, let's head on to the UCLA Far West Convention in 1974. What was your involvement with organization or—

TOLENTINO

I was just part of, I guess, the organizing committee in L.A., helped pull together from my own contacts individuals that could work out, because the way the conventions were set out is that you had a community group supporting at that point a UCLA student group, who would do most of the organizing and development of the program activities. So it essentially was Royal [Morales], Al [Mendoza], and those guys getting support, and we had community meetings to organize it, and had to tell them what is this Far West Convention, why are we spelling it with a P, all those little minor things and then issues raised about whether we're pro- or anti-Marcos.

SINGSON

Even before the planning stages?

TOLENTINO

During the planning stages. We always tried to defer it by saying, "We're going to talk about that as an issue. So let's defer to it, actually, and if you want to speak pro or anti, you're more than welcome. We'll make sure that any of the—." We had a panel on martial law. "We'll make sure that there's even numbers of speakers," and stuff like that.

SINGSON

Just to kind of clarify, because you were still a law student at this point, and there seems to be organizing outside of UCLA, too, Royal and Al Mendoza?

TOLENTINO

They're organizing with us, actually. They found us as a group that they could work with. Esther Soriano pops in as a social worker. She works with us. I mean, I think in her mind we were the at-risk group, you know, these young people whom she had to make sure led more gainful lives, I suppose. So it was very odd.

SINGSON

So what was your impression of the 1974 Far West Convention? How was it different?

TOLENTINO

In '74, I helped organize and I left to do an internship at the Center for Law and Social Policy in the Health Law Program.

SINGSON

This is outside of—

TOLENTINO

In Washington, D.C. This was a—it looks like, for all the Democrat potential appointees hung around.

SINGSON

You mean Democrat appointees of—

TOLENTINO

Yes, because subsequently [James E. "Jimmy"] Carter appoints probably half of that center. Stuart Eisenstat was an attorney there. Joel—I've forgotten Joel's last name—was his assistant. The first woman [U.S.] Supreme Court nominee was the wife of one of our attorneys. The second appointee was a clerk there. The current head of, I think, NOW [National Organization for Women], the feminist group, is Marsha Greenberg. She's an attorney there. A former secretary, Assistant Secretary for Defense, mostly for Democratic groups. One, another, eventually co-founded Brandeis School of Law. Another one essentially helped found the—Ralph

Nader showed up a lot—Consumer Protection Agency. So it was kind of a Democratic bastion.

SINGSON

What did you get out of this?

TOLENTINO

I was a law clerk. We were law clerks from about four law schools. We came from Yale, Michigan [State University], Stanford, UCLA.

SINGSON

And what did you get out of this, meeting all these Democratic appointees?

TOLENTINO

Well, for the first time—well, no, they were attorneys on cases. I was on a health law case, but it taught me about what they called at that point—the litigation was the Hill-Burton Act. One drop of federal funds into any kind of program means all the applicable laws of the federal laws applied, including nondiscrimination and also that they would then treat poverty or poverty-level participants. The cases that we were handling were all the ones in New Orleans, [Louisiana] against about five or six hospitals, including three Roman Catholic churches, Roman Catholic-run hospitals. So that took me on a two-week trip to New Orleans, which was fun, first time I've ever been there. But also because it was kind of a college internship, we would always go up to the [Capitol] Hill to listen to public hearings. At the same time, including public hearings was the impeachment of Richard [M.] Nixon. So we were there on the night that he decided to resign. We ran up from Dupont Circle [Washington D.C.] ran up over there to the front, Lafayette Park in front of the White House, to see what happens. We weren't the only ones there. They were all cheering. The most interesting view is you see Dan Rather on, like, a three-foot box standing there waiting for his cameraman for him to speak up, and periodically they would test, because they were waiting and they were waiting for the official resignation.

SINGSON

That's great.

TOLENTINO

Then we saw clusters of other camera folks, but Dan Rather was the only one we could spot. We didn't sleep that night. We were just cheering. So that was part of it. Then, interestingly enough, there's also, I guess through the grapevine, they discovered that I'm a law student there, but these very activist anti-martial law folks contacted me.

SINGSON

Based in Washington, D.C.?

TOLENTINO

Based in Washington, D.C.

SINGSON

Is it the Friends of the Filipino People?

TOLENTINO

You know, I don't know, but one was [Ben] Kerkvliet. He hadn't written his book, The Huk Rebellion: Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines yet. But there was a Filipina and an Anglo guy, and they were very active, I guess because they wanted me to be involved kind of thing in their local group.

SINGSON

Did you ever join their group?

TOLENTINO

In the way that I attended meetings, I suppose, but I quickly—I think they thought I was a law student that they needed to teach. [laughs] I mean, it was, "Did you know?" kind of. I said, "Yes, I taught the course." Because a part of the course I taught was like the Philippine history, I'm sure one lecture, very quickly, maybe it

was even two. But along the way, because it's Dupont Circle, there's a grape boycott going on. Dupont Circle's just a stone's throw away from the White House, of the Mall, and it's the center of really the progressive folks. We were all standing in this one door, so literally you would see a lot of activity at Dupont Circle itself. One of them was a big rally put together by the grape boycott. I wander over—and you can do lots of wandering—I run into—not into Philip, but the one who subsequently—I can't remember his name [Peter Velasco]. He eventually became the secretary-treasurer of the UFW [United Farm Workers of America].

SINGSON

Was he Filipino?

TOLENTINO

Filipino, yes. He had died two or three years ago. God, what is his name? I'd essentially run into him again subsequent in my career. But, anyway, ran into him for the first time, and we looked at each other, and he said, "You're Filipino?" "Yes, from L.A." And then he told me about the grape boycott and that he was traveling with this boycott group, and gave me his name to keep in touch. That was how I met him.

SINGSON

So while you're doing this Washington, D.C. internship, the Far West organizing is occurring.

TOLENTINO

Yes, at UCLA.

SINGSON

Right. Then you come back for the Far West Convention itself. I guess I wanted to hear your impressions, especially the anti-Marcos is already making its presence since 1973.

TOLENTINO

It had a table with its literature, and there was already a kind of undercurrent that this convention is going to be taken over by the anti-martial-law folks.

SINGSON

What do you mean, there's already a—

TOLENTINO

I guess at that point in time, people saw agendas, or hidden agendas, by other folks and that anti-martial-law folks were going to use the conference for their own agenda, to set resolutions attacking martial law in the Philippines.

SINGSON

Is this particularly only from the KDP or different anti-martial-law groups?

TOLENTINO

Different anti-martial-law groups. I don't think KDP even identified themselves as KDP, though you knew they were around if you knew KDP. But it really just was one panel for everyone, and there was so much more to do in the program that we didn't think it was going to be taken over. Maybe we were naïve students, but we were just organizing. Henry Empeno was the chair. We had a plenary session, and part of the plenary session is they did the pro- and anti-Marcos folks spoke, and we spoke about what the role was of the Far West Convention. It was to be a discussion, a dialogue of various issues, that it would take positions by a resolution process, which you would do at the tail end after we get reports from various panels. I wasn't part of the martial-law panel. I was part of the teaching Filipino American History panel and youth organizing. But you could tell after that, because usually the Far West Conventions on Saturday nights had a play, usually a play that would take a particular issue. That one took the pro- and anti-Marcos issue, and it followed the tradition of the Theatro Campasinos. Are you familiar with them?

SINGSON

No.

TOLENTINO

They were essentially the theater arm to promote the causes of the farm workers, but the characters would wear a sign saying what they were. For example, a bunch of farmers are campesinos. The other ones, big heavy contractors, the mayordomos. So this particular play had both sides, and you could tell who Marcos was and other people that are part of American Filipino history, of [Emilio] Aguinaldo, of various other folks in history, and it was to teach them the history of the Filipinos and how it has changed. So there was already an undercurrent of a focus on politics in the Philippines, and then there was undercurrent saying why are we going to this area? Well, they had a choice of whichever play they want to put together, but it has nothing to do with us Filipino Americans undercurrent and that was coming from a lot of the people coming out of Seattle. I guess during that same evening after the play, what we heard is that there were exchanges in the dorms. They were all staying at the UCLA dorms. We were organizers. We were exhausted; we went home. The following morning, we're pulling a plenary session together and Seattle people did not show up, and so Henry was trying to pull it together, but at that point people said, "You can't pass a resolution. You don't have everybody who registered. They essentially walked out." Part of their walking out was so that we couldn't pass a resolution. But a resolution was passed that was condemning Marcos.

SINGSON

But without—

TOLENTINO

Without any participation from Seattle. There were a few people that still stayed that supported Seattle's point of view. It was kind of a mixed bag from different folks.

SINGSON

But how did a resolution get passed even without a quorum?

TOLENTINO

Well, that was the argument, but some said, well, the quorum should be the people who were there. People said, "No, it's whoever is registered." So I'm not sure the resolution actually passed or how they resolved it, because every Far West Convention was always—god, we kept reinventing the wheel, so there was no real precedence to follow. It was just kind of a consensus. Everyone said it's a consensus of this group that remained, who wanted to work, and there's points of view that we're discussing from all three sides, actually, pro-Marcos, anti-Marcos, and those who said it shouldn't be an issue for this convention. A resolution was passed, but it took all day long, and there was a lot of exchanges with folks, and I think as organizers we just kept saying, "Oh, my god, we've lost control of this conference. It's just crazy." Henry kept trying to hammer down. People wanting to talk out of turn.

SINGSON

You were on this big plenary session?

TOLENTINO

I attended the sessions, but I didn't really participate in organizing it, any of this stuff. I was just an attendee and a member of a panel.

SINGSON

How did you feel about it, hearing this contention and also there's the fact that Henry was saying that we're losing control?

TOLENTINO

It was tough for any kind of dialogue. People were so set in their ways or set in their points of view. I mean, I rose each time to talk about that it was important to talk about it because it's part of our community, and you can see it's part of our community, because it's raised on this particular—and, "We should try and resolve it, but I don't think a resolution of either side is going to do much good

because I don't think we all really are speaking for this community. We're only speaking for whoever who are here at the plenary." "Well, so what? That's our point of view and we want this group, and the Far West Convention, which is the only Filipino organized group, to speak out and have discussion." It was never a vote, I think because there was larger numbers of anti-Marcos folks. It was all by saying "aye" and "nay" kind of thing. So a resolution, essentially very watered down, condemning anti-martial law, without naming Marcos, was passed. Everyone felt, because at that point, people all had this feeling that somehow this Far West Convention was never going to be the same, because now there was so much focus on that particular issue that we no longer were going to look at Filipino American history, teaching that history or Filipino consciousness. I said, you know, for these folks who are attending, many of them attended for the first time, especially the pro- and anti-Marcos groups that I think because we had no institutional memory, that they didn't realize that you might have covered this one part, but you left out a whole bunch of folks who are looking for a better understanding of their history, a better understanding of the issues of how it affected them, a better understanding of their own identity.

SINGSON

You looking back at these contentions, what do you feel about it? Are you saddened by the disunity or—

TOLENTINO

That didn't reflect until the subsequent Far West Conventions. It always came up as an issue. There's one more convention I skipped, but then at this point the next ones I helped organize in Fresno. That issue came up again in Sacramento. That issue came up again each time kind of reaffirming it. But the people attending the convention at that point, I think most people were anti-Marcos. But the conference folks were always hoping that Seattle would show up with folks that felt like they were left out, but they never did. I think that's what petered out the Far West Conventions.

SINGSON

This whole contention, it continued? Is that how you see it?

TOLENTINO

Yes, it did. It didn't end until martial law was essentially ended.

SINGSON

Okay. Well, this is a good spot to end, just to kind of wrap up with the Far West Convention, and then next week we'll go on to other things that you're greatly involved with, so many different things, community organizations and other groups. So thank you, Cas.

TOLENTINO

No problem. [End of July 12, 2011 interview]

1.4. SESSION FOUR (JULY 19, 2011)

SINGSON

Today is July 19 [2011], and we are here in Los Angeles in Cas[imiro] Tolentino's home, and we are doing our fourth interview. How are you doing, Cas?

TOLENTINO

I'm doing fine.

SINGSON

Very good. This is Precious Singson doing the interview.

TOLENTINO

[laughs] The reason I'm laughing is in a deposition you ask whether you're on medication or not. You ask each witness literally, so that everybody knows that he's got a sound mind and he can think straight. Yes, I can think straight.

SINGSON

Just for the record, we are thinking straight today. [laughter] We talked a lot about last week—I mean, we ended the interview with the Far West Convention. There's so much to this, and I think we should still continue talking about it later on when we talk about your experiences in Fresno [California] and Stockton [California], but just to kind of keep it in a chronological order, let me first ask the question, so after you were in HEW [U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare], how did you transition to the ALB [Agricultural Labor Relations Board]?

TOLENTINO

Essentially because the weather in [Washington] D.C. was just awful, and there was an opportunity to work for the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. Many people I'd worked in CRLA, California Rural Legal Assistance, also helped organize the ALRB [Agricultural Labor Relations Board]. It was kind of the centerpiece of Jerry [Edmund R.] Brown [Jr.]'s administration. It was the first time that they'd included the farm workers in the collective bargaining process, so the farm workers, who were pretty much on the bottom level, were suddenly brought up on the same level with respect to their collective bargaining abilities with agricultural employers. So I became—this is my mom's [Florencia Jose Urbano] description—from a Washington, D.C. lawyer to a Fresno lawyer, and she said, "Where is Fresno?" [laughs] But, anyway, essentially worked in that area, but because I was an attorney, we traveled—we were attorneys for doing the elections, attorneys who handled what we called the unfair labor practice complaints all over the Central Valley [of California].

SINGSON

I'm really surprised there wasn't any before. As far as you can remember, by incorporating this or sort of leading this organization, do you know how they used to work?

TOLENTINO

There really wasn't anything at all. When the National Labor Relations Act was created in the 1940s, it left out two very large groups of folks who really were powerless, and that was agricultural workers and domestics, domestic workers. There was always, all through the sixties, always an attempt to try and get a collective bargaining law into place, and California was the very first. About three or four years later, Arizona came up with their own, and now it's being considered by different states where they discovered huge numbers of immigrant labor workforce that they now have to be dealing with.

SINGSON

Well, obviously, there's a lot of Filipinos who are farm workers, and they're part of the UFW [United Farm Workers of America]. Did you encounter them, and what were your dealings with Filipino farm workers in the union or otherwise?

TOLENTINO

Filipino farm workers were kind of in a unique situation because they were both working with the UFW [Unifed Farm Workers of America], just from the history of Philip Vera Cruz and Larry Itliong, but then you also had people who felt like they were short-shrifted by the UFW, and they were just very strong, idealistic folks organized themselves, and they were like Filipino Agricultural Workers Group that also tried to organize. So some representation elections you would have the UFW, the Filipino Agricultural Workers Group and the Teamsters. The Teamsters and the UFW were the two main players. There was always the undercurrent, though, that the Filipinos were kind of manipulated by the Teamsters to kind of dilute and diffuse the organizing out there.

SINGSON

Of the UFW?

TOLENTINO

Yes. The Filipinos were kind of unique because they'd been there. Most of them were not young new immigrants, except a little later.

They were ones that were what they called mayordomos, the labor contractor or the heads of the labor groups and labor camps. The way a lot of places were organized was almost on an ethnic group setting, the Mexican camp, the Filipino camp, the Arab camp. Large number of Arabs also were working as farm workers. So I worked with paralegals that were of Filipino American ancestry, who were helping the UFW in terms of organizing their litigation, and Filipino witnesses that came forth. I recall several of them saying that, "Well, I wish I could tell you what I just told you, but I can't." Otherwise, they have a job and they didn't want to get fired.

SINGSON

Just to clarify, again, these mayordomos and these labor contractors, they're not at all part of the UFW, or not even Teamsters.

TOLENTINO

Well, some of them were. They were called travistas. You also had Filipino labor contractors that were considered travistas, because the unions slowly were picking up contracts in various places, and once a contract is in place, the labor contractors themselves had to sign up. I would say it was almost 50-50 that you had Filipino farm workers on the side of UFW, and the other probably third were probably trying to organize on their own, thinking they could do better. Then the other folks were just working with the Teamsters. The Teamsters had the money, had the organization, and convinced some folks that they could do better than the UFW could.

SINGSON

Do you recall any unique, outstanding, or something memorable for you that was brought up as an issue by the Filipino farm workers?

TOLENTINO

Well, I think most of them felt that their voice was always kind of diminished with the UFW because there was so much focus on the Mexican farm workers, and that's why they organized. I got to know

a few of the organizers out in Stockton. They had some doing out in Delano [California].

SINGSON

How were their concerns different from the Mexicans?

TOLENTINO

That they weren't given a voice, I suppose, in the decision-making powers, though some of them were no longer working out in the fields, were active members of the paralegal group coming out of Delano. I mean, without them pulling witnesses out of the different camps, especially Filipino ones, then it would have been a much more difficult task by the UFW to pursue its unfair labor complaints, because you needed folks. Essentially a lot of the charges were that the employer was essentially funding also Filipino organizing groups or funding opposition through the UFW, which is illegal under the ALRA [Assocation of Labor Relations Agencies]. They can campaign, they can organize, but they can't fund a third party to try and—

SINGSON

To break up.

TOLENTINO

Yes.

SINGSON

So, just to move on, you were staying in Fresno, and did you involve yourself with any other community activities?

TOLENTINO

Actually, yes, through—there was an individual, a new professor at Cal State Fresno [California State University, Fresno]. His name was Michael Eng. He was from Hawaii. I think he was kind of—an interesting group of APAs [Asian Pacific Americans] who went out to essentially the various areas and started organizing Asian American Studies. He was put in contact. I guess he'd gotten my name from Lowell Chun-Hoon, who is another one who was at UCLA organizing

Amerasia Journal. So we got to talking and he was very active. The only group out in the [Central] Valley was JACL, Japanese American Citizens League. So he also had students, APA students, so I went to speak to several of his classes. Eventually, they also, in turn, I guess, informed the parents. They were kind of a loosely organized group, and I became their general counsel.

SINGSON

You mean the student organization?

TOLENTINO

No, actually, it was the Filipino community of Fresno County. I was usually the first Filipino American lawyer that they would see, and so it was natural, I guess, for them, "Well, you can become our general counsel," which replicated itself in Sacramento and also in San Diego. I was general counsel of those respective community groups, which I didn't mind. I understood my role as essentially representing a community, and I think they felt more comfortable, I guess, putting a "real lawyer"—that's the words that they were saying.

SINGSON

Why do think would a lawyer become more essential for the position?

TOLENTINO

Because they realized how hard it was to become a member of the California bar, because many of them had lawyers who were trained in the Philippines, and they had a tough time passing the California bar, and they were usually the former general counsels, but they weren't members of the California bar, which was kind of that threshold for a lot of the groups.

SINGSON

Was your lawyering necessary within the general counsel of a community organization?

TOLENTINO

I pretty much was just almost like a figurehead, I suppose, where they would put me on the stationery, kind of thing, and I'd go to the events, that kind of stuff. But what was interesting is that they were organized in terms of provincial groups. The groups there, because I was Ilocano, that was helpful. A lot of the farm workers are Ilocano, and so those ties really helped out. It was also kind of an interesting dynamic because a large number of the agricultural employers were Nisei farmers, Japanese American farmers. So you also had Asian or Japanese American agricultural employers out there who also argued a historical argument that they'd been out there and they'd worked hard and they got their farms, and, "We treat our workers very well," kind of argument, which I'm sure was probably true for many of them. I think it was tough for them to realize that there was a government agency that kind of enforced some of the laws and enforced some of the collective bargaining. So one of the things that we needed in Fresno is I remember bringing a group of folks down to, I guess, a Far West Convention, and they were impressed. A couple of them who were of Filipino ancestry were our investigators, and then some of the community groups and some of the students from Cal State Fresno went down.

SINGSON

To which Far West Convention?

TOLENTINO

My recollection is San Diego, and for me, personally, it was the first time I started interacting more with Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo, because our issue was labor and employment. The focus was on the history of the Manongs, the focus on labor. That was kind of the start of kind of a yearly communication back and forth about setting up what we're going to cover next. I just remember exchanges, especially more with Gene, because he struck me as more the writer, and he was sending me companies of the International Examiner paper.

SINGSON

So your correspondences with them, just to sort of clarify, Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes were labor organizers in Seattle and they were murdered in 1981 later on. But since we're already on the topic, and they were also anti-[Ferdinand] Marcos activists.

TOLENTINO

Yes. They were also very active in their union, which is interesting because they were kind of a splinter group, outside of the norms, because they were organizing the cannery workers, largely Filipinos. They were more like not a splinter group, but a voice, anyway, for them. I know that they were organizing and that they were trying to get a stronger voice within not only the local but the international arena.

SINGSON

Did you ever talk to them about Marcos at all, anti-Marcos feelings?

TOLENTINO

Oh, yes. I mean, it was kind of a natural part of our conversation, which permeated and informed almost every organizing anyone ever did. You were either pro- or anti-Marcos, and if you sat on the fence, you were pushed one side or the other.

SINGSON

In San Diego, I don't know if you recall as much in the Far West Convention, wherein you brought in some delegates from Fresno, was this ever an issue, the [Ferdinand] Marcos, or was it sort of everyone's already anti-Marcos during this period?

TOLENTINO

I think it was interesting, because the dynamics of the people from—interesting, pretty similar to the Sacramento people, is that they were willing to live with the fact that there were pro- and anti-Marcos groups around.

SINGSON

I'm sorry. Are you saying—

TOLENTINO

I mean that they were willing to deal with anti-Marcos folks, and they hadn't made up their minds.

SINGSON

Okay, so they tolerated—

TOLENTINO

Yes. Their approach was, "Well, let's see who we can work with" kind of thing, and so that's why, essentially, that's what I was hoping and we brought to the organizing group in Fresno, is that, "Look, we're split with this particular issue, but it shouldn't split every single one of us in every single issue that we do have," even though I know it's raised everything. It's politics. Pro and anti is a political issue that's always in the context. But the focus was on the farm workers when we organized it for the Fresno Far West Convention. The play there was called Isuda Ti Imuna [They Who Came First], which was a great play coming out of, I think, the Bay Area. I think a lot of those folks were very—it perked up the Sacramento people, who I just had peripheral working knowledge because I was physically working out of Fresno.

SINGSON

Yes, I was going to ask you.

TOLENTINO

Interestingly enough, I got transferred over as the regional director for the Sacramento region, moved up to Sacramento, reconnected with a whole bunch of, it was interesting, for the first time, second-generation Filipino Americans. They were the majority. There was like an assistant superintendent for the San Juan School District, people in state government that were in management positions. So it was a very different breed of folks. It was a different group, where the ones in the other places, the community people weren't

as homogenous. Up in Sacramento, everyone worked for the state or some public service agency.

SINGSON

This was by 1970s?

TOLENTINO

The late seventies. Then we met, interestingly enough, in Sacramento every Sunday to organize at—there's this coffee shop downtown that would be just an informal gathering. If you showed up, you showed up, but we just had private room off to the side and it's usually ten people showing up, people being brought in. That's how the Sacramento Far West Convention was organized, and it was also a way of organizing the Filipino American community in Sacramento.

SINGSON

Now, just to clarify, by this time you're no longer in Fresno, right? You're not traveling back and forth from Fresno to Sacramento.

TOLENTINO

No, but I was still traveling in lots of ways, because Sacramento covered all the way to the boundaries of Fresno. I wasn't doing any more cases.

SINGSON

Then the other thing that I wanted to clarify is if you have these Filipino American second generation who were very organized or have already attained a level of political positions within the government, sort of working in institutions, but then there isn't any Filipino community organization? Because you mentioned that—

TOLENTINO

No, there were. There were like provincial groups that were still there. There were veteran groups that were organized. In fact, there were two Filipino groups. There were south of—the street, Florin, south of Florin, Filipino organization, and that was kind of

where a huge number, because that's probably much closer to Stockton at that point. Then there was kind of the general area folks. Even though they were in higher levels of position, I don't think they were—for the first time they got the glimpse of what we could do if we did organize. Ferdinand Galvez, he was a key person at Sacramento. He was the assistant superintendent. I think what happened was he was actually a top candidate to become the superintendent, and he would have been the highest-raking Filipino American, second generation, farm worker background and had worked his way through the education system. But he didn't get it, and everyone else, his colleagues, essentially said, "Well, it's because we didn't organize on your behalf. The other folks organized." And, unfortunately, a lot of this decision making is based on political considerations. So then at that point we decided to meet and at that meeting said, "Well, let's meet next week," and kept meeting and meeting, and pretty much the duration of the year and a half I was in Sacramento there was a consistent meeting. Out of that came the Filipino American Lawyers of the State of California. I can't remember our official name. But there were so few.

SINGSON

But it's in Sacramento?

TOLENTINO

Sacramento. There were so few of us. Gloria Ochoa is one of those co-founders. Gloria worked for the state, worked for the legislature. She eventually moved over to Santa Barbara and ran for Congress against [Michael] Huffington. So all these folks you get to meet and get to know, and I mean, that was part of her organizing, I think, in lots of ways, because once she decided to run, she had contacts either through me or other folks here in L.A.

SINGSON

Did you just talk about politics or who to put in what position during these Sunday meetings?

TOLENTINO

No, actually, just more organizing our community so that we had a better voice.

SINGSON

In what ways specifically?

TOLENTINO

And also addressed essentially issues that were rising. Part of the issues that were rising was the failure, I guess, of promotions of Filipino Americans. Even though some were managers, there was still a glass ceiling. They wouldn't get to the next level because of the language problem or the perceived language problem, the perceived language deficiency, which is mostly accent. For the first time we were dealing with issues coming out of other communities, to be supportive of—I guess there was a litigation dealing with some nurses, Narciso-Perez issue.

SINGSON

That's right. Yes.

TOLENTINO

Then kind of peripherally also for different folks to organize themselves. For example, because Ferdinand [Galvez] was in the education area, there's kind of another smaller group of Filipino educators coming in for the first time, who they began to kind of organize themselves. I remember telling them about Helen Brown and her organizing down in L.A. In lots of ways, we didn't even use the word "organizing." We were not considered organizers. We were just trying to pull together people for a common interest.

SINGSON

To network. I think it's interesting, too, because you mentioned a lot of these people are Filipino American second generation, but the issues were, for example, having accents and also foreign-trained

professionals and doctors and nurses. Was the Sacramento area changing? Was that why these issues are at the forefront?

TOLENTINO

No, I think for the first time we actually even saw each other in terms of that we can work together. I think they saw that because they saw the—they called us the young people organizing themselves, and we should be organizing ourselves also so that when issues arise, we would have a voice. Probably half of the people in Sacramento were Filipino Americans of second generation, and the other half were just brand-new immigrants. Yes, you touched on it with underemployment of many of the immigrants. Then you would have lawyers and accountants working in low-level clerical positions. The difficulty of them passing the California bar, I mean, that was the one thing the different lawyers group that were organizing at that point is to help out our fellow countrymen pass that bar.

SINGSON

That's interesting for you speaking within that field of lawyering, because I know there's different movements. For example, the nurses have their own movement for their licensing. For the lawyers, you mentioned there's something similar to it. What happened to that movement?

TOLENTINO

There really wasn't a movement other than they were encouraging people to keep taking the bar, because there wasn't any specific impediment. California didn't reciprocate with anybody. You had to pass the California bar. If you're a member of the New York bar, there's no reciprocity. You have to pass the California bar, so that was kind of just an overall discrimination by the state bar. But it just encouraged them, because some of the issues and some of the bar exam questions were geared up for more kind of situations in the United States, and at that time the bar exam was probably two-thirds writing and hypotheticals, and that seemed to be the

toughest part for a lot of the folks that wanted to pass the California bar.

SINGSON

So it's a lot of encouraging and advocacy for the Filipino lawyers, or what else?

TOLENTINO

See, at that point, it's also the beginnings of probably more systematic bar review courses. When I was graduating out of law school, the bar review courses were in their infancy. They were still trying to figure out how to do this, not with big business, but, yes, it was very—there we were trying to get more low-cost ones, I suppose, and focusing on the writing.

SINGSON

For Filipinos.

TOLENTINO

For Filipino lawyers, I guess.

SINGSON

Okay. So let's head back to L.A. In between you mentioned—

TOLENTINO

Well, I do. I kept heading back to L.A. during this whole time because I recall working with Helen Brown, and she was organizing the educators group and she was organizing conferences actually geared—many times they were sponsored by the Asian American Studies Center, the Filipino Educator's Group, and at that time L.A. Unified School District also had an Asian American Education Commission.

SINGSON

Let's start with how you met her. How did you meet Helen Brown?

TOLENTINO

Helen actually approached me after she sat in on the class. She was a much older lady, and she approached me after the class and wanted to chat with me, introduced herself just as a teacher, that she was trying to develop a Filipino curriculum for L.A. Unified School District. So I still didn't have much time. I'm a first-year law student. So I said, "But come Saturday. Come on by. It's easier for me to deal with on weekends." So she did, and that's how I met her more formally. At the same time, I also got a phone call from Mila Aquino, a professor of education at Cal[ifornia] State [University], Dominquez [Hills], and she was interested in trying to get a Filipino history class at Cal State Dominquez. I say, "Well, come in on Saturday. Those are my office hours." They have to come up at the same time, and we just talked pretty much all afternoon. Then I just remember Mila Aquino saying, 'Oh, I've got to go feed my kid." "Feed your kid?" She left him in the car. I said, "Mila, just bring him up." But she didn't want to. "They're noisy little kids." I said, "No, don't worry about it." But they became very good friends, and they were the two co-founders then of the Filipino Educators Group.

SINGSON

That's great.

TOLENTINO

Milo was the more politically astute, I think, because she ran for Assembly from Redondo Beach. Unfortunately, she died of cancer probably about five years later. She was a dynamo who, I think, in lots of ways got the initiative out for the educators who organized.

TOLENTINO

What was your role during these conferences for the Filipino educators? You mentioned there were several conferences that occurred, so maybe just if you can recall some of the highlights of your own work for them.

SINGSON

It essentially was how I developed the Filipino American History course and talked about the course that I taught, and at that time

also the book Letters in Exile, an anthology, which came out of the Asian American Studies Center, and probably two-thirds of that were the readings from my class, another third were kind of the original essays written by members of my class. Actually, I taught the course probably a year and a half. It was supposed to be combinations of oral history also, which we quickly discovered was almost impossible to do. So I graduated from law school and entrusted Jessie Quinsaat to finish it, and he did, probably about a year later, so I was very happy with that. So at that point, to talk about developing publications, developing more curriculum, because even at the point which is about three or four years later, there still didn't have any kind of class—not just classes, but just any kind of curriculum on Filipino Americans.

SINGSON

Are you talking about college, high school level?

TOLENTINO

It was actually more, probably, K-12, because it was being sponsored by L.A. Unified [School District]. And then I remember the first-year focus was trying to get a curriculum together, and I think they were able to pull together a group to try and help Helen write one. The second one was focusing on Filipino American arts, and the first time I ran actually into Linda Mabalot, who probably three years later becomes our executive director for VC [Visual Communications]. She was coming down, and she was kind of a filmmaker. So it was kind of combinations of—we had actually performance later that evening by a cellist from New York, Michael Dadap, but anyway, world-famous, apparently. But he organized the Filipino American Philharmonic in New York, brought down here, and so—

SINGSON

For that conference?

TOLENTINO

Yes. So that was actually probably the beginning seeds of FPAC [Festival of Philippine Arts and Culture]. Jerome Academia, I remember him attending with his sister, who was Eleanor Academia. She was this world music kind of thing. So the other folks, I'm not in L.A.; I'm in either Sacramento or in Fresno. But those folks were the seeds of the beginnings of trying to organize the arts.

SINGSON

That's great. Why do you think at this point, I mean, it's been several years already that the history of Filipinos are being pushed, even as far back as 1971 and the Far West Convention. What is happening to this movement?

TOLENTINO

Part of it, I think, is that we were always reinventing the wheel. We really had no continuous—I mean, I was not a historian. I was a law student. I was going to go to law school and finish law school and be a lawyer. Jessie was the same way. Jessie was a year behind me in law school.

SINGSON

You mean Academia, Jessie Academia?

TOLENTINO

Jessie Quinsaat. And Henry [Empeno] eventually went to law school. We were not historians in that sense. So I think if we did have historians from that point on, it would have probably developed a little faster, but we were delving into that area and trying to get it started, and then we had our own careers to pursue. I'm probably the only one that kind of still kept in touch with those kinds of groups, at least through the years. Those are my contacts when I came back to L.A. and socially reconnected and evolved into different groups I help co-found in L.A.

SINGSON

I'm very curious about this traveling and networking, and this is not just in your interviews but as the other interviews in the series talk about Filipino networks all over the different cities. How are they done? For you as an example of someone who's lived—

TOLENTINO

It's because you get the names and addresses and phone numbers at the Far West Convention, and young folks who wanted to become attorneys, they'd come and talk to me. So I'd get their phone numbers. They knew what my interests were. Bill Tamayo, is how I kept in touch with him or even with everybody else. Bill was just a young undergraduate student who eventually went to law school. I knew him from the Far West [Convention], and when I'd run into Juanita [Tamayo], "Bill's my brother." "You're right. Tamayo, you're both Tamayos." So those contacts are made. The same with [Silme] Domingo and [Gene] Viernes, all over, it's like the same folks.

SINGSON

People are willing to travel, to drive and fly—

TOLENTINO

The travel was once a year for them. Every Labor Day, you knew there was a Far West Convention. Fortunately or unfortunately, it always came from the grassroots themselves, and so they would set up panels again to talk about Filipino American history. For those of us who had been to two or three of them before, it kind of became a rehash, but we slowly recognized that you have to keep doing it, because new generations were always coming in where that local community itself didn't really know. You were always astounded by the fact that they knew very little about their local community's history. Or they knew a lot, yet they hadn't imparted it to the community. I just remember both, "Oh, I didn't know you did that." "Yeah, I did that. I organized the strike over there at the Panda Farms." And go, "I was there." And it's like these exchanges with different folks. Unfortunately, there weren't historians out there trying to capture it. We tried to with minutes of the Far West

Convention, but then there are always these bits and pieces. It always stuck in my mind that those bits and pieces were always getting lost.

SINGSON

I'm also curious, because you seem to have this larger level of activist networking, I mean, larger as in geographically large level, but then in each of these local cities, so, for example, your own organizing of the Far West Convention, for example, in Sacramento, which you seemed to be involved with, there's a local community. I don't know what it is like in Sacramento. There's always an opposition, so either a pro-Marcos opposition or more conservative faction who are afraid of the radical youth or such movements. Was there any?

TOLENTINO

Yes, there was always that undercurrent. I mean, in almost every group meeting, there was undercurrent of whether to be pro- or anti-Marcos. Even in Sacramento you had people who had worked with people who were accused of being pro-Marcos or being paid. They'd show up at our meetings sometimes and they'd say, "I'm not being paid by Marcos. I'm my own man," kind of argument, and, you know, you just kind of shrug, and, "All right, we acknowledge that, but we need to organize and do something else about this."

SINGSON

You mean on a Sunday meeting?

TOLENTINO

On a Sunday meeting. It came down to very local levels, that this particular newspaper, I think—much more so I think I became more aware of it out the newspapers out of Sacramento and out of the Bay Area that there were lots of Filipino newspapers. It lended credibility because you never knew how they got funded, because it was always free. So they said, "Oh, no, Marcos just poured money into that paper. That's why they're surviving. It's just a Marcos rag," kind of talk. But some of them would show up because some of

them are community members in Sacramento, and many people knew who they were, because to them it was also kind of a provincial side. He was an Ilocano, Marcos was, so they always kind of adhere that he was trying to do the best. So there was a lot of pro-Marcos sentiment at the same time. They always saw the anti-Marcos as more the young people issues.

SINGSON

Going back to L.A., I guess the reason why I wanted to ask that is because while we are talking about the community of activists, there's always this sort of background of the Filipino organizations, community organizations that are sort of not in the activist network. In L.A., how is the interaction like with, for example, you're doing the Filipino Educator's [Group], involved with this. What is the response of the rest of the community?

TOLENTINO

It seemed to me that because it was always just kind of at the very low level of organizing, they were just trying to get together as teachers and trying to work on a curriculum, "When we get to that point of what happened during the Marcos era, then we'll get to that point, but we need to focus on at least trying to get our history out there."

SINGSON

For example, FACLA [Filipino American Community of Los Angeles]. FACLA, did they ever support the Filipino Educators?

TOLENTINO

Actually, the focus was more in the Bay Area, the Educators Group. It was more organized because that's the location of Mila Aquino and Helen Brown and Royal [Morales]. I would say the strongest of the folks organizing were folks coming out of the Carson, Wilmington, Banning area. That seemed to be where a lot of Filipino educators were. The few administrators that were being promoted and were Filipino were all pretty much down south.

SINGSON

There's also Filipino groups there, so the Wilmington—

TOLENTINO

Yes, there's a Filipino Community of Wilmington, which my family was more active with because it was more focused on Ilocanos, I suppose, veterans groups. The one up here in FACLA was already in the throes of conflict. We would attend events there. It was also the site of one of our teach-ins. It was also the site of many a conference on pro- and anti-Marcos. You would have the anti-martial-law folks having their own teach-ins. They were more of kind of the much older generation like Raul Daza, Jovita Salonga. They were all here, so they were trying to keep that network going.

SINGSON

So the anti-Marcos isn't necessarily seen as a radical group by FACLA. Is that what you're saying?

TOLENTINO

No, it wasn't, not really, though, I think, FACLA, or I guess they got money from the rent, so they were happy to host it, I suppose. But also the folks that were really the ones who were already anti-Marcos was a generation of really kind of much older folks here in L.A. It wasn't led by the anti-Marcos, wasn't really a youthful approach, though you did have ones like KDP [Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino]. The ones here in L.A., the ones who raised money for [Benigno] Aquino [Sr.], who organized things for him to travel around were kind of the more established. I mean, Raul [Daza] practiced. He passed the California bar. He was kind of the local person here in L.A. I had contact with him because he was also a lawyer. It was always kind of interesting, because all the way through, different situations like out of the blue we'd get the call that Dovie Beams is around and invited the group. Essentially I think it was Samahan [Samahang Pilipino] or a bunch of other folks to go, and she showed up. She kind of talked about her relationship with Marcos and Imelda [Marcos]. It's all true, she said, all the

stuff, that she fears for her life, that there could be agents all around. It was very funny, because it was like you were reliving through this weird tabloid history that you were dealing with.

SINGSON

How did you feel about this, seeing all this anti-Marcos movement coming from the Philippines? How did you relate it to your own work, doing all these advocacies for Filipino American issues?

TOLENTINO

Actually, it was always on the periphery of when I was organizing, and I always held to the point that there are certain issues that we don't need to divide ourselves on those points, even though everyone did, and just try to move on. I said, "That will always be with us until that's resolved." I would encourage people to work on pro- or anti-Marcos but not make that the central focus of anything that we're organizing or a central focus of anything we're doing. Because I remember we put together the Filipino American Political Association. I think it was Larry Itliong and Alex Esclamado, and I think we put together a teach-in in which Larry spoke and Alex Esclamado talked.

SINGSON

Here in L.A.?

TOLENTINO

Here in L.A. Alex Esclamado was anti-Marcos. The Filipino group itself didn't take a stance at that point, but it was always kind of in the background. The focus was we need to organize ourselves and to start people running for offices, and that was their focus.

SINGSON

Just to clarify, is your belief a common thing, or is there a clear division between—where did the divisions lie?

TOLENTINO

The division wasn't very clear at times, and there are other times that it's very clear, because when you're dealing with the Filipino Educators, it was kind of hazy. If you're dealing with a Filipino political action group, clearly Alex Esclamado was very anti-Marcos, eventually. He was pro, I think, for a short while. Then Larry Itliong tried not to make that a central focus, because he wasn't quite sure where any of this stuff was going. Philip [Vera Cruz], I think, was very anti-Marcos from the get-go. But it was always in the background, and it also drove, would create separate groups because of it many times.

SINGSON

Even if it's the same cause, is that what you're saying?

TOLENTINO

Yes. It just was a very tough issue to deal with, and it was always hazy. I think for all of us, we tried—even, I think, Royal [Morales] said he was anti-Marcos if you asked him personally, but he was trying to work with everybody. He said, "I can work with you even if you're anti-Marcos. We can work on this issue."

SINGSON

Is that sort of the same thing that you did because of the beliefs that you mentioned earlier?

TOLENTINO

Probably, because I think Royal was kind of a mentor for a lot of us, that you saw him as somebody who actually was working, trying to work with a community that was so difficult to organize.

SINGSON

So, besides this anti-Marcos versus pro-Marcos division, is there always a sense of if you're an activist, no matter if you're working for anti-Marcos or not, you're socialist or communist? Because that's certainly an issue that a lot of Filipinos were very much attuned to, especially coming from the fifties.

TOLENTINO

Well, I think if you were pro-Marcos, that was what informed you because he was trying to protect the Philippines from communists. So that was pretty much the underlying basis for it. But we also had the typical separation between provincial groups. One group would start something and one part of that group doesn't like it, so they'd start their own. It kind of happened many a times. It was always a tough haul to whatever you're trying to—see, the problem is we're not using the word "organize." We didn't think we were organizing. We were trying to bring Filipinos together for an issue. But it was tough.

SINGSON

Let me bring this back to particular organizations. During the 1980s, VC [Visual Communications] kind of had a turnaround.

TOLENTINO

What happened was that Bob Nakamura and friends realized that in order to get government grants, in order to get foundation grants, they needed to become a 501(c)(3), which is a nonprofit status under the IRS Code. Before that, they were getting funds from probably UCLA Asian American Studies Center. They were getting funds from different foundations, who kept asking them, I think, if they were 501(c)(3), and they said, "We're working on it." Then when I came back pretty much to L.A., because of my work with the Filipino American History Group, I actually had worked with them in terms of doing some of the background material on Filipino Americans, and so I had contact with Bob Nakamura. He always wanted to work on more of the Filipino American history. They did Manongs.

SINGSON

When you're talking about background, are they making films, or are there projects?

TOLENTINO

They were doing projects. They were working on trying to get Carlos Bulosan's America is in the Heart together.

SINGSON

You mean the book?

TOLENTINO

Yes, the book.

SINGSON

What do you mean "together"?

TOLENTINO

They wanted to do a screenplay for it. They had done Hito Hata, and that was done essentially by pulling together a production entity. But if they wanted to keep going, they needed to have a nonprofit status. So when I came back—just from contacts of Dick Osumi was there, who went to law school with me, Allan Nishio, Kenyon Chan shows up again, ECTP [Exceptional Children's Tutorial Program] and I was UCLA Tutorial Project. Kenyon actually was our first chair of the first Visual Communications Board of Directors. Asian American Educational Services, is that what it was called? I can't remember. But, anyway, so I wrote the bylaws and the constitution, and we constituted the first board for VC.

SINGSON

While you're on the board, do you remember any particular highlights while you were in the position?

TOLENTINO

The highlight was just trying to organize themselves so we could start writing proposals and grants and then also hiring. We had an interim executive director for a couple of years, and we eventually hired Linda Mabalot. Linda was pretty much the first executive director of VC.

SINGSON

During that time, what were the first few projects VC was working on?

TOLENTINO

Working on the Bulosan project.

SINGSON

Do you know what came out of it?

TOLENTINO

They came out of it a twenty-minute—well, they called it a trailer, but it was a means of trying to get better funding. Not much went through, because we couldn't get the funds for it.

SINGSON

What were the difficulties for creating—

TOLENTINO

I think it's the same in any kind of independent film project, just getting the funding for it. We got the funding to do just a short trailer to try and see if we could market it, get additional funding and production. We were trying to follow the Hito Hata pattern, but, see, that one, it was sheer skill of Bob Nakamura to get the production in place and stuff like that.

SINGSON

Were there a lot of artists, Filipino artists?

TOLENTINO

No, not at all. They weren't around.

SINGSON

Here in L.A.

TOLENTINO

They started showing up a little later in the nineties. But pretty much Linda was there and I was there. But keep in mind this was

also the time of organizing, developing an infrastructure for VC. We were trying to pull ourselves together. At the same time, the [Asian Pacific] Legal Center, mutual friends again, and we wanted to focus on being more advocates for our community, so we—

SINGSON

I'm sorry. Legal Center?

TOLENTINO

Asian Pacific American Legal Center. So I helped co-found that with another set of board of directors.

SINGSON

And the Asian American Drug Abuse Program during this time?

TOLENTINO

I was just a board member there. It was already established, but it helped me understand actually much more how boards run and function.

SINGSON

What is this project?

TOLENTINO

Asian American Drug Abuse Project?

SINGSON

Yes.

TOLENTINO

It came out of Yellow Brotherhood. It was work with at-risk youth pretty much who had drug or alcohol addiction. It set up transitional housing. It had projects to outreach to kids about the drugs.

SINGSON

How is it different from SIPA [Search to Involve Pilipino Americans]?

TOLENTINO

This was more APA, Asian Pacific Americans, where SIPA was kind of struggling and the focus was more on Filipino Americans and the local eventually called Historic Filipino Town. The other group was just professional groups who wanted to educate, focusing on the lack of promotions of APA folks, and that was LEAP, Leadership Education for Asian Pacific Americans, so I was on that board for probably about five or six years.

SINGSON

You mentioned that you learned a lot as the Asian American Drug Abuse Project.

TOLENTINO

Because the board itself worked very well at setting up policies and guidelines and how to deal as a board. Because I was working for the first time developing our own board at the Legal Center and then our own board at VC, and here was a terrific model. Mike Watanabe was a terrific model, a model as an executive director and a model for organizing a working board. All the boards I was on were working boards. I had no children. I'd just gotten newly married. So there was actually time to do all this.

SINGSON

I was just about to say there were all these different projects and—

TOLENTINO

Well, they all came into play because I came back to L.A., and there not only were just very few Filipino lawyers, but there were very few APA lawyers who were working with community issues. Because we all have the same kind of common interest, our approach in organizing an organization would address those.

SINGSON

What happened to these different organizations?

TOLENTINO

Visual Communications is still going strong, and it's doing its film festival of twenty years, and so it's doing fine. I did leave the board last year after twenty-five years. I thought that was enough time.

SINGSON

How is it different from the way that you started the bylaws and how they are today?

TOLENTINO

Well, it's a little bit more structured, I suppose, and the revenue stream is coming in better. We now have grants going through that we manage. We have a film festival we manage. We have an ongoing skills workshop we manage. So it's doing fine. I thought it was time for me to move on. I guess it's kind of a cliché, but it's like new blood, which means probably my mental state or my energy level probably twenty years ago, twenty-five years later, I was I think, a little more active, a little more angry, a little more concerned, where over time it's like—not that the issues aren't of interest to me, but it's like the drive or the motivation doesn't seem it's there. ADAP is doing great, built its new building. It's got different outreach all over the place. The Legal Center, which I'm very proud of, is doing very, very well. It's now a—I guess it's a public record. We do have almost $100 million budget and sixty employees. We organized different advocacy groups all over the United States, and it's very well respected. Essentially it's the voice of the Asian American community with respect to mostly legal issues dealing with the El Monte kind of slave trade with the [unclear] garment workers, to the organizing against Forever 21, against Abercrombie&Fitch, and trying to get the garment workers out of Reebok and Nike so that they're not sent over to under-age and under-paid folks and they're not exploiting those communities. But at the same time, when I was there, we worked on trying to bridge infrastructure between the Korean and the black community. That was the first—I think when the riots came out, we literally had no bridges to the black community, but now we do. We put together

a Dispute Resolution Center. We put together a leadership training program, including the black community within that setting.

SINGSON

So you stayed on the board through the nineties?

TOLENTINO

I'm still on the board. I never left. I was the chair the first eight years. I guess I set the cycle, because every eight years we get a new chair. Sandy Sakamoto is the new one, who just happens to be the mother-in-law of my neighbor across the street. She lasted eight, and she said, "Well, Cas lasted eight, and I'm tired," kind of talk. Then Martin took over, took another eight years and he said, "You know, Cas set the eight-year limit. That's my term, too. That's what we'll do." And we've been doing very well. It has a new building and is very well respected. LEAP is doing a lot of focus on actually more the APA employees within the aircraft and the engineering industries and trying to teach them about skill sets in terms of promotions and policies and stuff like that. What else am I a member of? But along the way you do get to be a member. I was actually the first chair of the Studies Center's Community Advisory Committee. There was an Advisory Committee for about five years, but it didn't go very far.

SINGSON

What do you mean, Community Center?

TOLENTINO

Well, I think they were trying to bring in more of a community focus at the Studies Center, and so they thought if they put a Community Center—

SINGSON

You mean at UCLA?

TOLENTINO

At UCLA. That was probably the mid eighties. I remember I was at the Guild. We had meetings at the Guild because it was much easier for me to do it. It wasn't that far away from UCLA.

SINGSON

This is based outside of the community?

TOLENTINO

No, it was actually part of the UCLA Studies Center program. We had kind of meetings every other month to talk about whether to see—one is we were community members, and to just update us on programs, and if there were issues within the community that the Studies Center could address, that was our opportunity to do it.

SINGSON

One thing that I miss, before we end this, is to track your personal history. We started this whole series with your family background, so I was hoping that maybe we can backtrack a little bit and talk about your marriage and your family formation and then heading out to the eighties.

TOLENTINO

Eventually, Jennifer [Masculino-Tolentino] and I kept in touch, despite all this travel, and eventually got married when I came back to L.A. I think she was looking forward to traveling again, but I stayed put in L.A.

SINGSON

She stayed in L.A. throughout the whole time?

TOLENTINO

Yes. She became a nurse, sociology, at UCLA, became a nurse, she got her BSN [Bachelor of Science in Nursing] and then eventually she got her certification to become a nurse midwife. We lived out in Culver City for a while. It was too crowded, so we moved out here to Silver Lake. We've been here now about twenty-nine years. Along the way we had CJ, he's my oldest son. He's also an old veteran of

all our meetings, because I dragged him around in a stroller. Same thing with Christina. Eventually, CJ went to UCLA, a history major, two years ago. Then my daughter went to UC Davis, anthropology, and she just graduated this year.

SINGSON

I think the best way to end this series is to sort of do a look back. We sort of ended it with your family life and you taking CJ around through all these meetings. How do you assess your activism? There was so much that you participated in the 1980s, having all these positions as board of directors.

TOLENTINO

I'm hoping, though, that along the way I developed leaders behind me. One of the first things I learned, I think, with Samhang Pilipino, because there was a huge gap right after kind of the organizing folks left in '76 or so, I left in '75, but between '75 to about 1980 it was floundering because we didn't create the leadership behind us. From the time I reconnected with them, I just kept reminding them this is the one failing we had, is that we didn't get the leadership. So in almost in every organization I've dealt with, I've said, "We need to make sure we have the leaders behind us to support us," and I think we've been somewhat successful.

SINGSON

You worked so hard to organize Filipinos. Do you think there was a lot of result to all these different organizing—

TOLENTINO

What I learned is that change and upward movement is so incremental and very slow. You learn to be very patient, because you always need to be bringing people along with you, because if you're not, you're not going to succeed. I like to think that along the way I would always encourage people to step up like maybe I did earlier, but now I'm kind of always stepping back. Where I would gladly lead the charge for the Legal Center and be the chair of VC and chair of this, now I'll be happy to be the secretary or member of

the board, actually, to help out, because I think there just needs to be leadership pushing it forward. The other that I—but this is much later into the nineties, is Fil-Am Arts. I helped co-found that and help put together as part of the initial board.

SINGSON

Fil-Am Arts is different from FPAC?

TOLENTINO

No, FPAC is one of our programs. Fil-Am Arts, it's got the Pan Asian Filipino Arts Network and for a short while we had Kultura Eskwela, which is a cultural school. FPAC overwhelms our programming. [laughs] We're trying to expand beyond just that, but it's tough. You start in January for an event in September.

SINGSON

The other question is, you mentioned that today you sort of allow other people to lead. What drove you before to do all these things? What motivated you? Especially during the seventies, there seems to be so much organizing.

TOLENTINO

I think I just slowly learned a little bit more about the history of the Filipinos, and I think just my own personal decision to move forward and make sure that it doesn't happen again. I think there probably was a combination of anger about why we were treated this way and why we're not progressing, and combinations of just my own consciousness as an APA individual, that I think if you were growing up in that era, I think if you didn't address those issues, you weren't contributing much to society. So that's why I became a lawyer, did the kinds of jobs I enjoyed, focused on that. At the same time, I knew that I have to be an example. That's why you see me showing up at kind of mainstream folks, mainstream organizations. In the mid eighties, I'm a member of the Civil Service Commission, a member of the United Way, their board of directors, which for the first time helped fund the Legal Center and also helped fund SIPA and different other programs that they had not known about before.

SINGSON

And you're becoming judge. How did this take place and what was the path towards it?

TOLENTINO

Well, I think it's along the way you just kind of develop contacts and networks, and that's pretty much how it happens. I'm currently, for example, with the Fire Commission, and it's just because it seems to me that the Fire Commission or the Fire Department is in terrible shape, because it had these charges of discrimination against women, against folks of color, we had this hazing incident which eventually cost millions of dollars to the department, and they eventually litigated it. I remember when I came onboard, the mayor's thoughts were, "I need your labor and employment skills to manage this commission and manage this department." It was [Antonio] Villaraigosa. Interestingly enough, his chief counsel, which I then learned was Tom Sines, who had clerked for me, I got somebody that I know, that I'm sure Stuart is an advisor to Villaraigosa. So those are the folks that along the way you've learned to deal with and know your skills. And though I'm not sure that was my interest, but it piqued my interest. In lots of ways you're always kind of pushing other people along the way. At the same time, you kind of have to take action according to what you're really, really preaching, even though it takes a lot more toll. I mean, I didn't need a Fire Commission. I was happy where I was, but I think we needed representation, not just Filipinos, but for APA on the Fire Commission. I'm probably the first one they ever had on that commission. It's a charter commission and it's a very powerful one. So I'll put in the time just to encourage other people to do it.

SINGSON

There was something that we were talking about while we were not recording, and I'd like to bring it up. Theo Gonzales, who was a Filipino American scholar, who was talking about Philippine American identity movement, mentioned the word "courage" to describe—

TOLENTINO

I was attending—I knew the conference of the UCI Cross Cultural Center, and I think on my way back I caught a session in the afternoon coming from San Diego. I think I was at a training conference in San Diego, we got out early, so I drove up. I said, "Oh, they're doing something at UCI. I'm passing through, so I'll go swing by." So I was there for lunch and chitchatting with all these folks, folks I'd never seen before or dealt with, I suppose, but they were all Filipinos and working on—at that point the interest was on the Filipino diaspora. So the panel that afternoon was on the development of the Filipino American students in the seventies, and every single one of them, they talked in terms that I don't think us as organizers of these groups, terms like translocalism and transnationalism, and they put into words what they thought we were thinking of. What's interesting is they didn't speak to me.

SINGSON

You don't think that you were a transnational organizer?

TOLENTINO

No. We were just trying to get together as Filipinos with our own interests in bringing the culture, the history to UCLA. That's Samahang Pilipino. Same way with the Studies Center or the Legal Center, we wanted an Asian American voice in issues. But, anyway, so Theo was one of them. First time I've ever met him, and he started out—and I told him later that's one part I appreciated—is he comes up—I don't know if you know Theo, but he had kind of this wild look. He goes, "One word for those organizers: courage. It took courage for them to put together a class, to put together organizations, and that's how I would describe them." Then he talked about transnationalism and translocalism. [laughs]

SINGSON

How do you feel about the word "courage"? Was this something that you think—

TOLENTINO

Well, you know, I don’t think we thought about it in those words, but I did tell Theo that I appreciated his sentiment. I didn’t think we were all that particularly courageous, but, in retrospect, we took that first step and we were able to lead other people to take that first step. But it did take a lot of courage to keep them going, because it wasn’t easy. It was also the first time for people to organize themselves as Filipinos, and some were not convinced that this ethnic-specific focus was of any value.

SINGSON

I think that’s a great way to end this. Thank you very much.

TOLENTINO

You’re welcome. [End of July 19, 2011 interview]

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