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Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario interviewed by Meleia Simon-Reynolds Part 1 of 2

Speakers: Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario and Meleia Simon-Reynolds

Date: June 5, 2021

Scope and Contents: In this interview conducted in person, Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario speaks with Meleia Simon-Reynolds, a member of the Watsonville is in the Heart project team. De los Reyes details her family history arriving in the United States from the Philippines. In particular, she discusses the relationship between the Ibao and de los Reyes family and the history that led up to her adoption. In addition, she discusses the way her parents petitioned their family to come to the United States and how they housed them on their property. She also discusses her mother's participation in various cultural and social clubs including the Filipino Visayans, Filipino Community, and Filipino Women's Club. De los Reyes also discusses her mother's collection of Maria Clara dresses.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 00:00

All right, so I'm just gonna read this script first:

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 00:09

So hello and thank you for taking the time to share your story with the Watsonville is in the Heart Oral History Project. Watsonville is in the Heart is a community initiated project seeking to uplift the stories of Filipino families that have lived and worked in the city of Watsonville and the greater Pajaro Valley. The project team is composed of faculty, grad students, and undergraduates affiliated with the University of California, Santa Cruz; Roy Recio of the Tobera project; and Amanda Gamban of the United Way. Our ultimate goal is to document your story to preserve it and to someday share it with others in order to learn about local Filipino history. We also hope that scholars may rely on your story to write richer histories of the Filipino experience in the Pajaro Valley. In the future, we also plan to have an art exhibit that will feature some of the oral history material that we're collecting.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 01:04

I've provided a consent form to you to sign that consents to participation in the project. This also acknowledges your oral history as a gift to the Regional History Project of the University Library at UC Santa Cruz. The interview should take no more than two hours—we're not going to go to two hours [laughs] definitely not. You should feel free to take breaks, stretch, and refresh yourself as you need. I'm going to record the interview on the phone, the computer, and on this camera here. Feel free to discuss concerns in detail so you can come to an informed decision about what you're comfortable with. You'll have the opportunity to review the

recording. I'll share a copy of it within a week through a Google Drive folder and you can take your time to review it. We want to make sure you feel comfortable with the content and you can request to delete or remove any portion of it. And you may also choose to withdraw from the project at any time, even after the material is made publicly available. You may also request confidentiality and we can ensure your anonymity before our recording is preserved in the library.

Joanne de los Reyes 02:18

Okay.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 02:20

All right, awesome. So I'm gonna ask you first to state your full name and the names of the family members that you're going to be talking about today.

Joanne de los Reyes 02:34

So it's Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario. And I'm going to be talking about my Dad and my Mom and how they met. Also another part of the family, which is my Mom's sister and her husband and their experience here as they came.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 02:57

And what is your mom and dad's name?

Joanne de los Reyes 03:01

So it's Luisa Irao de los Reyes and my Dad is Johnny Tabol de los Reyes. And the other couple are Bernabela Irao-Ibao and Serbolo Ibao.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 03:18

Thank you. So we were hoping that we could move through this a little bit chronologically at first. We were hoping that you could start telling us a little bit about the stories of Johnny and Serbolo; how they came to the U.S., how they met each other, any experiences that you have heard in the past about either of those?

Joanne de los Reyes 03:43

So Johnny came through Seattle and that was in the—he was born in 1910 in Navitas, Philippines—and then he landed in Seattle, I want to say, in the late 1920s. And so it was during a time where they were having a lot of the Philippine workers come and they were coming for the opportunity. And I don't know exactly when Serbolo came through or where he came through. And so Johnny kind of worked his way down and ended up here in Watsonville and Castroville, and there are pictures that I've seen of Fort Ord. And some of the manongs

have have said, "Oh, that's that Fort Ord" and have totally recognized that there was a Fort Ord building in the background.

Joanne de los Reyes 04:35

So they lived on a property in Riverside, Johnny did. There were a couple of men who worked on the farm and they lived on Riverside Road for a while until they were able to actually purchase this property. So, from what I know, they lived on Riverside and then they lived here. But there was a men's camp on—further down Riverside, like towards the beach. And that's where I know we would go visit the "uncles" that we called them. They lived on that farmhouse on Riverside. We would call it Riverside, "We're gonna go to Riverside and see them there." So I think Serbolo actually lived with the men that were living there. It was all men that lived there. They were all single men until they would meet a woman and then, you know, get married, move out, and buy their own houses.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 05:33

Oh. Could you talk a little bit about the significance of Fort Ord?

Joanne de los Reyes 05:39

I don't know anything about—

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 05:40

No, nothing about Fort Ord?

Joanne de los Reyes 05:41

That was the background on a picture. And I think my—Eva [Alminiana Monroe] was like, "That's Fort Ord!" I know the picture and there's several pictures of my Dad with that building behind him. And that was Fort Ord. So what I was familiar with when I got here was this house and Riverside. And then as we would drive down—so 152, 129—the freeway, they would point to this house on on the right side as you're coming into Watsonville and they said, "We lived in that house at one time before we lived in Elkhorn, there was four of us. And it was a one bedroom little house and we lived there." And so I have a lot of pictures of the nieces and nephews, who were older than I at the time, and just different family members. They weren't directly our blood relatives but we called them family. And they're kind of running around. The kids are running around. You could see that like they've got fried chicken and they're cooking stuff and parties that they had on that house. But that, yeah, I don't have any.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 06:45

Did your dad talk to you about Serbolo and the beginning of their relationship together?

Joanne de los Reyes 06:52

So there were several camps that they would work at. And I know that Serbolo worked at a camp that was a little bit more towards the beach. He only had, I believe, a fifth grade education. But he knew math. He knew numbers really well. And so they recognized the fact that he was really good with numbers and so they kind of elevated him to work numbers. Like, if there was a certain number that they needed tossed around in terms of bookkeeping and keeping the time cards for the other workers, they would give it to Serbolo. So he was not necessarily like a foreman, but he was the guy that they were responsible to give to to check their time cards and make sure that their hours were right because he was good with numbers. And they were saying he was a great volleyball player. And he was just an amazing person. Had a very little education, but being so good with numbers.

Joanne de los Reyes 07:48

So I know he worked at a different ranch and I don't know how they got to work together. [passing vehicle in background] But Johnny worked for the Willoughby family farm. And he worked for the Willoughby family farm from before I can remember. And I remember this because every Christmas we'd get a knock on the door—like Christmas Eve. And the Willoughby family, the owner of the farm or after he passed away his son, would bring us a giant ham and a box of See's chocolate. So every Christmas we just kind of waited like a day or two before Christmas where we'd get this knock on this door right here. And it was like, "Okay, we know who that is!" And he would come with this big ham and the five pound box of See's Candy. And that was something that we looked forward to every year. And I just remember it's the Willoughbys. The Willoughbys, that name was just a big deal. And it's the ranch that's out by the Chevron. If you're driving down Highway 1 now, it's on the left side like where the Chevron is.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 08:48

Oh, yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 08:49

And that's where the house where the men—the men camp. Basically, now you could call it kind of that. It was along that property as well. So when I would—we would go with my Mom down Riverside, we'd kind of look out and I'd see my Dad's car parked in the field. And it's like, "Okay, yeah, look there's Dad! He's wearing his green sweatshirt out in the field and his car is parked out there." So there's a lot of connection to that side of the street.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 09:17

So your dad, Johnny, worked in the fields there. Did he ever tell you about what it was like to work in the fields there?

Joanne de los Reyes 09:24

So he did irrigation. I know that he did a lot of moving on the pipes and things like that. He didn't—I mean, when I would get up in the morning, he would already be on his way out the door. And he would work, you know, as soon as the sun was starting to come up and then he would come home. I recall by maybe four or five in the afternoon he would come home. But it just seemed like it was really tiring work. He would be asleep right after dinner, probably around seven or eight. He never complained about work and his hands were like this nice dark brown color, but he had his arms were white. He had that definite farmer's tan from just being out in the sun. They didn't use SPF back in the day. I remember he had a hat that he would wear when he would work. But he never, he never complained about work.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 10:16

And when you say "they" are you talking about Serbolo and Johnny?

Joanne de los Reyes 10:16

And so when they lived here together, finally—that's a, the story of how that all came together is really interesting. But when they would be here together, they would actually work the fields in the back. And so after working in the fields, they would come home and they would work and plant stuff in the back. So we had all these different fruits and vegetables in the backyard. So, I guess you could say, if the work was really that tiring, and like super hard, they wouldn't have had the energy to put into what we had here. But they did.

Joanne de los Reyes 10:16

Yes.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 10:18

So they stayed here together?

Joanne de los Reyes 11:03

So what happened was, Johnny ended up meeting my Mom. The story is that Johnny had a niece who was dating someone in the Philippines, Francisco Irao, and the niece was Lou Irao. And so, Lou was talking to Francisco and she's like, "Hey, you know, I've got this uncle in the Philippines. Works really hard, he's a really nice guy. Why don't we set him up with one of your sisters?" Because Francisco had five sisters in the Philippines. They were mostly all teachers or already married. And so he said, "Hey, Luisa is my favorite sister, why don't we set up your uncle with my sister?" So they did this matchmaking thing. And so Johnny and Luisa started writing each other, and they wrote each other for a year. And then my Mom—I think Johnny

went back to the Philippines under the implication of like, "Okay, I'm going to meet her, we're going to see how things work out." And they ended up getting married.

Joanne de los Reyes 12:12

And my Mom said, "You know, I'm not really into this guy. I'm not, you know, he's 20 years older than I am." She was thirty, he was 50. And she's like, "He's got a bad habit, he smokes. There's just things about him I'm not totally sure about." And so her plan was, "I'll get to America." Because, at that time, you had to be like—you could get married and then you had to wait a year through the petitioning process before you could come here. And she's like, "Okay, we'll get married, we'll wait the year. We'll write and show the government everything that we need to show. And I'm going to drop him. As soon as I get there, we'll do what we need to do and then that's it."

Joanne de los Reyes 12:50

And then she said—when she got here after writing him, after they got married for a year and kind of getting to know him and getting here and being with him—she said, "I actually fell in love with him. He stopped smoking and he was just the sweetest man. And I could not have asked for anyone nicer. If he gave me any reason whatsoever to leave him, I would have. But he never did." And so they ended up—she ended up falling in love with him.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 13:15

That's so sweet.

Joanne de los Reyes 13:17

So she ended up married to Johnny and then being here and then in meeting all these different people here and making friends. My Mom was very outgoing. So she had really good social skills. She wasn't shy. And she had this laugh that would just take over the room. And so, she started meeting the wives of the other farmworkers who actually did get married and have kids, like the Alminianas, the Sulays. They—like I said, these men are twenty years older. They were in their fifties. So a lot of them already had children and married and had their own things not living on the farm. And then there was this group of the men that were single that were already in their fifties who weren't married and didn't have anything really going on, or had girlfriends or something in the Philippines that they were planning on going back home to.

Joanne de los Reyes 14:20

And so she met Serbolo and in the process of being married to my Dad, she started petitioning her siblings to come. So she had her sister Bella come—Bernabela. And I guess Serbolo saw her and was very interested in her. I just heard this story recently, was—there's usually someone, another male, kind of watching that they're comfortable. Like, "Okay, Bella can't be

home by herself. She's single. There should be someone kind of watching." And so, they were always around her to make sure she wasn't alone.

Joanne de los Reyes 14:59

Well, apparently there was one night that she wasn't—had no one taking care of her or no one kind of watching her—and Serbolo heard about that and he went to her. And he knocked on the door and she was kind of like, "What is he doing here?" She was familiar with him but didn't really know him. And he's like, "Look, I like you. You like me. I, you know, I think you like me. I'm not, I don't want to mess around with this, I'm being straight up and honest with you. I like you. If you're interested, let's get married." He was thirty years older than she was. He was like, almost sixty. And he's like, "I will give you whatever you want." And so she was kind of like, "Whoa, this is a lot coming from this guy." And he's like, "And if not I'll leave you alone. But I have the best intentions for you. I just want to make you happy." So, she had to sit on that for a while. She had a boyfriend in the Philippines [Meleia laughs] that they were trying to get her away from.

Joanne de los Reyes 16:03

Serbolo—heart of gold, this man. So his story was when he grew up in the Philippines, he was adopted and raised and he didn't really know who his family was. And so when he got here and working with the other manongs and everything, he was also well liked. And the fact that they trusted him and he knew numbers and all of this. So, he went to Reno and he won—I hear varying stories of this—but it was \$60,000.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 16:32

[laughs] Oh my god.

Joanne de los Reyes 16:35

I heard \$60,000. That number changes depending on who you talked to. But he won all of this money. And what he did was when he got back here to Watsonville, he started giving it away to his friends like the Sulays family. I know he gave them a couple thousand of dollars that they purchased property with. There were other families that he had helped. And so with this money he told Bella, "Hey, what do you want? I have this money. If you marry me, what do you want?" And she said, "I want some property in the Philippines. I know exactly where on the street. In the middle of town in Kalibo." He's like, "Okay, it's done. I will buy you that property. You have to marry me." And so with part of that money that they won as well, they put money down on this house.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 17:27

Ohh.

Joanne de los Reyes 17:28

And Johnny put money down. So, Serbolo and Johnny basically both invested in this property on Elkhorn and that's what moved them out of living on Riverside Road. In that little one bedroom house they were living together with—Luisa and Johnny were already married, Bella wasn't. And so that's what basically got them to buy this property: it was available. So they bought the house. They lived here. There was a little cottage in the back.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 17:59

Um-hm.

Joanne de los Reyes 18:00

Originally, this was just two bedrooms and a bathroom. There was a garage and a little bathroom here. But of course, I've made renovations since. But there was a cottage in back. So Serbolo and Bella lived in the cottage in the back and my Dad and my Mom lived here. Any other family members who included my Mom's other siblings—Francisco and Lou—came from the Philippines, countless other relatives all came through, they all ended up staying here at this house. And living here until they got on their feet. My Mom encouraged them to get their credit good and to, you know, save enough to buy houses and do all these really amazing things. So, this was like the hub. Like everyone ended up here before they got to go out and buy property themselves.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 18:52

Oh, wow.

Joanne de los Reyes 18:53

Yeah.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 18:54

This is such like [laughs] a historically important house! Does it feel really similar now living here? What does it feel like to live here still now with your family?

Joanne de los Reyes 19:05

[pauses; begins to get teary] I'd have to say that it's a great gift. It's very sentimental because so many of my cousins who have lived here have now like, oh my gosh, they have these huge houses in town. Their kids are like graduating college. They can all look back and say, "I lived [cries] in that little house." Back then it was like ten or twelve of us living there. There was like one bathroom until we expanded it. It's just, it's so humbling and I don't think I would be who I am today and that's—[trailing off away from mic; sniffing]. I had that experience to live. You

have to—you'd have to share and we really did not have a lot growing up. I mean my Mom, she was teaching in the Philippines, but when she got here the only job that was available to her was putting elastic into the pajama pants over at Coleshire—which was a company factory in town. And so that's what she did.

Joanne de los Reyes 20:15

And then she was able to become a teacher's aide. But it was not to the extent—she was never ever a teacher again. And so they didn't have a lot. We would really rely—I'd remember opening the refrigerator and finding the bricks of butter [laughs] the bricks of butter and something else that the federal government would give us that we would have bricks of. And we didn't, I was just telling you guys earlier, we didn't have a lot of bacon growing up. It was such a luxury thing. We had rice and we would have that one staple meal if it was we had a party or something bigger. Yeah, they would cook a little bit more. But like, having spaghetti or fried chicken was such a treat.

Joanne de los Reyes 20:53

And it wasn't like I could open the refrigerator and just guarantee that there was going to be some food in there. And I didn't realize later that we had money. But what my parents were doing was they were sending money to their nieces and nephews in the Philippines and supporting their education. Because, to my Mom, education was the main thing. It's like, no matter where you land on this earth, as long as what you have in your head [starts crying] you'll be fine. It's like, you know, you could just—as long as you have that education, you'll be fine. If you land on a rock on some Island, you'll be okay, you'll be able to survive, you'll be able to get through it. So that was always my Mom's push. For me, and then for my other family members.

Joanne de los Reyes 21:42

I found letters later on like—I had cousins telling me when I went back to the Philippines and they're like, "Oh, man, your Mom put me through school. Your Dad, they would send us money. So you know what I'm going to help you: here's your allowance for the week. I'm going to help you out with this if you need that." And so, there's a lot of people who owe my Mom and Dad because of what they did. And—not that I'm like looking for that payback—but it's amazing that this woman who sacrificed so much and married this man who was twenty years old, who really didn't like him, but for the sake of her family sacrificed that. Like, she could have stayed in the Philippines. She could have been a teacher and met and married a really nice guy there. But she put her family first. And then she was able to bring most of her siblings up here and now their kids and they're all successful people.

Joanne de los Reyes 22:40

Look at my first cousins. They're like—one's like one of the heads at Google. He's like Head of Marketing at Google. And I have countless nurses, doctors that are first cousins. And, you know, just in all facets of society. They're called where they help. And I'm like, that's my Mom. Like, if she hadn't done that one thing—I'm sure we would have, our family would have found a way to make it here—but she made the ultimate sacrifice. I mean there's no way. I think if you were to put that situation in front of most people nowadays, they'd say, "Oh, hell no! I'm not going to basically put my life aside for the better good of everyone." I think if more people thought that way, we would totally be a different society. But sadly, it's just—it's not who we are as a people, taking care of family first.

Joanne de los Reyes 23:41

So in just being here—and I don't think about it all the time, but every once in a while a niece or nephew will say something to me. And then it just checks me like, "Oh, yeah. Okay." I was making a joke, "Oh, we're going to sell Elkhorn," and my niece last week she's like, "No. I had a dream about your Mom. And we have to protect that house." And I was like, "Whoa." Like I didn't—[laughs] her feelings are so strong and she's like, "No. If it ever came to you guys talking about selling that house, you need to have a larger conversation with more people because there's so much investment that we have emotionally with that place that you can't just say 'we're gonna sell it.' No. There's, there's just so much history of all the families living here and where they've all spread and what they've done with the gift of being here."

Joanne de los Reyes 24:40

And it wasn't just that they had a place to stay, but again my Mom was like, "Okay, credit. Build your credit. Save money while you're here. Help with what you can. But really the most important thing in America is your credit in your name and do good things and have that." Because once your history—if your credit history is not good, it makes it harder. But she understood that right away. And having that was important. So yeah, it does. I'm just very blessed that I'm still here and [laughs]

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 24:41

I wonder if you could share a memory that stands out from when you were younger? Like a memory in the house, a party with your relatives, or something like that.

Joanne de los Reyes 25:32

So we would have a lot of parties here. It was—gosh, so many countless ones. Whenever anyone would visit from different places, be it Canada or just different parts of the United States where her other brothers and sisters kind of sprouted out. We would all—this would be the place where we would all have that party and meet. We the kids, we would play outside. I remember playing baseball out here with my cousins and trying to see who could hit the ball

over the fence into the neighbor's yard. And we'd do our Easter egg hunts here because there was just so much place. And then we would count the eggs to make sure we weren't leaving any hard boiled eggs outside and we would find them days later and they were all rotten. But this was the house at that time where—of course, until my Uncle Francisco, him and his wife, they invested—well, they actually bought more properties and then they were able to buy a really nice house up on the hill. It's called Rebecca Circle. Like if you're leaving out of town, it's on the left side there. And so they bought a bigger house and so we would have a lot of parties there. They had a garage that we could put up the little disco ball—

Joanne de los Reyes 26:53

—and have those fun parties at. But it would just depend on who had something going on. Then we had that extended family of Visayans like the Tejadas and the Cawalings and the Tabios family. And so we would also go to their houses when they had different events and we would spend time with them. We also had like a family, the Reyes', that lived in Castroville that we spent a lot of time when on the weekends or if they had parties. So we were pretty spread in a big, you know, the different people that we would spend time with. Not direct blood family, but also this family that my parents took on being here.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 26:53

[laughs]

Joanne de los Reyes 27:43

And then you have the different organizations. You have the Filipino community. You have the Filipino Catholic Association, the Filipino Visayans—which was pretty centered out of Salinas, the Filipino Visayans. So during the holidays, they would have a Christmas party. We would all get gifts from that. We would put up a tree and have that celebration down at the Pajaro School gym. And then the bigger events they would have it at the Vet's Hall in downtown Watsonville. That's when they would wear their Maria Clara's and I remember my Mom and Dad dancing and me kind of cutting in.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 28:20

[laughs]

Joanne de los Reyes 28:21

You know, putting my feet on my Dad's feet and I would kind of cut in and dance in between them with my feet on his and kind of take over their dance. But the big parties that were like that happened in those venues for years at the Veterans Hall in downtown Watsonville.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 28:45

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your mom, Luisa's, involvement in those organizations?

Joanne de los Reyes 28:51

So there was also a Women's Club. And so I know she was part of the Women's Club. She was president of the Filipino Catholic Association for several years off and on. And I don't know what positions she had at the—for the Visayans. But so when they would have meetings she would go. And the Filipino Community, she was never a president. But she was active. Like if they needed someone to do things. I don't know if she ever took post, if she was ever a secretary or vice president. I don't think she was because there were a lot of strong members in that group already. But she was an active member. Like if there was something going on, she would go and she'd be there helping.

Joanne de los Reyes 29:37

They ran bingo, and I remember this because I was already elementary—middle school. The current place where the Filipino Hall is, on Freedom Boulevard, that used to be a continuation school. And so, the Filipino community we use that Hall on the weekends and have bingo games. And they would start, I think, around twelve and we'd end around four or five every Saturday. So my chore was, after I had my First Communion done and my Mom taught Saturday School here at the Assumption Church, I would stay home and I would do all the chores. Then my Mom would come home at twelve, pick me up, and we would spend like four or five hours at the Filipino—at that continuation school—which now is the Filipino Hall. Just sitting in the room in the back waiting because it was gambling. You know, you couldn't be running around while they were playing bingo. And that's how I think they raised a lot of money that went towards actually purchasing the building and it being the Filipino Community Building that it is today.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 30:44

Wow. [pause] I would want to ask a little more about the Maria Clara dresses. Uhm, can you describe a little bit about how they were made?

Joanne de los Reyes 30:59

I actually don't know a lot about how they were made. For example [showing Meleia one of Luisa's dresses], like this one, I know this was one of my Mom's favorites and they would—I know that there wasn't anyone here in town that could do this and so they would get them in the Philippines and have them special ordered for all the beading that had to happen on it. And then they would pay a lot of money [laughs] and bring them back or have someone else bring them back for them. But because my Mom was so active in all those different groups and they would have those different dances, she would like to of course be dressed in her best. And so

that's how I ended up with—these are the more fancier ones, these two. And then, more recently, that black one over there is the one that she had made for something and then Black was just more culturally appropriate. Back then they really wanted bright colors and then when the black kind of came into fashion she had that one made. But I know she had that one made in the Philippines as well. But, yeah. It was what they wore when they would go do their fancy things.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 32:19

The dresses that you have still here, did only your mom wear these dresses or do you ever remember her loaning them or if she helped other ladies get dresses?

Joanne de los Reyes 32:30

They all had their own. They all had their own style and . . . these I know were hers. The only time she ever lent one out was through me because one of my co-workers had wanted to borrow one of them and that was the only time. My sister had worn one of them for something, but that was pretty much it she kept. I think it was kind of—they didn't like borrowing each other's things back then. They weren't as—like, how I wouldn't think twice about asking from a friend like, "Hey! I don't have a disk"—I just did this a couple weeks ago. We had a Disney day at work and I didn't have anything Disney but my friend is all Disney and she's got this beautiful [laughs] Disney apron that she had ordered and I didn't think twice, I'm confident. I'm like, "Hey, Nancy. Can I borrow your apron?" And she was like, "Yeah, no problem." But back then my—even borrowing clothes from my friends when I was growing up, my Mom's like, "You don't do that."

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 33:32

Um-hm.

Joanne de los Reyes 33:33

No, like, "How embarrassing, you have your own stuff. You don't want to do that." So I really don't think [laughs] that that was kind of cool for them to do.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 33:44

Did they ever have to coordinate with getting the materials from the Philippines or do you remember if it was just your mom had to do that?

Joanne de los Reyes 33:55

Yeah, I mean that was just her thing: having them. I'm sure when she came over she probably at least had one or two because it's considered the traditional dress. But I know as time went on whenever she went home to the Philippines, she would pick up another one or get fitted or

she would write them. Because back then, you could call but it was so expensive or she would just write and say, "Look, I'm going to be home in two or three months. Can you start this for me?" And they could at least start the beading or any of that first.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 34:31

Um-hm.

Joanne de los Reyes 34:31

Then their people can kind of put it together for her. But she had two—two sisters in the Philippines still. One had a shop and so the textiles were easy, easier for them to access them to get what she needed to get them to make.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 34:51

Can you describe a little bit about the events—a little bit more—about the events where the ladies would be wearing these dresses?

Joanne de los Reyes 34:59

So I remember going to them younger, when I was a lot younger. And they always had a formal program that they had set out. And they uhm—I think it was one of those things, like you didn't have to write that you wore your Maria Clara it—you know how now you're like formal. It was just what they did. Like, okay, we're going to the Filipino community thing or if there is going to be this. It was either the Filipino Community—the big community thing was the Filipino Community thing—or the Women's Club if there was an inauguration of officers. That was another thing where they would totally get dressed up and wear one of these dresses. If they were going to be in front of, you know, presented to people. They always have politicians. Like I remember Mayor Ann Soldo, who's mayor of Watsonville, going to one of these events. And they were all standing there with her with their Maria Claras on and it just the representation of them. As Filipinas, this is what we are, you know, this is who we are. And the puffy sleeve, you just had to do that. [both laugh]

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 36:17

Eva [Alminiana Monroe] showed us some little pins from the Philippine Women's Club that was for the lapels. I would imagine like, they had so much formality with the clubs it's so beautiful.

Joanne de los Reyes 36:31

Yeah.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 36:31

And so, so much pride. Okay. [unintelligible] I think we should take a little break, and then maybe we can talk a little bit more about your story coming to the U.S.?

Joanne de los Reyes 36:47

Okay.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 36:47

Yeah, let's take a break.

Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario interviewed by Meleia Simon-Reynolds Part 2 of 2

Speakers: Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario, Meleia Simon-Reynolds, Christina Ayson Plank

Date: July 23, 2021

Scope and Contents: In this interview, Joanne de los Reyes-Hilario speaks with Meleia Simon-Reynolds and Christina Ayson Plank, two members of the Watsonville is in the Heart project team. De los Reyes discusses her memories of her family home on Elkhorn Road in Royal Oaks and visiting the labor camp on Riverside Drive in Watsonville. She also discusses cultural differences between the United States and Philippines. De los Reyes also talks in more detail about her adoption and growing up with her cousins. Lastly, she discusses the importance of fishing to her and her father, Johnny de los Reyes.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 00:00

And, yeah—so I'll have you share the story about that photograph.

Joanne de los Reyes 00:05

Okay, so this picture was taken on Riverside Drive. This is the house of Auntie Cleofe and Uncle Danny. And I remember going to this house as a young child. I believe that they owned the house and land around it. And they would have a lot of parties there because it was a big plot of land. And we always knew we were close to it, because there was this house before that had a windmill. So it always stood out, we knew that we were going to be going over there. So as soon as you would walk up the steps and through this front door, there was a bathroom to the right. And I remember using the bathroom because there was a bathroom like inside-inside their house. But there was a stack of Playboy magazines.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 00:54

[laughs]

Joanne de los Reyes 00:55

Probably not Playboy, some other like off—so, you know, you're a kid, you're curious. So you're like flipping through them. But whenever I was in there, I was always like, "Oh, gosh. I'm going to get caught." So I would, I think, just even hurry up but then try to peek at pictures. So I shared that story about the Playboy magazines that were in the bathroom and so many other people were like, "Hey, I remember those!" [laughs]

Joanne de los Reyes 01:25

One of the cousins who is gay said—even as a gay youth—"I was even like, oh, curious." Like, "What is this?" and kind of flipping through the pages. So we were always trying not to use the bathroom, but trying to use it because the other bathroom was open. So you would go in and then to the left was like a big living room. And I just remember going in there and we would kind of sit around and that's where we would eat and they would be talking all the time. And then that's where the other restroom was that we tried to avoid.

Joanne de los Reyes 02:02

But there were so many parties and Roy's got a great story about them slaughtering pigs and other things there at that little ranch that they had. They've since torn this down. There's nothing that has taken its place. But this [picture] was taken again in 1968, so I wasn't born yet. But I remember still going to this house into my teen years. And then Aunty Cleofe's husband—and her husband—they ended up going back to the Philippines. And they both ended up passing away there. But my Mom and Aunty Cleofe were very close friends. Aunty Cleofe had a lot of little businesses and family in the Philippines. So she would call my Mom and I would have to go with her course. And my Mom would write letters for her; because she appreciated my Mom's proper English. So my Mom would do a lot of letter writing for her and her letter writing sessions would turn into gossip. And you know, two, three hours later, I'm like, "I want to go home." But whenever they would do the letter writing at this house, I'd always try to sneak in and look at those magazines. [laughs]

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 03:19

[laughs]

Joanne de los Reyes 03:19

Kind of a funny thing with this house.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 03:22

Very.

Joanne de los Reyes 03:23

Yeah and I just ran across this and there's so many families that are in here and I could only guess someone was visiting. And that's what brought them all together to be here.

[unintelligible] Yeah, do you want to close? [window shutting]

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 03:41

So I guess I'll ask a little bit about this photo and where it's located in your memories of the Riverside house first?

Joanne de los Reyes 03:50

Yes. So the Riverside house, I never lived there. But we'd always go by there and my Mom would say, "We lived there in that little house. Can you imagine all of us living there?" So they would go back and visit—I think just for sentimental reasons—and they knew who lived there after. So we would just go there. And—this is Connie Tejada and Alvin Tabios. And so, as you can see in the picture, they're like playing in the tanbark. They could have been going just to collect tanbark too. I'm not quite sure. But we would just on occasion go out there and the fact that Connie and Alvin were with us. Oh, my Mom could have been watching them. I know that she was Connie's godmother. So her mom and my Mom are very close. So that's the Riverside shot.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 04:52

And then for this one [new photo], maybe say a little bit about where it is and early memories of—

Joanne de los Reyes 05:00

Yes.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 05:01

—being here?

Joanne de los Reyes 05:02

So this was taken in front right by the water meter where there's a jasmine tree in front of the house. And the fence—look, [scoffs] totally needs painting. But I remember my little sandals—these little white sandals that my Mom would put me in and this blouse—because I remember looking down and it was this big kind of clown blouse now that I would describe it. With a big, long, you know, big collar. And we—she had me out there. I think we were on our way somewhere and she thought "oh, this would be a good time to take a picture."

Joanne de los Reyes 05:38

There was a tree in that corner. Which you can see in the picture like they tried to—they started to cut it down because they were really high trees. And that's there, right in the front corner of the house. We had several trees. Probably three trees that were here along the left side of the property. And so this one went down as I was growing up. And then there was a second tree that would be like on the other side of the walkway. And we would climb that tree to hide when we didn't want to nap. So we would hide up there and we could hear and see them looking for us and they would never think to look up the tree. And that tree recent—well, when my Mom was still here—the wind got ahold of it and knocked it down and it completely blocked the driveway. So we had to call a tree company to come and take it down. But those

trees, yeah, we have a lot of memories with the trees that were there. We tried to keep the stump but it deteriorated. So that's the memory with this.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 06:45

Are your first—very first memories as a child—in this house? Or do you have any memories like from before?

Joanne de los Reyes 06:52

No, I don't remember the Philippines even though they told me stories. When they got me on the plane, I was calling for "[unknown]" which was my nanny. "Ibaba, ibaba"—I mean she's like, "Take me down, take me down." So I was calling for my nanny to take me down because I didn't like the feeling of being on the plane. But I don't recall any of that. But it was always running around here either playing in the backyard or having the cousins come and playing in the front yard. Like we would play kickball and have games like that. But everything was pretty much out of here in the way that the house was set up with the front door being where it was. I mean it was a totally different house than what it is now. But the memories were definitely here. And then we then moved to a condo on the other side of town. And I was like seven when that happened. And that's because we just had so many family members coming from the Philippines that it just made sense that we would move out and kind of have our own thing and then have them live here.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 07:58

Right. And then did you move back here at what point?

Joanne de los Reyes 08:02

So, my Dad suffered a stroke in 1985—1986. And then the government said "You can't have two homes. You need to have—you need to sell one of your homes." So we sold the condo and then moved back here. And that was my freshman year of high school. And then halfway through, my Mom and I—it was just a really hard transition for me. And she had a lot going on with my Dad being in the convalescent. Because, by then, his stroke had just gotten worse and there was no way that she could take care of him and still work. So we had a talk and she said "I think the best thing would be for you to go back to the Philippines. Your Nanay is there.¹ Your Janice and Edward, your two siblings are there. I think it'll just be a good opportunity for you to go back." And so I thought, "you know what, I think this would be good." I can go, I could be with them. I'd have someone actually give me the attention that I need because she was so

¹ Nanay means mother in Tagalog. When Joanne uses "Nanay" she is generally referring to her biological mother, Bernabella Irao Ibao. When she says " Mom," she is generally referring to her adoptive mother, Luisa Irao de los Reyes. Similarly, Joanne uses the Tagalog word for father, "taytay," to refer to her biological father, Serbolo Ibao while she calls her adoptive father, Johnny de los Reyes, "Dad."

stressed from, you know, going in seeing my Dad every day. So I said, "Okay, let's go back." And I think that was the best decision at that time for all of us.

Joanne de los Reyes 09:21

I actually had a really good experience in the Philippines. Just learning my culture and then being with a group that kind of drove you. Like coming from here and going there it was like, "What?! There's no age limit, I could drink! I could do whatever I want!" And then the crowd I was with were so driven. They're like, "Yeah, we can drink, but let's study first. Like we want to go where you came from."

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 09:45

Yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 09:45

So they had goals and they knew what they wanted to do. And so, you're only as good as the boat you're on and their boat was really, very directed towards just getting school done, finishing college, and then coming to America. So it was really good that I had them to kind of push me to be a better person. [laughs] Versus if I was here, I probably would have gotten so much more trouble and—

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 10:12

And then you came back?

Joanne de los Reyes 10:13

And then I came back. So in the Philippines, you don't have Middle School. So from sixth grade on, you go into high school. You graduate high school when you're sixteen. Basically college when you're 20. So since their class starts at eight and ends at three— or five sometimes—they basically compact your middle school and your high school into four years. So it's a lot harder. But you get out two years sooner. So I was able in that time, in the two years that I was in school, to get everything I needed to get my high school diploma. So when I graduated I was seventeen because I did start a little bit late there. So I came back in 1990 from the Philippines. So I was there for two years.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 11:05

What do you think this house meant to your parents?

Joanne de los Reyes 11:12

I believe it's the "American dream" to own a house. There was a lot of talk, my Mom said. They just—they just don't know in the Philippines. They think when you get here, you know, the

streets are paved in gold and you just pick up whatever you need and everything's there. Not, not really knowing how hard it is to work. And I see this with family there. And it's not just me, like my husband sees it as well. A lot of the family that ended up staying in the Philippines, really think that once you get here, it's pretty easy. Things are not as hard. But I think now in the last few years, as people get more information and as the people who are here go back and say, "Look, we work. We work hard to send you these things. It's not—we're not just sitting there and things—you know, money is—the streets aren't paved in gold. You actually have the work."

Joanne de los Reyes 12:11

So when they had the opportunity to buy this property, it was because Dad had won all that money in Reno. And he was already helping his fellow manongs out with investments and buying property. And the house, he did buy that house in the Philippines for Nanay which she wanted. Which was like a huge apartment building. I don't know what the value of it was at the time, but I know it was quite a big chunk of what he had won. There was just enough for them—both families—to invest in this property at that time. Which, I think through the pictures, we're looking at maybe 1968. So they bought the property together. The four of them lived here. There was two bedrooms.

Joanne de los Reyes 12:56

And then as Nanay, who came from the Philippines a little bit later, that my Mom realized how hard it is to be here. And for her, I think the awakening moment for her was when she had my brother. So when she got pregnant with my sister, she was in the Philippines. And she rang a bell, she had my sister at home. The maids would come and clean her up and help with the baby and take the baby and do everything for her. And so when she got pregnant with my brother, she had him at Watsonville Hospital. And she said, "The next day after having him they were like, 'you need to take a shower, you're leaving today. You need to get ready to go' and she was so shocked. Like, what? I can't just relax a minute? And culturally, in the Philippines, after you have a baby you relax. Really you don't shower. You do a lot of things that are kind of against their beliefs in terms of cleansing yourself. Like your body just needs to kind of recuperate. And here they were like you need to get [laughs] shower, you know, and she said the nurses were pushing her to get out. So she did go into the shower and just kind of wet her hair a little bit and she just remembers it was so traumatic to get pushed out of the hospital with this baby and having to go to the grocery store like the day after you had this child and have to pick some things out that you needed. Because of course, back then the hospitals just didn't give you all the stuff you needed.

Joanne de los Reyes 14:34

So it was just—I think that was kind of the kicker for her. Like "Okay, I think long term this is not what I want compared to how it was in the Philippines." So when she got pregnant with me that's—she went back to the Philippines right away and had me there and had my sister there as well. But I think in the long term she was really preparing like, "I'm not gonna stay there." And even now, I mean, she's eighty-six. And I say to her, "The healthcare here is great. You need to come, we'll get you checked out." And she's like, "I'm not going back there. I'm gonna end up in a convalescent home and no one's gonna take care of me. And I see so many bad things that happen there so I'm definitely not going to go back." But they made the decision early on just to sell their share over to my Mom and Dad so that they could plan for their basic retirement in the Philippines.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 15:35

Right. And did they—how did they discuss the adoption of you to Luisa and Johnny? Was that decided while she was pregnant before she went back to Philippines?

Joanne de los Reyes 15:49

So there's so many different versions of that. The two that I like to stick to is that: Nanay says "I loved my sister so much and she couldn't have kids—"because my Mom had developed spores from her uterus. So she needed to have a hysterectomy early on, so that's why she couldn't have kids. So she says, "I love my sister so much and they sacrificed so much and petitioned for all of us to come here I thought, 'I'm going to give her the best gift. I'm going to give her one of my children if it's a girl.' But if it's a boy—"because the Ibao last name. Basically my Tatay was the last Ibao and he was adopted. He didn't really know his family. So she said, "If it's a boy, we're gonna keep another boy. But if it's a girl, we'll give her to you.

Joanne de los Reyes 16:39

Whereas my Mom, and some of my uncles, their version was: "Well your Mom had already Elkhorn. They basically took over the property already and they were already accumulating some wealth here." That she didn't want any of our other siblings' kids to have that. So she wanted to be sure that one of her kids were able to have that: the wealth that went with that family, for lack of a better word, person-wise. It's that time of the day. So there's two different stories. But I think the bottom line is, you know, she did love her sister. You wouldn't just give a child to your sister without really thinking about it.

Joanne de los Reyes 17:24

The thing is that she didn't tell her husband. She didn't tell Tatay that she had promised me. So right after I was born it was, "she's a girl." My Mom went to the Philippines and Nanay then had to tell Tatay: "By the way, I didn't want to tell you this because we weren't sure if it was a boy or girl. I promised her to Luisa." And Tatay was devastated.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 17:54

Oh.

Joanne de los Reyes 17:54

Yeah, he's, he—she told me he didn't talk to her for weeks. And so when he finally kind of forgave her, he's like, "Okay, well, we're gonna have another one." And so that's why the age gap between my sister Janice and I is like 18 months. Like as soon as she basically was physically able and up to it again, they had another child lined up. So, when my Mom went back to finally get me after all the adoption paperwork kind of been filed and ready for her to get me, Janice was already born. But Nanay had already started started the process. Like within a few weeks of me being born, she already gave me over to one of the nannies and the nanny basically raised me because she's like, "I didn't want to get too attached to you because I knew I was going to give you away already."

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 18:47

Right.

Joanne de los Reyes 18:47

Yeah.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 18:48

And when Luisa came to get you then, you just went back with her? Or did Bella and Serbolo come back also?

Joanne de los Reyes 18:56

So they had Edward and Edward was born here. So Edward stayed with Mom and Dad here until I was born. And so when they went back to the Philippines, they took Edward and left Edward there, and then brought me back. In the process of bringing me back Nanay said, "You know what, why don't you take Jessebel? Why don't you take, you know"—my sister's name is formerly Maria Jessebel, so sometimes they call her Marybelle. Sometimes they call her—Jessebel—Jes. So she said, "Why don't you take Jessebel? Have Jessebel go with you so she can help with Joanne." Because I think, by then, my sister was about seven years old. She's like, "Just have her go back." So she sent my sister, Jes, back with me. So Edward stayed in the Philippines.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 18:57

Oh okay, wow.

Joanne de los Reyes 18:57

And then Edward and Janice, they did come back. And they came back—I was probably like, four. So three to four years later, Janice was about three. And I was four when they came back. And then they lived in the cottage in the back,

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 20:13

Serbolo and—?

Joanne de los Reyes 20:15

Serbolo and Nanay and them. Because Serbolo was still working in the field and Nanay then got a job at Dominican Hospital in their housekeeping department, so she did that. My Mom had worked with Cole Shire, doing the elastics inside the waistbands. And then she then did what she really wanted to do, which was become an aide for the school district. So things were kind of looking up for them all. They all had employment, which was good, you know?

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 20:45

How would you describe, when everyone was here and Bella and Serbolo were living in the back, the parenting dynamic between the four of them? Was it like co-parenting of all of the siblings?

Joanne de los Reyes 20:57

Yes. So Nanay worked a night schedule because I remember we would come home and she wouldn't be here. And my Mom, she did not. She had more of a heavier hand. She had these Hot Wheel tracks. They're probably looked so much bigger when I was small, but they're probably about this big [showing Meleia], and it's the tracks that they use and they would flip them over, so the cars would do that. She had one of those that she would hide and that's what she would wack us with So we would have these parallel—

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 21:33

Oh.

Joanne de los Reyes 21:33

Yeah, child abuse, CPS now. But we would have these parallel welts on our butts and on our backs that she would whack us with. I know sometimes it was whatever she could find. It would be a slipper sometimes. But when she went for that Hot Wheels—oh, man. We would like hide underneath the beds and she would like pull us out and—but she never hit us for no reason. Like we were just kids. We—there was so much stuff in the back that we could get into to do things that we shouldn't have been doing. I don't—I can't really remember some of the more—I blocked them out of my mind. [laughs] Like why? But that, we talked about that a lot.

Like the Hot Wheels, that orange Hot Wheel track that she would use. And she used it on some of my cousins who they remember like, "Oh yeah, I remember Aunt Luisa had that track" that they would get spanked with too.

Joanne de los Reyes 22:38

So when Nanay wasn't here, there was a time that Grandmother was here, Lola, that she lived with us too. And she was pretty strict. Like we had to take naps in the afternoon. That's when we would go hide up the tree and just kind of avoid her because they really wanted us to nap. It was like their thing to open all the windows and just have the whole family lay down and try to nap. So Grandma was a little bit strict. Nanay and Tatay they were so mellow. My Dad was so mellow. If they ever raised their voices or anything—and then as time grew on, Nanay then kind of stepped up and got a little bit more stricter. But I recall one time Janice, who was such a little shit back then—and she still is kind of—she was calling 911. She'd pick up the phone call 911. The phone was here in the corner. And then she would hang up. Or then they would—or she would start talking to the operators. So, the phone rang and I think it was my sister, Jes, answered it and it was the operator and she's like, "You need to tell that little girl to stop calling us because this is an emergency number." And so my Mom got home and they told my Mom—you know, what happened—and Janice got whooped with with the Hot Wheels track.

Joanne de los Reyes 24:10

I remember Nanay getting home and them explaining, telling her Janice being upset what happened and Nanay was really upset with my Mom. Like, "That was no reason for you to do that." It's not like it was something really dangerous. It was kind of like too much. It was really excessive what they did. And I think after that, my Mom just kind of laid off like the corporal punishment. Especially for them, Edward and Janice, after Nanay and her had that disagreement. But now thinking back, "Yeah, it was kind of excessive." But we were just kids running around here.

Joanne de los Reyes 24:55

But there was one time that my brother got Nanay—just I think they put a belt to him because we had a neighbor who had a BB gun. And we were all playing outside and I was probably five or six at the time, my brother was seven. And my brother had the BB gun and he looked at Janice and he said, "Run." And Janice started running, you know, towards the back of the house, and he hit her with the BB gun right on the butt. Like right under the butt cheek. And you just saw Janice running and—I totally remember this—she kind of jumped a little bit from getting hit with a BB gun and she ran to the back of the house and I went looking for her. And she was crying and she was rubbing her butt and it was like this little welt. And when Nanay got home and Janice told her what happened, I—yeah, my brother. I don't think I ever touched

a BB gun again after that. But that was so traumatizing. And just, I totally remember that vividly. Like "Janice, run."

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 26:03

[laughs]

Joanne de los Reyes 26:04

Her little face like, "Oh, just the terror of it all."

Joanne de los Reyes 26:08

But we have a lot of memories of just playing here. And then what happened was, we ended up moving up to the condo when I was in second grade. And then not far after—probably less than a year after—Nanay and Tatay had a talk because Tatay had really bad eczema. Like his skin, his arms, and his legs would just get really crusty and flaky. And they went to so many dermatologists and they said "It's just a weather thing was probably a diet thing." But back then they weren't really assessing diet so much like they do now. I'm sure that there would have been so many other things that they could have done for him. But they decided that it was time for him to retire and go back to the Philippines and just get his skin under control. So then Edward and Janice and Tatay went back to the Philippines. So, they left and I remember being in probably—my brother was in third grade or fourth grade. And I just remember crying. We'd dropped them off at the airport and I was so inconsolable like, "Oh, they're leaving and I'm going to be my myself." I have my cousin's but it was so different because we had lived together and I just knew I was gonna miss them. And I didn't know that we were siblings.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 27:35

Oh.

Joanne de los Reyes 27:35

I had no idea we were siblings until I was about five. My brother Edward and I got into a fight. And I remember standing at the back door, facing the cottage and him yelling at me from the cottage going something like "You don't know who you are. You think you know you're this or you're that. You're really my sister. Basically you live in that house and we live in this house, but you're my sister" kind of putting me in check. And it was like "What?" And he's like, "Yeah, you're my sister." So then my Mom got home and I go "Oh, you know what, manong Edward said something to me about this" and my Mom was like, "Oh God." So I remember her taking me to a doctor and the doctor just giving me a full physical. Then later on, as I was older, my Mom said "I was so worried that that was gonna affect you, that I actually took you to the doctor for a physical and asked him like psychologically 'What is this gonna do to her' and he was like 'she's fine. She's totally okay.'" So.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 28:41

Oh, wow. When they all moved back to the Philippines—was your family able to maintain contact still? Like during as you were growing up, did you write letters—

Joanne de los Reyes 28:53

Yeah

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 28:54

—or visit?

Joanne de los Reyes 28:55

We wrote letters. We would visit every couple years. But then as I started to get older, my other cousins filled in. Like I had my Uncle Ramon and his family had moved in and he had three sons and a daughter. And then I got closer, a lot close—I was really close with them—with my cousin Dinah and Francisco and Jean. And then they had a son, Philip, who was like a day older than me. So we grew up pretty tight. Like I could say at least every other weekend we would see each other. Either here, we would be here probably once or twice a week, visiting Elkhorn. Like just staying here and having dinner and then going home. Or being at my Uncle Francisco's house and by then, him and my Aunt Lou, they were doing really well. They had bought a few houses up in town like up past the street—the numbered streets past Notre Dame. And then they bought a beautiful house on Murphy Hill, like going out towards the freeway on San Miguel County—San Juan Road. And so we would spend time with them as well. So we all stayed close. Then the other manongs and manangs that I had and the cousins that we adopted, we were all still really close at that time. It was kind of like the the golden age for them because everyone was working and the kids were all pretty healthy. And everyone was close.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 28:57

Yeah. I'm kind of curious; so I'm sure it was really, felt super tight knit and comfortable to be around your family. How did you feel growing up when you were kind of outside that space, say at school or around town and other spaces where you're kind of outside?

Joanne de los Reyes 30:40

I never really thought about that. It wasn't really, uhm— no, I never really thought about that. And then once we moved to the condo, we had—I had friends. It was such a small—the houses are so compact that we moved and had friends that lived, a lot more different people that were around us. So that that actually kind of filled in that gap a little bit. I'm sorry, PJ's here.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 31:15

We'll pause.

Joanne de los Reyes 31:15

No, yeah.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 31:16

All right. So the last thing we wanted to ask you about was about your passion for fishing—

Joanne de los Reyes 31:24

Yes.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 31:24

—that we've heard so much about.

Joanne de los Reyes 31:25

Oh my gosh.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 31:26

And I'm wondering if that is something that your dad did, fishing?

Joanne de los Reyes 31:32

Yes.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 31:33

Yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 31:33

So I remember on days where it was kind of dreary, or if it was off season and he didn't work, he would grab his poles. Because this used to be the garage right here on this left side of the house. He would grab his poles and he would go out and come back with a bucket with different fish. I don't—I don't remember what kind of fish they were, but he would. My Mom would ask him and he would go out often, at least once a week. That was kind of his thing to do. He didn't have any other vices really. Like he wasn't into the cockfights I would hear the other manongs, or the Uncles, talk about "Oh, I lost this amount of money at the cockfights." He really didn't have like other—and he didn't go to the card houses at the Philippine Gardens. That wasn't his thing, either. So fishing was definitely something that he was into.

Joanne de los Reyes 32:34

He would take me when I was sick from school or if I didn't have school because he didn't want to leave me alone. And so I just remember going with him. And the first time, I was so excited to go I put on a bathing suit and I went and I froze it was so cold. Because I thought, "Oh we're gonna go to the beach, the sun's gonna be out. I'm gonna do what they do on TV, lay out on a towel and all this." And it was windy and cold and freezing and I just I couldn't wait to go home. It was such a bad experience for me. And I remember trying to get warmed up because it was just so cold.

Joanne de los Reyes 33:12

And then I remember one time he brought home like a tiger shark. Like we got home from school and there was this shark in the back. Because they used to do a lot of—right outside of the bathroom window out here—there was a water spigot and just kind of a platform where they would put things that they would process like the fish or chickens or whatever they would have. And so, there was a tiger shark there and just being amazed by the size of this thing. And they were talking about processing it. I didn't really saw—see how they prepared it. I just remember coming back a few hours later and there was like this little bowl of something that they said was the shark meat. Because apparently at that time, they really didn't know.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 33:59

Yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 33:59

There's so many things that you could do with it. And I think I just know that was the biggest thing he had ever caught was that tiger shark. So I really didn't think of fishing until a lot later in life due to circumstances. My husband took my daughter out when she was younger and she caught some fish and then we went on a family trip and I got hooked.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 34:26

Yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 34:26

And then I started going to the beaches where my Dad would go like Zmudowski, Moss Landing. I go to Manresa a lot. But when I'm out there I totally think about him.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 34:36

How, in what way?

Joanne de los Reyes 34:38

It's just . . . there's something freeing. [pauses; starts to cry] And I also think that just the work they did. The labor, the manual labor they did. They would get up so early like I remember going to school—and it wasn't until I was in high school—and I had to be up at 6:30. Like, that's when he would be leaving and just thinking of all the toil from 6:30 to 3:30 or four o'clock when they would get home. That is—that was the one thing that they had for themselves to be able to say, "You know, this is what I'm gonna do." And for someone like my Dad, who really didn't have any vices, that I know is definitely just his getaway. It was that and sleeping in his car. [laughs] I would come home in the afternoons or just during the weekend and he'd be sitting in his car with his head back and just totally asleep with the windows just slightly cracked. And my husband and I talk about this, like that was probably his getaway from all the noise in the house and kids running around. Just to be able to sit in his car and kind of roll up the windows all the way, or almost all the way, and just have it nice and warm. And you know, there's something about that and I'll do that. I'll come home from something and just sit in the car and just think, "Wow, it is really quiet in here. This is a nice place to just kind of get away and tune out."

Joanne de los Reyes 36:14

But I hear from other fishermen that I meet out there. I've met so many Asian—just older Asian men—that go fishing and they have such relatable stories. Like, "Yeah, we would come out here and there was so many fish here before." They would have tournaments where they would catch fish and the stingrays would be stacked up here. And they had these crazy stories of how the Filipinos and the Mexicans and the Chinese and all the different nationalities would kind of come together and have these fish derbies and do that. And I know my Dad didn't participate in any of those because I never heard of him doing that. But the fact that they had this common thing that they kind of brought back from the native land.

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 37:01

Yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 37:03

I think being close to the ocean was something that was—something that, for them, was really—kind of brought them back home. And if my Dad's background growing up, if you saw where he lived in the Philippines, he lived on the beach. Their little village, Navitas, is right on there. So you just imagine as a small boy, that's what he did. He played in the ocean, he grew up on the ocean. He was really familiar with the water and doing a lot of things on the ocean. And so, that I believe really was home, kind of brought it home from him. Like I can't imagine him with his personality and like what he liked to do at the beach, living inland. Like that would not have been a thing for them, they wouldn't have lived—done well like in Los Banos even or somewhere where it was far from the water and kind of a grounding thing for him. And so now

as I'm out there more, that's like my grounding thing. I can see where this is relatable for them just to come out here and get your feet in the sand or touch the water. As soon as I go out there, one of the first things I do is just get my hand in the water and just like, "Aw, okay." Touch the sand a little bit and just "Okay."

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 38:31

Yeah.

Joanne de los Reyes 38:32

Kinda just calms everything down. Yeah.

Christina Ayson Plank 38:36

Wow. Do you think that was one of—like a big reason why your father ended up staying in this area, the proximity to the beach, do you think that like had a big influence?

Joanne de los Reyes 38:49

I'm sure it was a big percentage of why he was here. But the fact that the family that he worked for, the Willoughby's, they were just a really good family. They took care of their workers. I mean, all the way. Even after—like I think I shared in the last interview—after my Dad passed away they still would drop off the big ham and the five pound box of See's candy. Their relationship with their with their boss was really sweet. And the fact that the other manongs were in the area and they had really close ties with each other, that was a real big factor of the community that they felt here and what they established with the Filipino community and what they had with the Fil-Visayans. They had their own family in a sense and that's why the lines are so blurred: "Like is that a cousin?" It was until I was much older it was like, "Okay, is that a blood cousin or is that just cousin-cousin and they had to break down and try to explain that, you know, all

Meleia Simon-Reynolds 40:02

I think we're good. Okay.