

AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCELA WATTIN

An Oral History Conducted by Stefani Evans

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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Oral History Project

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Claytee D. White
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PREFACE

“They can see my legacy, or they can see my story from my great-grandmother, my grandmother. That’s very important.”

Arriving in Las Vegas in 2015 directly from her hometown in Cebu Province, Philippines, Lucela M. Watin was struck by the dry climate, "like an oven!" But she immediately felt at home in her apartment near Spring Mountain Road and Chinatown, because she could buy familiar food items, and because her new next-door neighbor also came from Cebu Province. Lucela, the fourth of six children, talks about how her father died before she turned two years old, how her mother supported the family by working in a laundry, and how her maternal grandmother stepped in to raise the children. She recalls her paternal grandfather taking her to his farm to see the black caribou and feed the chickens.

Watin discusses her college years and graduation and arrival in the U.S. under her fiancée's visa. She describes her first job in Las Vegas as a non-union busser in the Excalibur dining room and the difference the Culinary Union made in her benefits and work conditions; she also speaks of taking on leadership roles with the union and describes how the union is partnering with a legal aid attorney to bring her daughter to the U.S. During COVID, when the hotel/casino was closed for three months, she was distressed because she had to temporarily stop sending money home to her daughter in the Philippines. She talks of her favorite dishes, sinigang, chicken adobo, and bugas mais and describes the way that her hometown celebrates Halloween and All Souls Day, October 31–November 2.

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in Las Vegas, Nevada
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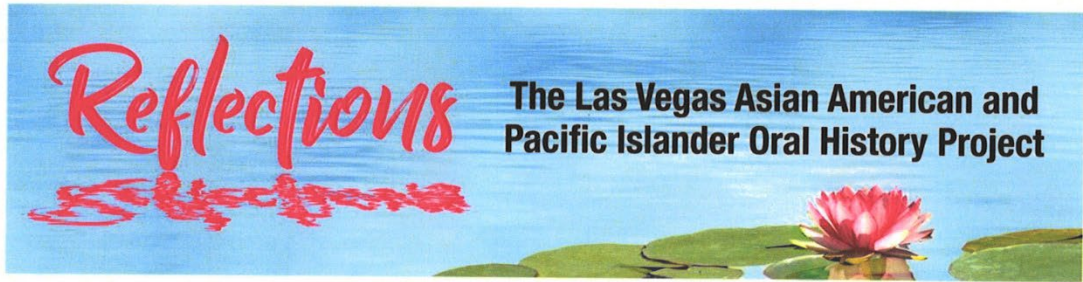
Lucela Wattin describes her childhood, family composition, general and upper education, her first few years living in Las Vegas, raising a daughter in the Philippines while living in the United States, her first job at Excalibur, and the backstory with her parents.1-2

Wattin further describes her previous marriage, the process of arriving to the United States, working in a nonunion job, her shift schedule, the shift from nonunion to union work, and the affects of COVID-19 on her job and family life.3-5

Moving on, Wattin opens up about her grandparents, her grandmother’s passing, her Spanish ancestry, memories of her childhood with her grandparents, some of her favorite food and their recipes, and where to get those ingredients,6-8

Wattin then details some of the cultural celebrations she partakes in, the importance of Halloween to her culture, New Year’s celebrations, religious affiliations, raising her second daughter in the United States, being a part of the Culinary Union, leadership roles, why being unionized is important to her.9-12

Wattin closes off with the importance of collecting interviews and leaving a legacy for her daughters in the future.13



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Good afternoon. This is Stefani Evans, and I'm here with Lucela Wattin [December 6, 2021].

Lucela, may I ask you to pronounce and spell your first and last name, please?

Lucela Wattin; L-U-C-E-L-A, W-A-T-T-I-N.

Thank you so much. The first question, as I mentioned, is to tell us about your childhood; your parents; your grandparents; your siblings; things you used to do for fun; all that.

I grew up in Cebu, Philippines. I have six siblings, two brothers and three sisters, and I'm the fourth of all the siblings that I have. My father died when I was one year old, and my mother is the only one who is supporting the children that she had. My grandmother is the one who is taking care of us while my mother goes to work because I don't have a father to support us, who are six.

I go to school in my place in Cebu. I graduated high school, and then after high school—I was already a student to get my college degree in the Philippines. While in college, I was a working student to get it. I traveled different country after I graduated college. I worked in Singapore, I worked in Lebanon, and then I found fiancé, which is my ex-husband, and he is the one bringing me here to America. Unfortunately, we are not in a good condition; we end up divorced.

Right now, since I came to the U.S. in 2015, I look for a job. I work in Excalibur as room dining attendant, which is a nonunion job. I worked there nine months. After nine months, I feel like I do not have enough money to support my family back home, so I decided to look for a union because that's what I heard of my colleagues, my Filipino people that told me, "Union job, it's good for you. You have all the benefits and good salary rate."

After I had been six months in the nonunion job, I find casino porter, which is inside Excalibur, and finally I get that union job, classification EVS, casino porter. Then I realized that being a union worker is totally different. I have all the benefits that I have. I have enough money to send back home to support my family, especially—I forgot to say that I have a daughter in the Philippines. She is right now eleven years old. I try to communicate as much as I can because it's been a long time that I haven't seen her. It's almost six years now. I'm planning to bring her here with me with the help of our Culinary Union Legal Aid. They are the ones who are doing the process right now. Unfortunately, the lawyer told me it takes a while, especially for this restriction. Hopefully by next year she will be here with me.

That would be wonderful. I'd like to go back a little bit. Your mother raised all seven of you together?

Yes, yes, yes.

What did she do for a living?

My mother works in a laundry. Fortunately, my father, when he died, he left a pension for my mom, so we had support, a little bit, from my father when he died.

What did he do?

He was working in mining, something like that in the Philippines.

Did he die in an accident?

Yes, he died in a motor accident, bus and motorists.

Are you the only one of all your siblings that's in the U.S.?

Yes.

Everybody is back in the Philippines?

Everybody is in the Philippines, yes.

Are they all in Cebu?

One of them, the second one, she is in Manila. The rest are in Cebu.

Where did you go to college?

I went to Philippine State College of Aeronautics when I was first a third year in Pasay City, but after four years, I went back home because I cannot support myself anymore; I need my mom's support because I need to do the practical to get my degree. After fourth year, I went back to Mactan Air Base. It's the same school, but a different branch. I graduated in Mactan Air Base, Cebu.

How did you get to the U.S.?

My fiancé, he is the one who is bringing me here.

You came under his visa?

Under his visa, yes.

Did you have any trouble staying in the U.S. after you split up?

Yes, I have my ten-year visa.

That was no problem, then?

That was no problem.

Tell us what it was like in the nonunion job at the Excalibur. What was your day like when you showed up for work? Tell us about a typical day.

First, I was part-time, on-call. I don't exactly know the shift I'm working, different shifts. I work graveyard, I work swing shift, so it's kind of hard to adjust the time especially...I had never worked graveyard shift before, so it's hard to adjust, especially when they call you in for graveyard. "You have to come here right now." They give us two hours' difference to prepare ourselves, especially the distance. It's kind of hard to adjust, especially working graveyard shift.

Yes, when you go back and forth from graveyard to...

Yes, and I have to come back the next day swing shift, back to back. It's very different than the union job because you have your own schedule, you have your own shift, you have your own days off, so that is a really big difference between the nonunion job and the union job.

Even after you'd been there for five or six months, you still didn't know what your week was going to look like?

Yes. Maybe after four months, they give us a schedule, but because I am the less senior, they put me swing shift/graveyard shift, like split. You are not working exactly swing shift for the whole week; they give us different.

What was the work that you did in the dining room?

Usually, I'm cleaning up the table after the guests finish up their food, bus the table, clean the table up, empty the trash.

How did your work change, then, when you became part of the union?

I love it because they give us...this is your schedule for the whole week, like day shift, and you have your own days off, and I can do my appointments because I know my days off already.

Especially, we have job security. The nonunion job, whatever the manager do for you, they can just fire you anytime without reason, but in the union job, you can fight if you have the rights.

You have the job security that is helping you to fight for your job.

How did COVID affect your job, or did it?

Yes. I believed they closed for three months. My property, which is the Excalibur, they closed for three months. For three months, I have family that I need to support back home. They're asking me, especially my daughter, "Mom, can you send money for me?" I said, "Right now, I don't have work because the casinos are closed, so I cannot send you what I did before." Every

two weeks, I would send her money. “Right now, I’m only depending on unemployment, so I cannot send it because I don’t have work.” I think they can understand, but for me it’s very hard because I don’t have...financially support my daughter.

When the casino closed, as I recall, there was no end date. We didn’t know how long that would be.

Exactly, we didn’t know when they were going to reopen, and there’s no guarantee when you’re going to go back. I believe a lot of my coworkers are worrying about that, too, because our contract for the recall rights, only two years recall rights, so they are worrying about it. What’s going to happen when it’s over the time? Are we going back to work? I told them I also don’t know what’s going to happen. Everybody is worrying about when and what’s going to happen.

When COVID began, some people in the U.S. started calling it the “China virus” and the “kung flu.” Did that affect you in any way, for example, in the way clients at work treated you, or the public?

Yes, of course, it affects me because I’m an immigrant. I’m from the same, Asian country. They think we are bringing virus here to the U.S. It really affects me personally because it’s not right. They are very racist, these people, why they’re calling China is the one who started the virus and bring it here to the U.S. Even I’m not Chinese, but also I’m in the same country, an Asian, so it will affect me.

Can you think of some incidents where people have been extraordinarily kind to you in this past COVID environment, where people reached out to you to see if you’re okay, or...?

Yes. Some of my friends are asking, especially back home. They’re very worried, also, because I am by myself here in the U.S. They’re asking me, “Is everything okay in your place? Are you seeing protocol for everything?” It’s really, really hard. Yes, I heard from my family extending

concerns about me here in the U.S. I feel like, oh, somebody is worrying about me; somebody is concerned about my situation, especially this COVID situation. There's all that.

Could you tell us about your mother's parents, your grandparents on your mom's side?

Then I'll ask you the same for your dad's side.

My grandparent, she just died last September.

Sorry.

Thank you. She just died last September last year. She is the one taking care of us, my brothers and sisters. She is very close to all my sisters and brothers because, as what I said before, she is the one taking care of us while my mother goes to work. She trained us very strict. If you did something wrong, you have to say sorry. Proper training of children. I miss her. She is like my second mom. She is always there. When I grew up, when I was in elementary, she was taking care of us for food, for dress, change clothes to go to work, and she is a lovely grandma.

What did you call her?

We call her Nana in my country.

And her husband, your grandfather?

I didn't see him. Don't remember him. He died when I was little.

Your dad's side, your dad's parents?

She also died a long time ago when I was eight years old. I barely remember her. But she is half-Spanish and half-Filipino. That's why my father's middle name is Rivera, a Spanish name because we're colonized by the Spaniards a long time ago in the Philippines, so some of the areas are mixed. That's what I think. I remember when I was eight years old.

She was Spanish?

Half-Spanish.

His father, your grandfather on that side?

I still remember. He died after her.

Can you remember a story about your grandparents, a story that you remember or a story that somebody has told you about them?

I still remember from my grandfather, he used to bring me to the caribou, the cousin for the cow. He used to bring me to go somewhere in a farm because he used to have the caribou, the black one with the bullhorn. That's the caribou, we called it. He used to put me to ride with him, and that's why I remember. We'd go to the farm and feed the chickens. He was a very religious man. He used to go to church every Sunday, and I remember every Sunday I would love to go visit him in their house because he always cooked a big chicken, the whole chicken, and then he would divide it into pieces. I'm not sure if I'm his favorite granddaughter, but he would always give me the leg part of the chicken. That's what I remember when I was eight years old.

Was this your mom's dad?

That's from my father's side because my mom's, I don't see him.

You mentioned food, the chicken. Can you tell us about other foods that remind you of the Philippines, or foods that you really miss that you can't get here?

Oh yes. I just told my partner last week, "You know what I miss in the Philippines?" The fish cooked with vinegar; we call it sinigang. That's what I miss. Also, chicken adobo. That's a famous food, very famous.

Do you have a recipe for adobo that you make?

Yes, I've always checked on YouTube, though. Especially when I miss the food, I just Google it and follow the recipes.

Have you found a place here where you can buy the ingredients to make the kind of food that you like?

Yes, in Seafood City, on Maryland [Parkway]. They have all the ingredients, the Filipino food.

Imagine if you take yourself back to before 1995, we had no Seafood City.

No? When is the Seafood City?

I know that they came into the Chinatown Plaza. I think that was the first one; I might be wrong on that. It wasn't that long ago.

But that's the first one for the Filipino store?

I think so. It used to be very difficult to get those kinds of ingredients, and people would go to Los Angeles. You usually shop at Seafood City?

Sometimes at 99 Ranch because there is Asian store. You can find also some Filipino ingredients, some Filipino food. I miss the corn that we use to have corn rice; we call it _____, my language. I like to eat that with fish, sinigang, and adobo. In my place, Cebu, we used to eat corn, like grits. They're called grits, but bigger than the grits, the ground.

Like hominy?

Something like that, yes, in Cebu. We are not used to eating rice. It's corn, but they grind something like that. They make it like grits, but bigger.

Interesting. What do you call that?

I can show you the picture. I just searched yesterday because I miss it. It's a corn.

I'd also like to ask, what traditions do you celebrate here?

Here in the U.S.?

Yes, or that you celebrated with your family at home.

Of course, birthday. Christmas is the big, big celebration. New Year's. Mother's Day, that's major. For me, as a Filipino, we don't really celebrate Thanksgiving, only here in the U.S. We don't practice Thanksgiving celebration. I also found it interesting when I came here and I see that Thanksgiving is a very big deal in the United States. My siblings' birthdays. All Souls Day; that's a big celebration in the Philippines.

Tell us about that one.

Every 31st October, which is my birthday, that's Halloween here, right? But there, it's a big celebration because we used to have Halloween disco in the cemetery, which the next day, November first, is the All Saints Day, and then the next one is All Souls Day. That's three days of celebration. It's a big one in my place, Cebu, because it is big. In each area it's different.

But the big celebration is November second.

November second is All Souls Day. All Saints Day, November first, but usually everybody has to go to cemetery to light a candle and pray for the family who passed. We have to bring flowers, something like that. October 31st, we cook. Before we eat it, we have to serve for the All Souls Day in the altar where you pray. We always put some food for them, offer them, like praying. We believe that they are coming to visit us and smell the food. That's how we believe.

You actually have to make the food to have those smells.

Yes. First, before we eat, we have to offer it for them. Then we pray. After we pray, then we start eating. That is October 31st, which is Halloween night, for November.

Do you wear anything special for the Halloween and All Souls Day?

Halloween, yes. Wear makeup, scary.

Oh, you do.

Yes, we do that, yes, on Halloween, but we don't do trick-or-treat. Some areas in the Philippines, yes, they do.

But not in Cebu.

Not in Cebu. Maybe Cebu City, yes, they're doing that. But in my area, not a city, a small province, we don't usually do trick-or-treat.

When you say *New Year's*, do you mean the Lunar New Year or the calendar year?

The calendar New Year.

Do you not celebrate the Lunar New Year?

No. That's for the Chinese New Year, right?

Yes.

It's different.

Right. And Mother's Day, is that the same day as ours?

What here, March?

Second Sunday of May, I think.

I think, yes, it's the same, yes. Also, Father's Day, it's a big day for us, celebration.

The holidays seem pretty similar except for the All Souls Day. Were you raised Catholic?

Yes. I'm raised Catholic, but right now my partner is trying to convert me to Orthodox, which I like the practice, because we have a daughter, and she is baptized Christian Orthodox. I think there is no big difference. I think they're almost the same because we have confession, we have the celebration Christmas, New Year. It's almost the same.

The rituals.

Yes, the rituals. It's almost the same.

That daughter is here?

Yes, she is four months. She is a baby.

Congratulations.

Thank you.

Tell us how you got active with the union.

Oh yes. I start getting involved with the union when I was a part-timer. A part-timer means I just get a job as a union job. My organizer in Excalibur, which is Miguel (NAME), he's the one putting me as a captain when we start the 2018 contract fight when we went to the Thomas and Mack. He is asking me to volunteer there for the strike. I said, "What am I going to do? I don't know what it benefits me to go there and volunteer." He said, "No, this is for your benefits. This is for everything, the contract fight." I said, "Okay, let me try." Then I start from there, start being a captain.

I was interested because all my coworkers are telling me to be a representative. I said, "What is the representative? I don't know about that." They said, "You're a shop steward." I said, "I don't know about shop steward." Shop steward is if we have a problem because they're working there for thirty years, so they know exactly. I said, "Why you don't want to be it, and why you want me when I'm new? I don't know exactly what is the union for me." They said, "No, you just go to the meeting, and what the meeting is all about, you have to give us information." I said, "Okay, let me try."

Then I started coming to the union when we had a meeting. Then I give them the information, and they kind of pushed me to be a representative because no one there is standing up for their rights. They're scared of the management. For me, why be scared if I have the rights and we have the contract? I stand up, and I give them all the information when we have a

meeting here in the union. They want me to be their representative, to be their shop steward. I said, "Okay." Then I started being involved as shop steward.

It's very important for me when I started getting involved that we have a union representative especially in each department because management is abusing if you don't know the contract, if you don't know your rights. I started educating my coworkers that this is our rights; this is what we're going to do; if we have a problem, let me know so that I can have a meeting with management.

From there, I think I fixed one issue in our department that I told the management, "You are missing the schedule. We have the schedule, and we have to follow what is in the contract." Especially when the workers come in in the MGM property, the workers do whatever they want; they just follow the system. I called a meeting with the management to fix the issue because we have the contract, and now you're following the third party who is doing the schedule. The time when I fixed the issue then started my career because they trust me being their representative. They said, "It's good to have union representative in the department because somebody to stand up for the coworkers, and they believe in you, and they trust in you." For me, it's very important to get involved and to educate the workers because some of them really don't know exactly what is your right.

Were you involved in a union in the Philippines?

No. I don't have any idea what is the union when I first come in here. I have Filipino coworkers, and they're the ones telling me because they've been working there for thirty years, so they know exactly the union helps them, their families, their benefits and everything. It's kind of interesting. Okay, let's do it then. That's how I started getting involved with the union. I love it because I believe that they are for the workers. They support and back us up.

What does it mean to you that the Filipinos are the fastest growing Asian American/Pacific Islander group in Clark County—in Nevada?

Oh, I didn't know that. Really, the Filipino community?

Yes.

That's great. Good to know that.

Why is it important that the university collect interviews such as yours?

I think for the next generation, like my daughters. I have two daughters, one in the Philippines and one here. Probably when I'm gone, they can see my legacy, or they can see my story from my great-grandmother, my grandmother. That's very important. Maybe they can one day go to school or college and get to see my book. "Oh, this is my mom." I think that's very important.

Thank you so much. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you hoped we would talk about?

I think that's all.

I can't thank you enough.

Thank you so much.

I really appreciate your willingness to participate.

Of course. I loved to.

[End of recorded interview]