

AN INTERVIEW WITH SONNY MALLARI

An Oral History Conducted by Chanele Mallari

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

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

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The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a grant from the City of Las Vegas Commission for the Las Vegas Centennial and funding from private individuals and foundations. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

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PREFACE

“Any other country in Asia, America is a way out for a better life, I guess. When we were kids, going to America is like a dream.”

Born in 1962 in Masantol, Pampanga province, Philippines, Sonny V. Mallari was the third of six children. When Sonny was seven, his father, a teacher and businessman, left for the U.S., petitioned by his older brother, who served in the U.S. military. Five years later, in 1974, Sonny's father petitioned for the rest of the family to join him in Salinas, California. Sonny talks of his father finding work at the U.S. Post Office, of leaving friends and family in the Philippines, of the immigration process, of being bullied in school, and of becoming a cook, moving to Las Vegas, and joining the Culinary Union.

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November 26, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
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Sonny Mallari details his early life and his immigration story. From Masantol, Pampanga, Philippines to Las Vegas, Mallari notes the lengthy process from his father being petitioned to come to the United States to the rest of his family. Mallari also gives a brief insight into the beginning stages of his career to where he now works as a cook for a major casino. Mallari then goes on to explain some background surrounding his grandparents.1

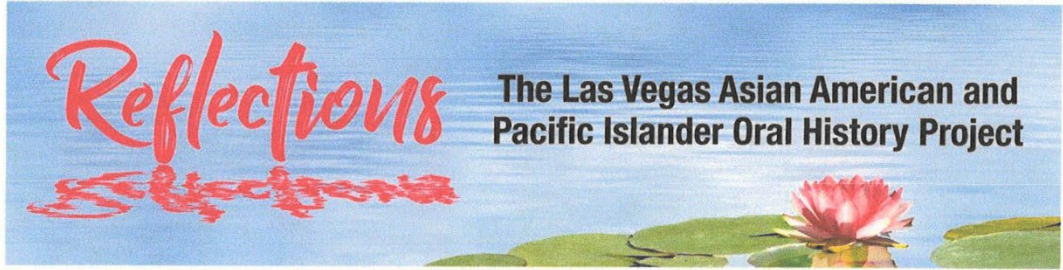
Moving on to identity, Mallari notes how he feels as though Filipinos are a combination of different ethnicities after being conquered by many nations. Then, Mallari returns to the topic of immigration and details his family’s immigration passage, but more specifically his father’s. Mallari mentions that his uncle was a major contributor to the streamlined nature of his family’s immigration. He then goes on to mention the hardships of immigrating from the Philippines and how he combats that by consistently keeping in touch with relatives through social media.2-3

Focusing on Las Vegas, Mallari describes his thought process in migrating to Las Vegas. Mallari saw potential in the line of work in Las Vegas. With his sister’s help, Mallari was able to get settled in Las Vegas with a stable job. With a rocky start in Las Vegas, Mallari gradually found many benefits in residing in Las Vegas.5

Mallari goes in to describe his family composition. He then moves on to explain his line of work in Las Vegas. He mentions that he had a hard time as he felt that there were not many Asians to help blend him in with the population. He eventually was able to find and currently works at the Mandalay Bay. Mallari goes on to describe other jobs he has had to work in times of financial hardships. As for other aspects of his life in Las Vegas, Mallari finds that he is able to identify and see Filipinos around him throughout his neighborhood.6

Drawing on culture, Mallari notes traditions that he enjoyed in California and how those have changed since he has moved to Las Vegas. Mallari also highlights fond memories of spending time with his family when they all came together to celebrate his mother’s birthday. He then contrasts the differences between living in Las Vegas and living in his previous city of Salinas, California. Despite the differences, Mallari enjoys Las Vegas mostly due to the employment opportunities and cost of living.7-8

On more contemporary political topics, Mallari mentions his opinions on the model minority myth, but also speaks on some discrimination he has faced because of his Asian identity. He views more contemporary racial discrimination revolving around Covid-19 and Asian Americans as negative but feels that there is little that can be done to combat these narratives. Mallari closes his interview by emphasizing the value of collecting interviews of different ethnicities.9-10



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My name is Sonny Mallari. I was born on June 17th, 1962. I am fifty-nine years old.

Talk about your family and your childhood, so stuff like schooling, recreation, friends, family trips, vacations, or relatives.

I've got two sisters, the oldest and next to me, so I'm the third child. There are six of us total. We came here to America in April 2nd, 1974, from the Philippines. I was born in Masantol, Pampanga, Philippines, and we came here in 1974, all of us including my mom. There are seven of us now total. My dad came here to America in 1969, and we stayed in the Philippines for another five years because my dad wanted to be a stable person before bringing us over here. My dad was petitioned by his older brother who was in the military. He petitioned my dad to come here to America, and then after five years my dad petitioned us to come here. We landed in San Francisco Airport in April 2nd, 1974. We stopped by my grandma's house, and then we went to Salinas, California, and that's where we stayed until we moved to Las Vegas.

I got into cooking, and that's what I do right now for my career. I'm a cook for one of the major—oh, we moved here to Vegas in March 15th, 2002. I started working for one of the casinos here in Vegas, and now I work for a major casino here in Vegas as a cook. That's it.

Tell us about your grandparents. Tell us some stories your grandparents told you about their lives.

On my mom's side, I met my mom's dad, but my mom's mom, I never met her because she passed away when I was a little boy. I don't really remember about her. On my dad's side, I wasn't even born yet, and they died when my dad was seven years old, and so I never met them.

When and where was your higher education?

I went to school in Salinas, California. I graduated high school there, and then I took some basic college at Hartnell College in Salinas, California. I started working and started making money, and so I forgot about school.

How do you identify ethnically?

Ethnically, Asia is a big country, so there are different kinds of ethnicities in Asia, but we are Filipino. We're more of a combination of Asian and Hispanic because Spaniards conquered the Philippines for about three hundred years until Americans came and fought for it.

Please tell your family's migration story. What made your family members decide to come to the mainland USA?

Any other country in Asia, America is a way out for a better life, I guess. When we were kids, going to America is like a dream. My dad was an English teacher back in the Philippines, and we own some fishpond business. Once my dad was petitioned by my uncle, he just dropped everything. All he thought about was a better future for his family, and that's why we ended up here in America, for a better future.

When did they leave? When did your dad leave for America?

My dad was petitioned. After eleven years after my uncle petitioned him. It's called a non-appearance. You don't get an interview. Once your paper comes up, you just have to come up with all the papers that they're looking for, take them to the American Embassy back in the Philippines, and you're ready to go, no questions asked because you're petitioned by an American citizen and an American soldier. It took eleven years before his paper came down. They call it non-appearance for family members, like brothers.

He came by himself first?

Yes, my dad came by himself. We could have went with him because when you're petitioned by your brother, you can take your underage kids and your spouse, but my dad came over first to get established before bringing us here in America.

Where did he go first, and did he go anywhere after that?

Like I said, we all landed in San Francisco Airport because our town where we spent most of our life, it's called Salinas, California, and that's where my dad was working, that's where he landed, and that's where his brother is. He stayed with his brother for a few years before getting established. My dad worked for the post office all his life here in America.

Who or what were the hardest things or people to leave behind in the Philippines?

A lot of relatives, uncle and auntie, and my grandpa from my mom's side was still alive back then. He took care of us because my dad was in America. He was the one who watched us and stayed with us to make sure nothing happened to us while we were still in the Philippines before going to America. I had a hard time saying goodbye to him and, also, my auntie, people who took care of us, and schoolmates, classmates. I was twelve years old and already going to school, and so I had a lot of friends, and it was hard to say bye to them.

How do you stay in touch with distant family members?

Social media. Nowadays it's easy to keep in touch with relatives and friends because social media is all over the place. It's easy.

What are yours or your family's fondest memories of home, the Philippines?

Going to vacation all together to another city or a tourist attraction with my cousin, my mom, my auntie. Every summertime they rent a big bus, and we all go for a vacation to different cities.

What was it like for you and your family to go through U.S. Immigration?

It's easy for us because my dad is an American citizen, and we were young. We were underage, so we didn't have a really hard time going through U.S. Immigration. We didn't get interviewed. They just checked if we're healthy. No interview or nothing like that because we're all underage.

Why did you and your family come to Las Vegas?

For work because my line of work, I'm in the culinary. My sister was here already, and she said that the housing is not as bad as in California. She offered to help us to get our own place, our own house, and so I took the opportunity. First, I moved here by myself. I got established. My sister helped me get a house. After six months, I went to get my family from Salinas.

What was the migration path to Las Vegas? You just came?

Yes, I just came. I went on vacation, and I see there is a lot of work that I do. I applied for a job before I went back. We just went on vacation for a week, and then my sister told me the housing here is very affordable, and I took advantage. I've got relatives here, and so they said they could get me a job. Before going back to Salinas, I already had a job. I went back to Salinas and told my employer that I'm giving my notice, and I'm going back to Las Vegas to live over there and work over there.

What were your first memories of Las Vegas? Where did you live when you first arrived here?

The first few months I was staying with my sister. It was okay. Then when it got summertime, it was kind of hard for me because back in Salinas, California, the weather is almost perfect.

Sometimes I had a hard time, but after that everything was okay.

What were the most difficult things about the early days in Las Vegas? Who was helpful?

My sister. Number one is my sister. She is already established here, and she helped me a lot. She let me stay in her house rent-free and just help out in the house. Some people I met at work were helpful, and they tell me things. A lot of people helped me out.

Compare Las Vegas with other American cities where you have lived, so Las Vegas compared to Salinas.

First of all, Las Vegas is in the state of Nevada. There is no state tax. That's one of the pointers. It's cheaper. The cost of living is a little bit cheaper. Gas is cheaper. Everything is a little bit cheaper than Salinas, where we came from back in California.

Tell me about your Las Vegas family composition.

We're all doing okay. I've been married my wife for thirty-five years. My kids are pretty behaved. I don't have no problem with my family. They do their part, and I do my part for it.

How many kids do you have?

I have four kids, and Chanele is the youngest. My oldest, her name is Jenica. Then I have two boys in between.

Tell me about your work in Las Vegas, all jobs.

I started working, like I said, when I went on vacation here in Vegas and then moved and stayed at my sister's house. I decided to stay here. My first job was in downtown Las Vegas, California Hotel. I didn't have a hard time blending in because there is a lot of Asians, and I know what I'm doing. I'm very experienced in what I do. It just took me a little bit of adjustment. After that Mandalay Casino opened up some more jobs, and so I applied for it, and I got hired. I'm still working there until now. This is my nineteenth year at Mandalay.

As a what?

As a cook in the culinary career. They take care of their people, and so I decided not to go anywhere else.

Did you have any other jobs?

Yes, part-time when I needed some money to get us by, or we wanted to get something, like when we bought our house. I needed another part-time job to put a down payment for a house and make sure I qualified for it because you've got to meet a certain amount of income. I worked for another casino here in Vegas.

Mainly as a cook?

Yes.

Where in Las Vegas have you lived? In these neighborhoods, were there other people of your ethnic background?

Yes. We started on the south side of Las Vegas, and now we live in the southeast near Henderson. Everywhere I go I see Filipino people. Actually, both sides of my house, they're both Filipino. Any side of Las Vegas, I see different ethnicities and Filipinos. I always have a neighbor that is Filipino.

How have these neighborhoods changed, if you think they've changed?

Nothing changes. It essentially stays the same. We've been living in our house for four years now, and my neighbors still look the same. We just got a little bit older because four years, but there are no changes.

Tell me about traditions and festivals that are important to your family? Are there festivals that you would like to reinstitute from the Philippines?

When we were in California, back in Salinas, California, we used to have this fiesta, they call it. All the people came from our town, and we have a reunion once a year just to keep in touch,

relatives, friends, old friends, classmates. Here in Vegas, we don't usually do it every year. We do it every two years. But lately, since the pandemic we haven't had that festival in about four years. We were supposed to have it when the pandemic started, but now we can't set it up because it's not a hundred percent clear yet. Those are the festivals I'm looking forward to again to see my relatives. We have a reason to get together. Those are the festivals I'm looking forward to.

How did your celebrations and festivals change after you moved to Las Vegas? You saw people less?

Yes. Like I said, we used to have it every year in California, and then we moved to Vegas, and we don't usually have it every year. We have it every two years.

What are a few of the most significant events in the history of your family or community?

Anything important that happened for your family?

Yes, when I had my kids and my mom's birthday and when my mom visited us here in Vegas. Those are memories to remember. And when my brothers and sisters visit because they live all over the place now. One lives in Texas. One lives in California. One lives in the Bay Area. One stayed in Salinas, California where we grew up. Those are significant times.

What are the greatest differences that you find between Las Vegas and other places you've lived, like cultural, language, political, religious, lifestyle, transportation, or traffic?

Mainly, it's work. Like I said, it's cheaper here, so that's a big difference between Salinas and Las Vegas, the cost of living, and there is no state tax. Everything is a little bit cheaper.

What should people who have never traveled outside of Las Vegas know about your country's culture and history, the Philippines?

The people are nice. We've got beautiful country. We've got a lot of vacation places that you could go to. The food is very cheap. Like I said, people are very nice.

What do you like most about living in Las Vegas? The entertainment, church, family events, employment?

Mostly the employment and the cost of living.

How do you feel about the activity of gambling and the gaming industry?

I feel no different. I don't have a different feeling for it. Gambling, that's what Las Vegas is built for, and it brings us work in Vegas. To me, that's okay, I guess.

What foods remind you of your ancestors? Can you get these foods or the ingredients to make them in Las Vegas?

Oh yes. Like I said, everything we use in the Philippines is here now in Vegas, or anywhere in America, actually. They have Asian stores where you can get the ingredients, the food that you eat when you were young. I don't really miss any of the food from the Philippines when I was young because you could have it here, make it here.

What stores do you usually go to?

Asian stores. Even a regular grocery store, they have Asian department. It's not a biggie anymore.

What home-crafted items remind you of your ancestors or older relatives? Can you buy or make them here? Do you or any of your relatives continue to craft these items?

Yes, the stuff that we use for Christmas, the star, the lights. It's not hard to get anymore. Asian stores import everything here now, or they make it themselves here. The stuff we had in the Philippines, we can have it here in America now.

Like Christmas items and stuff?

Yes, Christmas items, food, baskets, any decoration from the Philippines, we can get it here.

How has the model minority myth affected you?

What is that?

The model minority myth.

I don't really know anything about that, so no comment.

Have you ever experienced racially discriminatory practices against yourself or other Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders? Can you describe these incidents? Have you witnessed this in Las Vegas?

Not here in Las Vegas. But back then in 1974 all the way to the '80s, at school, because that's where I went to school, I did experience a little bit of discrimination. I went through that, and I survived it. Nowadays, it's illegal to discriminate against people, so I don't have no problem with that anymore. Only in my younger days when we landed in California.

Do you remember a specific time?

At school we'd get bullied because we couldn't hardly speak English even though we understand English, but we can't carry a conversation, and so we kind of got discriminated. They tell us to go back sometimes where we came from. Like I said, we got through that, so it's no biggie.

Have you seen a change in discriminatory practices against Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders since the pandemic began?

No. No, I see no difference.

How did you feel when high-ranking U.S. officials called COVID-19 the "Wuhan virus," the "China virus," or the "Kung flu?"

I'm kind of against it, but people have got their own sayings, so you can't stop it, but it's not really good naming it the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus." You can't stop people from saying that.

How do you feel about the Black Lives Matter movement? In what ways does or does not the Black Lives Matter movement affect Asian or Pacific Islander Americans?

I don't really know about that, so I'd rather not comment.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are the fastest-growing population group in Southern Nevada. What does that mean to you?

It means hard-working people. They are very disciplined. It's good. It's good for everyone because they are hard-working people and very respectful people and very nice people.

Why is it valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?

I think it's very valuable because you can get more information from different ethnicities, and it's a good idea to learn about other countries, other lives, ways, and stuff like that.

This is the end of the interview, but I have to ask this one question. Can you suggest someone else we should interview for this project?

I have a lot of people that I could suggest, but they're not open like me, so I don't think they'll do it. Thank you.

Thank you, Sonny.

[End of recorded interview]