

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH RODEL FUENTES**

An Oral History Conducted by Tracy Fuentes

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

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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Oral History Project

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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.

Claytee D. White  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
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## PREFACE

“I believe that everybody should try something for themselves to develop themselves, and I think Las Vegas is the best opportunity to do that.”

Rodel Fuentes, a licensed general contractor and real estate agent, was born in Manila, Philippines, where he was raised in the family home with his siblings, parents, aunts, and uncles. His parents followed his older sister to the U.S. When Rodel followed his father's occupation in marine transportation, his parents encouraged him to join them in Los Angeles, where he met and married his wife in 1992. The couple moved to Las Vegas in 1999, largely because of the cost of living. In Las Vegas, he worked his way up in the Dunn Edwards paint company from delivery driver to managing several stores before earning his contracting and real estate licenses and forming his own company. He talks of the Las Vegas Asian community, of building Asian restaurants, of New Year traditions, and of experiencing anti-Asia hate (exacerbated by "Wuhan Flu" rhetoric) but of loving Las Vegas's affordability, demographic diversity, and business opportunities.

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December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Tracy Fuentes

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Rodel Fuentes explains his family composition, his experiences growing up, and stories about his grandparents. Fuentes mentions his diverse exposure to the dialects of the Filipino language. Though he does not remember his grandparents, he is able to explain aspects of their personality that he is aware of. ....1

Jumping forward toward early adulthood, Fuentes recalls his experience in higher education. After attending the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines, Fuentes decided to reroute into marine transportation like his father. Then on, Fuentes speaks about his immigration story to the United States. While, on the paperwork end, Fuentes had little trouble with the immigration process, most of the challenges he found were from his personal attachments to the Philippines. Ultimately though, he chose to follow his family members that had immigrated to the United States not too long prior. He notes the contrasts between Los Angeles to Las Vegas, the two cities he has lived in, in the United States. Fuentes then continues to explain his start in Las Vegas, including previous jobs, first impressions, and challenges he had faced. ....2-5

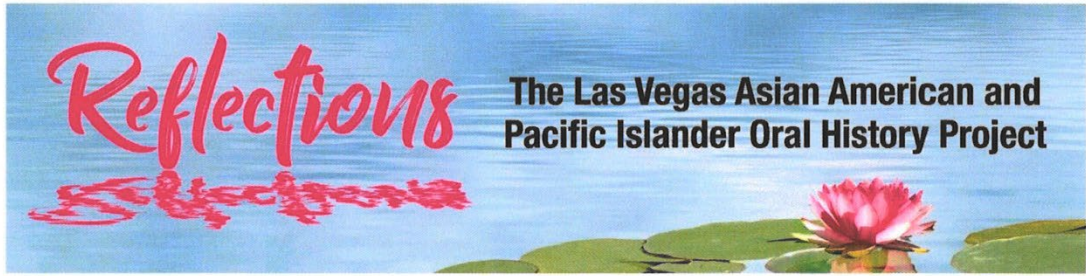
For Fuentes, he explains that holidays are an important part of his culture. Fuentes explains the traditions he continues to celebrate despite being far from the Philippines. He then draws on some significant historical events that have impacted his family. ....6-7

Focusing on his experience in Las Vegas, Fuentes details his experience in Las Vegas in comparison to other places he has lived. From political and religious differences to general lifestyle and financial usage, Fuentes points out many stark differences that he has noticed between Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and the Philippines. Fuentes also notes his opinion on the gambling and gaming culture that persists in Las Vegas. ....8-9

Moving more towards his identity, Fuentes details some of the food that links him back to his ancestors. After briefly mentioning his viewpoints on the model minority myth, Fuentes mentions a few incidents where he has experienced racial discrimination as an Asian American. From experiences on the road to microaggressions while being serviced, Fuentes regards these experiences as ones that have affected him, and the way others view him. Fuentes also highlights that racial discrimination has seen an incline with recent rhetoric regarding Asian Americans being tied to the Covid-19 virus, being dubbed the “Kung-Fly” or “Wuhan Virus.” Fuentes also notes his views on the Black Lives Matter movement and the ways that it ties in with Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders. Despite the racial discrimination he has faced, Fuentes does highlight that he feels safe if he is cognizant of the places he feels welcomed. ....10-12

Looking at the bigger picture, Fuentes talks about the role that Asian Americans have in Nevada on a personal level as a community. Fuentes goes on to describe his construction business and the

type of work he has done in Southern Nevada, most of them being with Asian-owned businesses. Fuentes finds that with the growing Asian American and Pacific Islander population group, he hopes to be able to help those communities with their business and get started on the construction end. Fuentes goes on to say that he enjoys that he is a part of the Asian community. He also continually stays in contact with his community in the Philippines through social media. Las Vegas has become Fuentes's home and he feels comfortable in the city. And while he sees a lack of representation in popular media for himself, he finds importance in collecting interviews about Asians in order to engage in the inside thoughts of the community. ....13-16



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**Talk about your family and your childhood, schooling, recreation, friends, family trips, vacations, relatives.**

Is this my family when I was young?

**Yes, your experiences growing up.**

I had a very fun childhood. I played with my brothers a lot, and we go play on the street, barely at home, always on the street playing. No worries. It was a lot of fun. My mom was always at work. My dad has contractual work overseas outside the country. I played with most of my friends in the neighborhood, and it was fun.

**Who did you live with in your house?**

I lived with my brothers and a sister, my mom and my dad, and a few of my aunties and uncle on my mother's side.

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

My grandparents on my mother's side, they were so quiet, and they spoke a different dialect, but that's how I learned to speak their dialect and understand their dialect, which is Chavacano from the south of the Philippines, more like 60 percent, 50 percent Spanish sounds like and meaning. They're quiet, so they didn't talk to me a lot about their life. They don't barely talk to us.

I grew up with a not-related grandmother, which she is the one who took care of my dad when my dad was young, so we considered her our real grandmother because my grandparents on my father's side, they're out of the country already. Growing up I don't remember meeting them. We never grew up with them or met them. But it was Lola Bonyang who took care of my dad when my dad was young, our favorite grandmother. She loves us because she always bought us chocolates when she would come every day. She would cook a lot of good food and always



have a complete dish on the table every night with fruits and a little bit of desserts. We love her so much.

**What and where was your higher education, like your college?**

In the Philippines. It's University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines.

**What did you study? For how long? Did you get a degree?**

I didn't complete my education in architecture in University of Santo Tomas. I was only three years at the university, and then I went to study marine transportation just like my dad, and I finished it in three years, two years at school and one year on the field.

**How do you identify ethnically? If someone asked you what's your ethnicity, what would you say?**

I would consider myself Asian of a different shade, ethnicity.

**Would you say you're Filipino?**

Yes, I'm Filipino, Asian, Filipino, mostly Filipino.

**Tell us your family's migration, how your family came to the United States, why they wanted to, how did they leave the Philippines, and who came and what order and stuff like that.**

In order it was first my sister, my mom and my dad. They came here in Los Angeles, I think it was in 1990, '91, or 1989, somewhere in that time. My sister, she was still in college, and she loved to live here, so she decided not to go back and finish her college. My parents decided to stay with her because she was still young, and she needed some guidance because she was still young. That's the beginning of the migration because my dad and my mom has to stay with her and keep up with her financially. They're the first ones to come over, and then I came here in

1996 in Louisiana. I was a sailor. I talked to my mom, and she wants me to come over here, so I came to California.

**Why did you want to follow? Just to be with your family?**

I missed my parents, actually. My dad was a sailor, and I missed my dad a lot because he wasn't home most of the time.

**After you, did anyone else follow?**

My brother Rhen was the next one who came, same thing how he did it, from Seattle.

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

Our friends at that time that I had.

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

It was kind of hard, but back in the day, 1995, it wasn't that strict, or it wasn't even politicized. It wasn't as bad as now. Everybody's aim or goal is to get the green card and be able to legalize their stay in the U.S. Those are the most important things especially to us when we got here.

**How about your journey to Las Vegas? How did you come to Las Vegas, and why did you decide to come to Las Vegas?**

From Los Angeles to Las Vegas? It was a joint decision between me and my wife, Cora, because my wife can't get along with my mom, and my mom kind of wants to dictate what we're doing. I decided to bring my family away from my mom, but not too far away, so Las Vegas was the closest, and it's livable here because of the houses and so forth.

**You chose Las Vegas because of the affordability rather than a different city in California?**

That's correct, affordability. Back in the day, I was thinking, if I'm going to have my family and my children, I don't want them to be living in an apartment where there is no backyard. In Las Vegas, I can easily buy a house with a backyard, no matter how small, at least with a backyard.

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

My first memory of Las Vegas was, of course, the gaming, the gambling, but I don't gamble, so that's not really a big deal with me. The thing about Las Vegas is that the food is so cheap. When we came here, buffet was only five dollars, five ninety-nine with a steak. That's the most memorable thing that we always go to in Las Vegas. What was the other question?

**Where did you live when you first arrived?**

With my wife's friend. Cora's best friend from Hawaii moved here. We rented a room from her.

**What were the most difficult things about those early days when you first came to Las Vegas?**

Having to deal with every day without friends and dealing with new-met friends that we don't even know what they're like, or are we going to have the same likes or hobby, like golf? Most of them play golf, and I don't. It was hard for me to deal with people that I don't know.

**Who was helpful to you while you moved to Las Vegas?**

Nobody helped me and my wife because we don't have a lot of stuff coming from L.A. It was just me and my wife to Las Vegas, and it was only a room, and we rented a storage. We don't have a couch, nothing here.

**Compare Las Vegas to the other American cities that you've lived in.**

I can only compare Las Vegas to Los Angeles. The big difference is the cost of living, the traffic. The roads are not as good as Las Vegas.

**Tell us about your Las Vegas family composition.**

My Uncle Lito lives here in Las Vegas. That's my mother's side, Uncle Lito with the wife and kids. Of course, my wife and my two daughters.

**Tell us about your work in Las Vegas, every single job that you've held while living in Las Vegas.**

I started working with Dunn-Edwards Paints store. It was transfer work from Los Angeles, the same field and same scope of work that I'm doing. I started as a delivery truck driver. It was hot in the summers delivering fifty-pound buckets of paint. That's how I started until I got promoted to become store manager. In three different stores I became a manager until I decided to become on my own as a licensed contractor and a licensed real estate agent.

**Where in Las Vegas have you lived, like what areas of town?**

I live in central Las Vegas close to north, which is Las Vegas Boulevard and Oakey or Charleston. We moved from there to southwest, Tropicana and Durango area, or Tropicana and Rainbow. Then in 2003, we purchased our own house in Thackerville until now.

**In these different neighborhoods, were there other people of your ethnic background, other Filipinos?**

Yes. The first one was Oakey, and there is no—we don't talk to the neighbors who we do not know, but I'm pretty sure there is a few over there. Then the same thing over at Woodhue where we lived in our second house, a townhome. There is nothing there that we know, Filipino. There is a few Mexicans or Latinos that are in front, our neighbor. Then on Thackerville, there is, I would say, five houses or neighbors.

**How have these neighborhoods change since you've lived there or over time?**

I can't say anything about the first two houses anymore because I don't know. Here at our present house, our address, Filipinos are moving out. They're getting their own bigger houses, and they're moving more to the southwest area.

**Tell me about the traditions and festivals that are important to your family.**

Traditional festival? We have to celebrate the Filipino tradition of New Year's and Christmas Eve. We have to be together, and that's the most celebrated event, festival of Filipino culture.

**Is there anything about celebrating Christmas that you did in the Philippines that you don't do here that you wish would come back or bring back?**

Yes. In the Philippines, there is what we call exchange gifts, and those are big because we put in an amount and then exchange gifts for everybody, the whole family. We exchange gifts on Christmas Eve aside from Christmas presents.

**You want to bring it back?**

Yes, I would say I would like to have that here.

**How did your celebrations and festivals change after you moved to Las Vegas? Did you celebrate your holidays or anything differently, or are there things that you used to celebrate before that you don't celebrate anymore?**

The biggest difference was New Year. New Year in the Philippines is crazy, a lot of fireworks, and long. It will take probably at least twelve hours of fireworks beginning New Year's Eve all the way to New Year's Day, fireworks all over. That's the fun of this in the Philippines, and I don't see it here. But based on everything, celebrations are about the same.

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

Events, I would say...I don't remember any big events about my family. I would say the biggest celebration is when my brother became popular with the celebrities being his clients, and everybody was proud of him. That's the biggest thing because he became really famous in the Philippines, Bambbi Fuentes.

**What are the greatest differences that you find between Las Vegas and the other places you have lived? First, the culturally differences.**

It's more diverse in Las Vegas. I see a lot of different ethnicities here. I see a different way to handle people, and I like it because I learn a lot of different attitudes and culture and festival foods. That's what I like about Las Vegas.

**Even language differences, right?**

Yes.

**Lots of different languages.**

Correct.

**What about political differences between Las Vegas and other places you've lived?**

I'm not involved in politics before 2016. I don't care about politics. But when Donald Trump came out, that's how I see the need for people to be involved in politics and voting, so that's how it pushed me into politics.

**What about religion or spirituality between Las Vegas and the other places?**

Las Vegas is better and quieter and easier to go in and out to a church. I am a Roman Catholic. I find it so hard to go in Los Angeles. The churches are so packed in traffic. But here in Las Vegas, it's so easy to come, and there is always available parking.

**What about lifestyle differences between Las Vegas and the other places?**

I would say Las Vegas is more hip, and they are more open, and they are crazier when they have a good time, especially when they're drunk compared to Los Angeles where they close the bar so early at four o'clock.

**What about family life or financially how people spend their money between Las Vegas?**

I would say Las Vegans have more fun spending their money, and they're not worried about the money too much, not like in Los Angeles. I can see the reason is they need to save money because it's so expensive over there living-wise. All expenses are expensive compared to here. I

would say people in Las Vegas have more extra money to spend for themselves than people in Los Angeles.

**What about in the Philippines?**

In the Philippines, about the same as in Los Angeles. They don't spend. They always save money over there trying to buy stuff. When they get enough money and they don't spend little by little, they spend big one, when they save a lot, then they go out and buy.

**What about transportation and traffic between Las Vegas, L.A. and the Philippines?**

Philippines is the worst traffic that you can imagine. Los Angeles is getting there. They're a little bit better. But the traffic in Los Angeles, knowing that you're in Los Angeles, California, you don't expect to have the traffic like the Philippines. In Las Vegas, there is no traffic that you can bring up, nothing.

**What should people who have never traveled outside of Las Vegas know about your country's culture or history? What should people that have never left Las Vegas know about the Philippines?**

What they should know about the Philippines is that the Philippines has a more relaxed environment, no rush, no stress country, and Filipinos speak English and understand English. A lot of beaches and beautiful outdoor lifestyle, and it's fun outdoors.

**What do you like most about living in Las Vegas?**

I like the business atmosphere here. It looks like people are more into a business attitude, character, which I like because I believe that people should have their own way of making money instead of working for somebody from eight to five, regular hours. I believe that everybody should try something for themselves to develop themselves, and I think Las Vegas is the best opportunity to do that.

**What do you do for entertainment in Las Vegas that you really like?**

I love watching live concerts, having a few beers with friends. Usually it's free, especially downtown. I enjoy live music, and I don't like crowded people.

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

The activities of gaming?

**Yes. How do you feel about gambling and the industry?**

I don't see any negative effect because people who gamble, I would say that that's their own business, and as long as they don't bother anybody but themselves, I don't mind that. Gambling to me is addicting, so I stay away from that, but that's their own priority in life. I don't prioritize gambling as much as other people do.

**What foods remind you of your ancestors?**

First, the rice and the stew. Most of our foods are based from a combination of Spanish food and Chinese food, and it becomes Filipino dish. I miss those.

**Is it easy for you to get these foods and the ingredients to make them in Las Vegas?**

Yes, because of Island Pacific supermarket, we have Filipino supermarket.

**What home-crafted items remind you of your ancestors or older relatives? Things that people would craft or handmake.**

The food?

**No, not food. Items.**

Oh, items handcrafted. I don't remember anything.

**How has the model minority myth affected you?**

It doesn't really affect me. I feel proud sometimes, but not always when I see some Asians not really achieving it, what they perceive we should. It doesn't affect me at all.



**Have you ever experienced racially discriminatory practices against yourself or other Asians or Pacific Islanders?**

I did. I had quite a few experiences of being racists towards me.

**Can you describe the incidents?**

Yes. One time I was driving, and this White kid with a mom driving, they yell at me, telling me what to do. I was holding my phone, and they want me to...and this is just a kid, and I don't think he even has the right to talk to me like that. I guess because I'm different from them.

Young kid, White kid can talk anything to anybody because they feel like it; they feel like I'm not White. Quite a few times I was driving. Mostly on service with a retail store, and you can tell that in front of me is a White guy, and they greeted him differently than they greeted me on my turn. They greet them, "How are you?" and all that. But on my turn, it was just nothing. You can feel. I'm not trying to be sensitive, but you can tell the way they look at you.

**And this all happened in Las Vegas, right?**

Yes. I never felt discriminated in Los Angeles. I think the main reason over there is that we live in a more ethnic Latino and Filipino community. I would say the White people there are not as racist as some people here in Las Vegas.

**Have you seen a change in how Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders, like the discriminatory rhetoric or practices against them since the beginning of the pandemic, how Asians are treated?**

I think it got worse because they call it the "Wuhan virus." As an Asian, I would say Chinese is...we're as one as an Asian. When they attack Asian Chinese, they don't care as long as you're from Asia. I would say it grew three hundred percent racial discrimination against Asians because of that.

**How did you feel personally when high-ranking U.S. officials would call COVID the “Wuhan virus,” the “China virus,” or the “Kung flu?”**

I think I feel he is in his own stupid league, and nobody can argue with that that he is the most stupid politician, and nobody can get close to that because not only he said something dumb, he created some people who would feel stupid against another ethnic, and that’s dangerous.

**How did you feel about the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests that happened last summer?**

Black Lives Matter rally and all that all over the U.S. I’d like to support them. I know that there’s a lot of people that really voiced. The reason they want to go out in the streets is to voice out what they’re feeling and nothing else, but there is also a lot of people out there who are not supposed to be in the rally, and I feel like they’re trying to make it a bad rally, and some people in the group are waiting for stores to get stolen, and they’re going to jump in and do it. Black Lives Matter on its own is really a good organization where I can support them.

**In what ways does or does not the Black Lives Matter movement affect Asians or Pacific Islander Americans?**

I think Black Lives Matter can be a big support both ways; Asians can support them, and Black Lives Matter can support Asians, not those against White. I think it’s towards improvement and change towards minorities. It’s not a movement against any other race and not against White, but it’s an awakening that people should know, and with reason to be open-minded especially children growing inside their house. But having an open conversation about other ethnicities with their parents. If their parents are racist or racially discriminatory, then the kids at home will become one of them.

**Do you feel safe and comfortable being Asian and living in Las Vegas?**

I feel safe because I know where to go and where not to go. I know who to talk to and not. I always observe my area, and I don't go to a place where I'm not welcome. I feel safe by thinking like that.

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

I like that because the more diverse, especially towards Asians, Las Vegas, the more I can relate. I know Asians are very friendly, and they're very smart and honest.

**Tell us more about your business and what exactly you do.**

Our business is construction, and we are a contractor. We do a lot of commercials, mainly restaurants. We specialize in tenant improvement restaurants. We have our own crew. We have our own plumbing, electrical and mechanical crew for stuff in our construction. We do our own design build. We have an engineer who can do design, architectural site plan and mechanical, plumbing and electrical calculations. We design for our own projects only. We don't design for anybody else. We are pretty good in dealing with the building departments, so that's our line of construction, mostly restaurant construction.

**What type of restaurants have you built here in Las Vegas?**

We built mostly Asian restaurants, like Top Sushi, Shabuya. There is ChiAm. It's like a Panda. We built a bar and grill, like Jackpot, (indiscernible), Viking. We built Del Tacos. Del Taco is the very first franchise restaurant that we built up in north.

**Do you think that the Asian business community is growing in Las Vegas?**

I don't see a lot of movement in Asian other businesses, but on the restaurants, yes, I think Asian restaurants, the food is for everybody. It's not designed for just a few or just for Asians. It's more for everybody.

**What about Filipino businesses?**

I don't see too many businesses in Filipino aside from home health business. Health businesses are dominated mainly by Asians and Filipinos and India. Restaurants are mainly by Japanese, Korean and Chinese.

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

It means good. I like it because it could grow more business chances for me to build more restaurants for them. Some of them, they actually need our help because there are a lot of people who are probably not going to do good because they're not really specializing in restaurants. That's all I can say about that business because other businesses, I can't talk about anything else but construction.

**Do you feel a part of the Asian and Filipino communities here in Las Vegas?**

I feel like I am part of it, yes.

**Do you like being part of the community, or what benefits do you see from being connected to them?**

Yes, I am proud of it, and I like it. We have a group of golfers every Sunday, mostly Asians. We change our networking especially on a business network, and it doesn't matter what kind of specialties, like doctors, construction, other kind of business. It doesn't matter. I like it because I'm well connected to them.

**How do you connect with your culture and your family after moving to Las Vegas?**

My connection with my old family back in the Philippines?

**Yes.**

We always have social media connections. We're using Messenger especially with my brother Bambbi and my brother Ronnie and their families.

**What about your culture? How do you stay connected to Filipino culture while being away from the Philippines?**

I always read the social media especially Facebook, and I can relate to videos there. I love to go back there if I can every other year. I would like to keep it like that.

**When you go back to the Philippines, how do you feel when you return there after moving to the U.S.?**

I feel good. I would like to say I'm proud because I accomplished something, especially I have my family here now. I kind of feel like I want to help, more than anything else, if I go back there.

**Would you be interested in moving back to the Philippines, or do you imagine staying in Las Vegas?**

I would love to visit but not to move for good. Las Vegas is my home now. I feel really comfortable here.

**Why do you think it's valuable for the university, UNLV or any university, to collect interviews such as yours among the Asian and Pacific Islander community?**

I think the important thing about this interview is that they can know the inside thoughts of other people, Asians. It doesn't matter if you have your own business or you work for somebody else. There are a lot of people who don't know how you think or how you enjoy your life or how do you see other developments here, and I think it will help.

**Do you feel represented in media as an Asian or Filipino? Do you feel like you can see yourself in movies, TV shows that you consume?**

I don't see it. Me, myself, I don't see it, but I would like to see some Asians, especially Filipinos, being part of that.

**Do you have any suggestions for someone else that we should interview for this project, ideally someone who lives in Las Vegas that is Asian or Pacific Islander or moved here from Asia?**

I would suggest Nathan Jimenez from Island Pacific.

**[End of recorded interview]**