

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARISSA FABIAN

An Oral History Conducted by Kyle Gregory Baluyut

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

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

“As a matter of fact, at the time, I thought it was Las Vegas, California. Yes, first time. Then the same year, we moved here and never left.”

Raised in Angeles City, Pampanga, Philippines, Charissa B. Fabian was the oldest of four children of an entrepreneur father and a schoolteacher mother. She describes a childhood with regular week-long visits with extended family grandparents and cousins. After graduating from the University of the Philippines with a nursing degree and working a few years locally, Charissa and nine classmates applied with a recruitment agency and found employment in New York. After working in other U.S. cities, Charissa and her husband came to Las Vegas in 1995. Here, she discusses the growing Filipino population in Las Vegas, nursing, her immigration process, the COVID-19 pandemic, and politics.

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November 24, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Kyle Gregory Baluyut

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Among Fabian’s first stops in the US included Honolulu, Hawaii, and New York City, New York, where she would go on to work in for several years. She describes her initial first impressions as well as her first time going to Las Vegas, Nevada. After moving to Las Vegas, she recounts finding a job, her current job, traditions, and festivals.6-10

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Reflections

The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander Oral History Project

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Just to start off, as much as you can, talk about your family and your childhood.

I am the oldest of four children. My dad was a businessman, and my mom was an elementary schoolteacher. Where I went to school or where I grew up, is that part of what you...? I grew up in what's called Angeles City. It's a small city about forty-five minutes away from Manila, which is a main city in the Philippines. I went to school in Angeles City, and then I went onto Manila to pursue my college studies. I went to the University of the Philippines for my nursing degree. My siblings and I, we all graduated from college. Anything else in particular?

What was your household like early on?

You mean financially or...? I think we were pretty comfortable growing up. I just thought that we were comfortable. We had helpers, house help. I didn't feel like we were wanting in anything, I mean materially. We were able to enjoy extracurricular activities, sports, scouting, and pursue hobbies and that. We were able to enjoy summer vacations as a family. That sort of thing.

How often were your parents at work?

My dad owned his own office machines and equipment business from the get-go. Weekdays he would be physically at the office, or he would have out-of-town meetings, conventions. My mom actually resigned early, retired early after our youngest sibling was born just so she could maybe concentrate more on raising the youngest one since my dad could provide for the family, anyway. As it turned out, she actually had her own little business as well because she got bored after a little while. Weekends were with family. It was spent with the family.

With your family in particular, how often would you spend time with your grandparents?

It was not like every weekend, but we would spend summers at our grandparents', and when I say summer, it could be a week at a time. I just had really great memories growing up spending

summer vacations with my cousins, my cousins who would be living in the same town or coming from Manila, pretty regularly, at least once a month.

What were your grandparents like?

My maternal grandfather was a schoolteacher, but he was a man of many talents. He was an artist. He cut people's hair. He was like a barber. He was like the barrio doctor who would give intramuscular shots to people who got sick who need antibiotics and all that. What else? Still a very talented man.

My maternal grandma, she did home business doing crafts. She made patches for school uniforms. Mainly, I think that. I don't know if you've seen school uniforms for the grade level patched onto their school top. Stuff like that.

On my paternal side, I didn't meet my paternal grandfather at all. He passed away from tetanus when my dad was still young. My paternal grandma, what did she do? I'm not sure exactly, but I think...wow, I don't remember her really working. She was older. I think stay-at-home grandma, I thought she was.

How would you identify yourself ethnically, Asian American?

I'm Filipino.

Moving on to how you moved here to the United States, what was the decision process behind that?

Coming to the States?

Yes.

I went to nursing school. At the time, nurses were so in demand back here that they would recruit people from the Philippines and maybe other countries, but I don't know. They just like recruiting nurses from the Philippines. I think they thought they were efficient, and they probably

didn't complain a lot, and they were very hardworking. After finishing my nursing program back home, I worked in the Philippines for a couple of years, two and a half, and that was a requirement. Not requirement, but I think that was suggested period of time to give back because I went to a state university as a scholar. We didn't pay much for tuition and that. I thought giving two years of service working there was a good thing to do, but I think almost everybody from my class wanted to come here mainly for financial gain. But one other thing that drove us to come here was in the Philippines, we didn't have the equipment that we needed to do our work more efficiently. I was just really excited to work and, ooh, you don't have to count IV drops or things like that. We actually have a machine that you can program to do accurate counting of how much you have to deliver to a patient. Things like that. The equipment here, you didn't have to recycle everything, it was not just easier, but the accuracy was there, not like the practice in the Philippines at the time. I don't know how it is now, maybe not much different. So, two things, the finances and the advanced equipment.

Was it just you when you decided to go to the States?

Actually, thinking back, I was influenced by an uncle of mine whose daughter is actually a nurse who just retired from school nursing, my cousin. When we graduated, the political climate in the Philippines was really bad. I wanted to do journalism and go into law, but he influenced me to take up nursing so that I could have a chance to come here, actually. He was saying, "Just finish your nursing and come here, get your foot in the door, and then do whatever you want after that. You can choose to be something else, change professions, but just try to come to the States so that you'll have a better life." Like financially. I think they thought it was safer to come here rather than be killed there in the line of duty being a journalist or something like that.

Regarding family members, was it ever a thought to bring them along to the States, or just by yourself?

At the time, I was twenty-one—no, I'm sorry. I graduated at twenty-one. I was twenty-four, I think, when I came here. My siblings were still in school, I think the one next to me—oh, no. My brother had already come here, joined the Navy. I think he came to the States before I did. I'm thinking we came here a month apart. I didn't really think of getting the family over. I think I just wanted to come here to see what it was like. I think that's that answer: I didn't really think too far ahead; I just thought for myself at the time.

Did you have any held assumptions about the States before going?

Assumptions as far as...what do you mean?

What did you think it was like before going there?

How life would be?

Yes.

In the Philippines, we were already very familiar because we have family who already lived in the States. We kind of had an idea of things that we just saw on TV or catalogs. Here you could actually experience or try and use. It was pretty exciting, the thought of coming here living the American life, not so much easy, but you'll know. Everything will be...How do you say it? Attainable. It's seemed easier to experience what you just in the past dreamt of. Oh, what would it be like to see snow? Things like that.

When you finally decided to go, what was the hardest to leave behind?

Oh yes, family, of course. I remember going to church on Sundays, and me and my friends would be crying almost through the entire mass because we would be thinking of how it was

when we would go to church with our family on Sundays. Even just eating your meals, you remember your family, and you miss them. Yes, that was the toughest, I think.

When you made it to the States, how would you keep in contact with them?

There was such a thing called MCI. Before, I would use that. You buy a phone card. I'm not sure if it was prepaid. No, no. They were prepaid phone cards that you can use to call overseas, call long distance, or you bought a plan that you would pay every month, and it will cost you so much per minute. So, by a phone. There was no Facetime like this, no Zoom or anything. It was just voice calls. And mailing out cards. I'm not sure if I did write letters, per se, but greeting cards probably on the holidays.

As you were leaving, were there any fond memories of home that you would recall to yourself?

Like I said, growing up our summer vacations, we really looked forward to them because they were just carefree, fun, and I had what you would call a *barkada*. *Barkada* means your group of close friends and mostly the ones whom you grew up with. Memories of family, cousins, and my *barkada*, yes.

Moving on, what was the immigration process like, going to the United States?

What we did as a group—I'm not sure if there were ten of us—roommates at the dorm where we worked at the Philippine General Hospital nurses' home. We all applied at this recruitment agency. They were the ones who did the processing for us. I think they paid for our airfare, for the application process, and at the time the agency gave us all pocket money of five hundred dollars each to start out. All we really needed to do was fill out forms. I'm not sure if there was even an interview. They did all the processing, basically. They got with New York City's Health

and Hospitals Group, so they were the ones in touch with the hospitals there, and they just paired us up. It wasn't too much of a hassle on our part.

Where was your first stop in the United States as a nurse?

Hawaii. We got to Honolulu and then New York—no, I'm sorry. Actually, it was L.A. Honolulu and then LAX and then Newark, New Jersey.

What was it like stepping foot into those places?

In Honolulu, it was kind of funny because when I saw, ooh, Filipinos. I asked them, "Hello, *kamusta*, are you Filipino?" they said, "No, I'm not Filipino. I'm Ilocano." Ilocano is actually a region in the Philippines, but I didn't realize that people in Hawaii identified themselves more as people of that region rather than people of the country, the Philippines.

We were just really excited because we were young. We were twenty-four, twenty-three, something like that. I came with my roommate at the nurses' home, so I wasn't by myself. It made it a little more fun. I don't think we even had anxiety. We were just kids going on an excursion.

Coming to Vegas, how did that come about in your life?

We were recruited to work. At first when they asked me where I wanted to go, I said, "Anywhere but New York City." Because at the time I thought New York was really a tough place to be at. I was afraid I was going to get culture shock.

But, or course, where do they send us? They send us to Manhattan, and I worked there for four and a half years. It was nice. The work experience was really good. The training was great. The winters, though, were pretty harsh. During that time, I got married and had a baby, my firstborn. It was hard to always bundle up especially in the wintertime and even just doing groceries. Everything became a chore because of the snow factor. Before you get out of your

driveway, you have to shovel. Well, I didn't have to do that. But I mean the time that you had to spend doing all that made us think of going someplace else that didn't require all that work.

We just went to the West Coast, in L.A. specifically, to see my son's grandma. Then we happened to come to Vegas. Well, they said, "If you're already in California, why not visit Vegas?" If you're coming from the East Coast, that's the thing then. We came here. This is in '95. The place was really booming. There was a lot of construction going on everywhere. We just thought this must be—the economy must have really been good. We thought, why not? We just gave it a shot. We didn't know anybody here, and we just took a leap of faith, and here we still are. How many years later? Twenty-six years later.

That's your first real memory of Las Vegas?

Yes, that was our first visit. As a matter of fact, at the time, I thought it was Las Vegas, California. Yes, first time. Then the same year, we moved here and never left.

What was the most difficult of the early days moving to Las Vegas?

Driving from New York and New Jersey. I was working in New York, but actually lived in Jersey City the last couple of years. It was leaving my friends behind. We had made really good friends there. We were all newbies, so we bonded like family. Then here I was four years later trying it out on our own in a strange place where we didn't know anybody. We were just going to try our luck although we knew, of course, that if there is a hospital, I would definitely get a job, and sure enough, that's what we did. I was the one who tried to get a job first and made sure that we had medical insurance because with a baby you didn't want to be without medical coverage in case anything happened. Matthew, my oldest, was two months old when we moved here, so April, May, yes, three months.

Aside from New York, how does Las Vegas compare to the other cities in the U.S. where you lived?

It's very convenient to live here in Vegas especially during that time where stores were open twenty-four hours, like Walmart. If you needed anything any time of day or night, you can get it. Jobs-wise, I think if you just went out there and looked for one, you will get one because they were building all these casinos, all these constructions for businesses. Jobs-wise, you'll get it. You'll have something. Then, of course, it's a bonus that we don't have to pay state and city taxes, which we did in New York, so that's one big advantage. I remember being paid more in New York but taking home less because of the taxes.

The weather, everybody said, "Oh, you're going to the desert. It's too hot and everything." But if you're indoors, you have air conditioning, and if you have to go outdoors, then you just choose the time to go. If you want to do your groceries, you can do that in the evenings when it's cooler. Adjustment wasn't that bad.

Presently what is your family composition like?

Family constitution?

Composition, what's your family like right now here in Vegas?

I have my kids, a boy and a girl. My mom used to live with us, my parents actually, but my dad had passed away, and now my mom was staying with us. But when she went to the Philippines, she got stuck there because of the pandemic. She is coming back early next year. My kids are now twenty-six and twenty-five, but for now they're still staying at home. I encouraged them to do so as long as they can or they want so that they can pay off some...they incurred student loans and all that. If they can do that and pay here without having to pay for housing, that will be great. I just want to give them a little advantage before they set out on their own.

Working in Las Vegas, what have been your jobs, past and present?

When I first came to Vegas, I had to look for a full-time job, and the only hospital that would offer that at the time was Sunrise Hospital. Coming from a government hospital in New York, I wanted to try working at one, too, but the University Medical Center wasn't offering a full-time job at the time. I started at Sunrise, and I'm still at Sunrise after twenty-six years. I did work a per diem job for eight months just to try it out at another facility, which was at Kindred. It's a long-term acute care facility. I did that for eight months, and then just kept my Sunrise job all this time. I work in the medical ICU.

Where in Vegas have you lived? Have you ever moved into different neighborhoods, or stayed in the same house?

It's always been in the southwest area. When we first moved, we stayed in an apartment on Decatur and Sahara. We stayed there for eleven months, and then before the year ended, we got a house on Flamingo and Cimarron. Now we're still here in the southwest area.

Do you think the neighborhood has changed in any way since first moving in?

Structurally, definitely a lot of housing. Houses really mushroomed. Business establishments have multiplied as well. The roads, they're still building more. First, there was a desert in arterial, and then now the 215 freeway. A lot of construction, buildings and stuff.

Are there any traditions and festivals that are important to your family?

Being Catholic, Christmas is a big one, Easter; that's a big one, too. Thanksgiving we also celebrate as a family. Even Fourth of July, Halloween, they're major holidays. Yes, we try to observe at least.

Were there any traditions in your family in particular back home that you had?

Just Christmas and New Year's. Growing up, those were the big ones. Easter, Easter Sunday.

In that nature, it hasn't really changed moving to Vegas.

No. Maybe the food. It became more diverse. But pretty much the same holidays.

Going deeper into the family, what have been a few of the most significant events in your family's history?

Immediate family including parents and siblings? All of that?

Yes.

Significant...the birth of the kids and raising kids. Does that answer? For me particularly, I enjoyed because I was very involved in both my kids' growing-up years, like I really enjoyed seeing them at every stage of their school life and their extracurricular activities. That's very important to me. I take so much pride. I feel so accomplished. I would keep that for the rest of my life. I wouldn't exchange that for anything, the experience of being a mom, just seeing these kids grow and just being there for them.

Back to Las Vegas, I'm just going to ask you some of the differences you can find between Vegas and the other places you've lived in. Specifically, what's been the biggest political differences between Vegas or the United States and the Philippines? How does that compare?

I have never been really involved in politics, per se. But I just know the Philippines, the graft and corruption there is over the roof. There is such here, but it's not as bad as what we have home.

Does that answer the question?

Oh yes. Do you think there are any big cultural differences as well between that?

I think in Vegas we are pretty diverse. It's really a melting pot. People flock here to find work. It's not just people coming from different states but from different countries as well. Comparing it to the Philippines, or comparing it to New York?

All the places you've lived before Vegas, wherever you've lived a bit longer.

New York is the same way; it's a melting pot. I met different kinds of people there, too, from different countries. There is that similarity. Although I hear people who actually grew up in New York, they say that people you grow up with, you'll still be friends for the rest of your life, kind of, which is how it is in the Philippines. The one complaint I hear here is that in Vegas, with so many transients coming here, sometimes you don't get to really keep the friends you get to have for the long haul. Maybe there's a grain of truth in that, but I have known friends here, like from my workplace, and I've been friends with them for at least fifteen, twenty-plus years. So not so much for me, that's not much of a difference for me. Did I go off topic again?

That's fine. It's all good. [Pause] Would you like to go on?

Oh no. Anything else? If I answered the question already or not.

What do you think people who have never traveled outside of Vegas, what do you think they should know about the culture and history of the Philippines?

People who have not been out of Vegas?

Yes.

What should they know about the Philippines? Can you say that again?

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

Oddly enough, I think Filipinos are very...I don't know of anyone who doesn't know of a Filipino. I just think that we're everywhere. There is no state in all of the U.S. that doesn't have a Filipino, and then, of course, there's Manny Pacquiao. He's not only nationally known, but worldwide so. Maybe if you go to the Midwest where there's really a very little chance of seeing

Filipinos. But honestly, everywhere, anywhere you go, be it Nebraska, Ohio, anywhere, there are so many Filipinos.

But going back to what I would want them to know about the Filipinos, I think it's the solidarity of the Filipinos. Even if you just meet a co-Filipino for the first time anywhere you go, you will feel that kinship, and you'll have that certain feeling of, I don't know, comfort, like a belongingness, like, *oh*, even if you never met them. I don't know. You're drawn to your co-Filipinos. Yes, Filipinos are loyal, fun-loving. With or without, they can make life fun. Even without resources, they just know how to be happy, to live happily even if they're not rich. Filipinos just know how to have fun.

Ever since moving into Las Vegas, what do you like the most about living here?

Traffic has never really been that bad no matter how tight you think it is sometimes. I've been to worse places. Traffic is one thing I like, and then the convenience of having the stores open, restaurants open longer than any other place I've been. They say that New York is the city that never sleeps. Well, it does. During this pandemic, I think things have changed some, but Las Vegas is truly the city that never sleeps.

Considering Las Vegas is all about gambling, how do you feel about the activity itself and the whole industry of it?

I think there are two kinds of gamblers. There are gamblers who go out there for recreation, I think, just to have fun, and there are serious gamblers who really know what they're doing and who have an objective and a strategy, and there are some who really have the talent or the skill, the talent, and they study their game, so they know when to place a bet, and they know what they want out of this game, and they know when to get out. If they're ahead, out. I've seen both kinds of players.

It gives the city revenue, so it's a business. I do not see it is being bad, per se. It's up to the people how they use it. As long as they have control and they know what they're doing, it's okay. It's creating jobs for a lot of people, and I think that's a positive thing.

Considering how diverse Vegas is, I am sure there is no shortage of finding food from the Philippines. How close do you think that food is compared to how you usually had it?

Oh, yes, it's pretty easy. I'm not sure if it's just here in the southwest, but yes, no problem at all. I can even walk to an Asian store to get food that I am used to back home.

Do you think it measures up? Do you think it's pretty accurate, the food?

Pretty close, yes. I always prefer homecooked-mom Filipino food, but I don't mind going out to the Filipino restaurants once in a while. There are different versions of making every Filipino dish, I guess, and to me, I'm pretty open about that. I am very appreciative of however any Filipino dish is made. I'm not like, "Oh, this is how we make it. This is how it should taste." No, I'm pretty flexible that way, so I welcome different versions.

Aside from food, has there ever been other reminders of Filipino culture here in Vegas, like stores or items?

There are Asian, not particularly Filipino stores, that carry Filipino products, so I don't feel that we are too wanting in that aspect. It's all good. I don't know if that answers the question. I don't feel too deprived of Filipino goods, and sometimes we get to improvise.

There is this term called the *model minority*. Are you familiar with the term?

No, I'm not. Model minority?

Yes. The model minority, like White Americans would call people of Asian descent to be upstanding and successful compared to other people of color and expecting a lot of success

and falling in line in the United States. With that in mind, has that in any way affected you?

I don't know if I can state that it has affected me one way or another, but I do know, and I am proud to say that for the most part, I think Filipinos or Filipino children or Filipino students fair pretty well especially in academics. I guess because of the culture, we are very geared towards education, higher education, even, and scholastic achievements. I don't know if you can call that affecting me, but I just feel that certain pride that for the most part that's what we see among Filipino children, Filipino students.

Have you ever experienced any racially discriminatory practices against yourself or other Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders in your life?

Yes. At work, for as long as I have worked in this field, of course we meet with different kinds of people, different Asians, different cultures. You will hear that from time to time. We have a Filipino accent, and they'll say, "Can you speak English?" even when you are speaking English. Or they'll say—this is rare, though, but I see it and I hear—they'll say, "I don't want a brown-colored nurse; I want a white nurse." We do get that. But you know what, though? For the most part, it's more often that I hear praises, though, about Filipino nurses in particular. They'll say, "Oh, you guys are the best," and they would praise us and tell us how different we are from nurses of different cultural backgrounds. Rather than discriminatory background, I hear more of the good things about us than the opposite.

Concerning all this discriminatory rhetoric or practices, do you think it's changed since the pandemic began?

As far as the reality that anybody can die from COVID regardless of age, race or...? Is that what you're trying to ask?

The origins of the pandemic, it changes the attitude.

Not so much, really. I really didn't even hear of people making remarks to that effect. If anything, I think I hear more of people appreciating just life in general. I think people are more accepting of one another, in fact, versus being discriminatory. I don't know if I have blinders on or something, but I think it made a positive effect in a lot of people realizing our own fragility, like nobody is immune. Not so much the pointing fingers at a certain culture as being the source of this or...

A lot of times in the news, high-ranking U.S. officials would have called COVID-19 the "Wuhan virus" or the "China virus" or "Kung flu." What are your feelings on things like that?

I think they're just referring to it because of the origin. That's where it started, and so they're calling it that, but it doesn't mean that it's from "these people," I think. I think people are sometimes just putting so much color, or they try to twist things to make it seem like what they want people to believe. The media, most particularly, tries to manipulate the public into believing certain things. Sometimes it's misleading. It incites people to think negatively. They put malice into things, I think. Sometimes I don't think the people who say things mean something bad, but the people who disseminate information twists it somehow.

There's been movements demanding equality, such as Black Lives Matter. How do you think a movement like that has affected Asian or Pacific Islander Americans today?

How we're affected by different cultures? I don't know if it has affected other cultures adversely or positively. To me all lives matter, so not just one particular color or race. To me equality has to be across the board, not a specific group. Not just a specific group.

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

Is that for real? Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders are the fastest-growing group, so that means versus Hispanics and Whites and Black Americans?

Yes, the fastest-growing population group in Southern Nevada.

Really? Well, awesome. Like I said, somehow I believe that because of the culture of this education-loving people that we are, I think it will be for the good of Southern Nevada if that's the case because I know that this particular group will have much to contribute to society. They are very competitive. I just think that Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders are highly competitive. They're achievers, so it will be a good thing for Southern Nevada.

Finally, one final question. Why do you think it's crucial for the university to collect interviews such as yours for their project?

Why do I think it's crucial for students of UNLV to gather information like this? Well, this particular one targets the Asian community, right? Are there other groups that are targeting their own? I'm just wondering if, say, Asian Americans are doing this, and then Hispanics are doing their own, and this, and when all that is collated, people can have a better insight into what people are doing right or what is beneficial, and then they can all share the good and try to avoid what's not working so well.

I believe that is it. Thank you.

I hope I was able to answer your questions.

[End of recorded interview]