

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH MIGUEL VILLARBA**

An Oral History Conducted by David Islas

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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

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

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

“In America, everyone is fighting for equality. I’d say everyone has a right and a chance to become equal with everyone else.”

As the son of a government worker and a nurse, Palo Verde High School graduate and College of Southern Nevada student Miguel Villarba details his life as a Filipino-American immigrating to the United States. Villarba, alongside his younger brother, began living a middle-class life in Manila, Philippines. His mother's nursing job--after ten years of processing--finally allowed the family to come to the U.S. in 2016, arriving first in Chattanooga, Tennessee. When she completed her contract there, the Villarbas came to Las Vegas, where three of his aunts and uncles already lived.

Villarba attended Catholic middle and high schools in Chattanooga and transferred to a public high school after arriving in Las Vegas in the middle of the year. Here, he aspires to complete his associate degree in radiation therapy. He talks about his grandfather's farm in Pangasinan, cultural differences between the Philippines, Chattanooga, and Las Vegas; different forms of gambling between the Philippines and Las Vegas; Filipino material culture, foods, and traditions, and racial discrimination.

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December 6, 2021  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by David Islas

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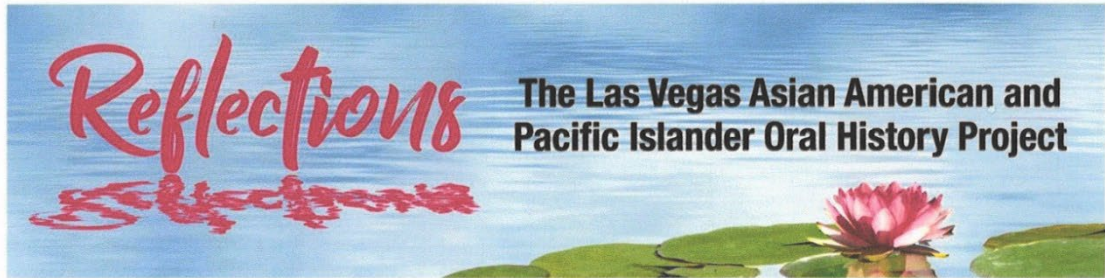
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**I am the interviewer, David Islas, [it is December 6, 2021], and our narrator here is Miguel Villarba.**

**The first question I want to ask of you, Mr. Villarba, is just some background information. Talk about your family and your childhood, like where you grew up, your friends, stuff like that.**

I grew up in the Philippines, in metro Manila, Philippines to be exact. My family is basically like any run-of-the-mill family, working parents. Mom was a nurse; that's basically how we got to the U.S. She got a job here in the U.S. She applied to get one, she got one, and we got our visas and stuff and passports, and we got here. I grew up in Manila, Philippines. I had an average amount of friends. I grew up in...What's the opposite of rural?

**A suburban area?**

Yes, I grew up in a suburban area. There were not a lot of people. Our house was kind of separated from everyone else's because ours had a gate. I grew up going to basically private schools for most of my life in the Philippines. Dad worked a government job. Mom worked as a nurse for as long as I knew. I was generally close with most of my family in the Philippines. I got in contact with my relatives in the U.S. from time to time, but not as much as the ones I could reach when I was still back there. I think that's pretty much it.

**Did you guys take any sort of family trips or vacations or anything to America before you moved here?**

I don't think we ever did take any trips to America. We took trips outside the Philippines, but never America.

**Where did you guys go outside the Philippines?**

As much as I can remember, just Hong Kong.

**Tell us about your grandparents and some of the stories that they've told you about their experiences within the Philippines.**

As far as grandparents are concerned, I was only ever really close with two of them, with only one out of the two sets of grandparents that I have, because the other ones were really far away from us. We couldn't talk to them all the time compared to the ones I'm closest with because they lived fairly close to where we were.

As far as stories are concerned, I just remember this story that my grandpa told me. He said that back then when he lived in the rural side of the Philippines, called Pangasinan, you had to be a certain age to go to school. I forgot what age. But on top of being a certain age to go to school, you had to do this weird thing, like you were supposed to be able to reach your other ear, place your hand on top of your head and reach your other ear to be able to attend school, which I thought was really weird. I don't know why, but he just said you had to. He said he really wanted to go to school. He basically kept asking the teacher if he could to the point where the teacher was willing to take him in, but not as an official student, but like a guest who would just...He would learn, too, but he is not an official student. He would just go there whenever it was time to, whenever his sister would go, too, and he'd basically learn with them.

**Another question I want to ask is, how do you define your ethnicity and where you're specifically from? Do you just say that you're from the Philippines, or...?**

Yes, I usually just say I'm from the Philippines. Whenever someone asks, I just say I'm Asian.

**You mentioned that your mom got a nursing job, and that was a big reason why your family left the Philippines. You mentioned that your dad also had a government job, so you guys ended up traveling from the Philippines to here. But were there any other motivations as to why you guys left, or was that the sole motivation?**



I guess a couple of other motivations, but the main motivation was for my mom and for my dad to move here was to give me and my brother just a better life in general compared to the Philippines because in America, you get better education and better health care compared to the Philippines.

**Can you give a year when you guys left?**

When we left...it's 2021 right now...I think we got here five years ago. I'd say 2016 we arrived in the U.S.

**How did you guys travel here?**

We traveled by plane. It took a couple of days to get here. We had a couple of stopovers.

**Who came with your parents? It was you, your parents, and who else?**

My little brother, just the four of us.

**Where did they go first?**

When she got accepted to go here, we first got and stayed at Chattanooga, Tennessee.

**How did you guys get to Vegas?**

I think we got here after my mom's contract with the hospital at Chattanooga was done, and then we went here just because most of our family is here in Vegas, and that's one of the main reason why we moved to Vegas.

**What were the hardest things to leave behind in the Philippines?**

The hardest thing, it was friends just because I knew a lot of people. Since I stayed at one school for years, I just knew everyone, and everyone knew me. Just leaving that felt kind of sad.

**Do you keep in contact with family members in the Philippines?**

Yes, we do. We still talk to them when we can, at least. We still get into contact with them, and they try to contact us, too, whenever.

**Do you guys do it over the phone?**

Yes, we generally do it over the phone.

**Do you have a specific fond memory of your back in the Philippines or the school life that you had?**

I guess the fondest memory I can think of is when there was a school event where we could all sleep over in the school. We stayed there for two or three days because our school had showers and everything, so we could stay there for a long amount of time. It was fun because I got to hang out with all of my friends, and we just played around and talked the whole time.

**Just as more background if you know, do you know if it was difficult for your family to go through U.S. Immigration laws, or was it pretty straightforward?**

It was pretty straightforward. As far as I know, it was pretty straightforward because we didn't really have any trouble going to and from.

**You also mentioned that you flew from Tennessee to Las Vegas because most of your family was there. Do you know how your family got to Las Vegas?**

I do not.

**The only reason why your family came here was because you already had relatives over here?**

Yes, our relatives and just a better life in general.

**What were your first memories of Las Vegas?**

I remember trying to find a school that would accept me in the middle of the year because we moved from Tennessee to Las Vegas in the middle of the school year. We just tried to find a school that would accept me in the middle of the year.

**Where did you guys first move into and live when you got here?**

What do you mean by “moved here?”

**What did you move into? Did you move into North Las Vegas or Summerlin or...?**

This is Summerlin, right?

**Where you live currently, yes.**

Yes, Summerlin. Yes, I'd say Summerlin.

**What was the most difficult thing to deal with when you first moved to Las Vegas?**

Just getting used to going to a different school again. It's the third time because I've been to three different schools because we had to move. Middle school to high school, different school, and then after that, I had to move here, another different school, yes, moving schools.

**Did you have anyone in particular that was really helpful into integrating into Las Vegas at all?**

Just family members. They helped us get settled in and with anything we needed.

**Comparing Las Vegas to where you came from, Chattanooga, Tennessee, what were the differences that you could see when it came to your experiences as an Asian American?**

When I lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee, there were hardly any Asian Americans there. I could count how many there were on my fingers compared to here in Las Vegas where there are a lot.

**You already talked about that you have your mom, your dad, and your brother with you.**

**Do you have any other close family that lives in your house?**

Does my grandpa that's living for a while on vacation count? He's not living here permanently.

He's just here on vacation.

**I just wanted to learn a little bit more about who is living with you and whatnot.**

Just that, if that counts, my grandpa is just over on vacation, staying here.

**You said you have a lot of family here in Vegas, too. Are those just cousins or aunts and uncles?**

Cousins, aunts and uncles. I have three aunts and uncles here and three cousins, too.

**They all live around the Summerlin area, too, correct?**

Two of them do. The other one lives in North Las Vegas, I think.

**Do you have any work experience in Las Vegas?**

Does that usher job I do count?

Yes.

Yes, that.

**Would you like to go into further detail about that, just like what you do at the job and whatnot?**

I had to direct people to where their seats were and such. One time I had to stand up in front of the venue and answer people's questions about the event that was going on inside and just general questions about where everything was in the casino.

**Is there a lot of people with the same ethnic background as you in your neighborhood?**

I haven't really met much people or any people at all in this neighborhood because it's a new neighborhood. It got built recently, so I'm not exactly sure.

**Since you're basically new to this neighborhood, have you noticed any changes ever since you've been there, or has everything still been pretty consistent?**

Everything has still been pretty consistent, just new people here and there moving into the newly built houses.

**Can you tell me about traditions and festivals that are important to your family around the city or just what they celebrate?**

In the Philippines?

**We'll go locally.**

Locally, here, I don't know other than just the regular U.S. holidays, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's. That's it, just what everyone else celebrates.

**Was that different back in the Philippines?**

Not as different, but kind of, because back in the Philippines, we didn't celebrate Thanksgiving; that's more of an American thing. We didn't have days, like Presidents Day, no, not Presidents Day, we didn't have days, like Veterans Day and stuff like that.

**Has there been some sort of significant event that's happened within your family that caused a shift in the way that you guys live or the way that you guys perceive things?**

No, not really. Everything has been fine since we moved. We kind of got used to everything around here, so there's not really much.

**From your personal experience, what are some of the big differences that you see in Vegas related to culture?**

Could you repeat the question?

**Yes. Compared to the other places that you've lived, how is Las Vegas culturally different than those places?**

I'd say things like festivals because here in Las Vegas, you guys have the Pure Aloha Festivals. You guys hold a bunch of concerts, too, like Day n' Vegas, and things like that compared to Chattanooga, Tennessee where there was barely anything to do, but it was more of a nice and quiet neighborhood.

**Do you see a difference in language in Las Vegas than you did in other places?**

I'd say it's more diverse here compared to Chattanooga because I hardly met anyone that just spoke Spanish or spoke both English and Spanish, English and their native tongue. All they knew was English compared to here where most of the people I know knew both English and their native language.

**Did you notice any political differences between Las Vegas and the other places you've lived?**

Isn't Nevada a swing state?

**It can be, yes.**

Yes, so that compared to Tennessee, which is a Republican state, I'd say that's pretty much it.

**Have you seen any religious/spiritual differences between Las Vegas and Tennessee or even the Philippines?**

In Chattanooga, I went to a Catholic school, so I'd say there are more religious people there compared to here because there were a lot of those there compared to here in Las Vegas where I know of none, or if there are some, there are barely any as far as I know unless I'm wrong, and in the Philippines, too, there are a lot of Catholic schools, and I grew up in Catholic school. I'd say just that general difference religious-wise.

**Have you noticed a difference in lifestyle comparing Las Vegas to other places you have lived?**

The major difference is the Philippines and Las Vegas aren't that different. It's a busy place. Everyone is almost always on the move for the most part. Where I lived in Tennessee, Chattanooga, it was more of a laidback kind of place. No one was in that much of a rush. There was hardly any traffic.

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

I don't know apart from, if you visit the Philippines, most of the people there usually know English, so you won't have that much of a language barrier between them when talking to them. In the Philippines, when you buy stuff not in actual stores, but outside of stores, just the locals sell stuff, you can barter and you can ask for a lower price, and they'll give you one if you ask nicely, for the most part. What culture was, like eating, eating without utensils, you're not looked down upon. You can eat with your hands, and you'd be fine. People wouldn't think you're weird or anything compared to here. Or if you eat with your hands, I think people think it's kind of weird since everyone uses either chopsticks or utensils, like a spoon or a fork and a knife.

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

Just that compared to the places I've lived, there was more stuff for me to do because in the Philippines, I hardly ever went out because everything that you could do would be an hour or two away. Anything good that you could do would be an hour or two away, something fun, compared to here, which would generally be thirty minutes away or less depending on where you are. Everything is close to each other, and you almost always have something to do.

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

I think it's okay. It's just a different form of gambling here compared to the Philippines because in the Philippines, there would be places that would hold chicken fights; that's basically one of the forms of gambling there. You guys have slot machines and stuff here; there you would have card gambling there, too, and stuff like that. From where I lived at least, there weren't that many casinos. But I'm fine with it.

**What foods remind you of your family, and can you get those foods readily available to you in Las Vegas?**

Yes. Foods, like *adobo*, *kare-kare*. There are a lot of Filipino restaurants here. Filipino food is pretty readily available. I don't miss food much, but there is that taste difference; it tastes better at home than it is compared to if you get it somewhere else.

**Are there any crafted items that remind you of your family back home, or just objects that remind you of your family back home, and can you purchase them here?**

There is this thing called a *parol*. It's a star ornament with lights around it and lights in it. You can buy it here. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. It's usually made out of paper and plastic. That's usually something you hang outside your door when it's Christmas. When it's December, you'd usually see it outside of people's doors, and that would indicate that Christmas is coming since it's December. I know that you can buy it here. That's one of the things that reminds me of home, and you can get it here.

**Have your relatives or you ever made them, or no?**

No, because it's pretty hard to make. You usually just buy it.

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

That's the first time I've heard that.

**I can go ahead and explain it in full detail. The model minority myth relates to Asian Americans, and it's the perception that Asian Americans are going to be the higher, successful people. They're always going to be smarter. They're always going to be the perfect minority where they just don't have any struggles, and they move to America and become successful because of whether they be intelligent or whether they have certain**



**perks or something like that. That quota around Asian Americans has been up to debate and on topic recently. Has that affected you in any sort of way?**

I don't think it has is what I'm thinking right now. I don't think that's ever come up other than the stereotype of you're Asian; you must be good at math. That's it.

**Have you ever experienced racially discriminatory practices against you or other Asian American or Pacific Islanders, and can you describe any incidents that you've experienced?**

No, I haven't.

**Have you seen them on the news?**

No. What is the news? No, I'm kidding. No, I don't think I have.

**Have you witnessed any type of Asian American hate or discrimination in Las Vegas?**

No.

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

Only that thing that the Asians brought the coronavirus. Other than that, nothing else.

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

I don't know. I guess I felt discriminated against just because it originated from China that doesn't mean that every Asian has it or brought it to the U.S., and it being called that is just insensitive.

**This is subjective, so it's up to you. In what ways does, or does not, the Black Lives Matter movement affect Asian or Pacific Islander Americans?**

I'd say it affects us because everyone that's not Caucasian or of any descent in that manner, in some cases, we don't get treated the same. In America, everyone is fighting for equality. I'd say everyone has a right and a chance to become equal with everyone else.

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

What do you mean? What do I feel about it?

**Yes.**

I'd say it sounds about right. Most of the immigrants that come—well, not most, but a decent amount of the immigrants that come to the U.S. are Asian, and it makes sense that Asian Americans are on the rise population-wise.

**Why would you think it's valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?**

I'd say it just helps people become more aware of just different backgrounds and help learn from the major differences, at least, from the U.S. compared to other developing countries.

**How was your experience in the education system coming over from the Philippines to the United States?**

I personally didn't have a hard time getting used to American education because I'd say that my education in the Philippines was much harder and more difficult compared to here in the U.S. because I'd say that here in the U.S., it is explained more simpler, in a way, compared to where I'm from.

**Did they ever make any accommodations for you in school, or did they just have you go in?**

They just had me go in as far as I can remember. No, they just had me go in.

**Has there been any sort of racism that you've witnessed throughout the country that have upset you, or you found yourself relating to the people that were being attacked?**

Just the Black Lives Matter movement. I remember at one point, there were a lot of attacks on Asians, Asian Americans in California with that one old Asian man got beat up. I forgot for what reason. But I remember seeing that in the news.

**Do you believe that immigrating to the United States from the Philippines should have been more challenging, or not?**

I'd say it's already challenging enough because it took, what, ten years for my mom to get approved to finally go to the U.S. and get to work here.

**When you and your parents flew from the Philippines to the U.S., was United States providing you with any sort of materials or information to help you get used to the process or, at least, be knowing what you were coming into, or did you just have to come to America?**

We just had to come to America. I don't know of any accommodations that were given to us to help us ease into moving here.

**Can you talk about where you currently go to college as well?**

Currently, I go to CSN. Do you want me to say what I'm trying to major in?

**Yes.**

Currently, I'm in radiation therapy. I'm trying to get my associate degree so I can start working, and then go off of that radiation therapy degree to something more.

**You said you don't know specifically how your other family got to Las Vegas, correct?**

Yes, I'm not exactly sure.

**Do you still have a lot of family home back in the Philippines?**

Yes, if I remember correctly, most of my family is in the Philippines. We moved here because most of my mom's family is here in America.

**Was there a specific reason why your dad chose to leave his family behind in the Philippines, or was it just the best scenario?**

It was the best scenario, and he didn't really leave his family because he has family here, too. But yes, it's just best scenario, for the most part.

**Did your parents want to take other family with them to Tennessee, or did they just say that they had to do it on their own?**

If I remember right, my dad wanted to bring my grandpa with us to live here in the U.S., but he didn't want to. My dad's brothers even tried to convince my grandpa to, but he just said no, he didn't want to; he wanted to stay in the Philippines.

**Do you know of any motivations that he had to stay there?**

Just that there's more stuff to do in the Philippines compared to here because he has a farm and apartments, so he has that to do, too, and he is working there as a teacher, so he has that to do compared to here where he'd kind of just do nothing. He prefers doing something over nothing.

**You said your grandfather owns a farm in the Philippines. Does he employ people there and work together?**

Yes.

**Does he provide food to the locals?**

He used to live there, the farm he owns. He used to live in that area. As much as I can remember from when I was young, he knew the people that work there. It's close friends, I'm assuming. He works there, too, from time to time, when he can just because it's not as easily accessible because it's far from where he lives. From time to time when he can, he helps out.

**Did your grandfather always live in Manila, or did he come from somewhere else on the island?**

He came from somewhere else. He used to live in Pangasinan in the Philippines, and then he moved to Manila for the same reason that my parents moved to the U.S., just so his sons could have a better life.

**And how many sons did he have?**

Three, my dad and his two brothers.

**Do you know how your parents met?**

I do not, or at least I don't remember. I remember them telling me, but it's been so long.

**They're both Filipino, correct?**

Yes.

**You mentioned, also, the ethnic background being more diverse in Las Vegas. Does that make you more comforted, per se, being around people with the same ethnic background as you?**

Yes, it does because I grew up in the Philippines for most of my life, so I only ever knew other Asians and the occasional Caucasians that I met. Yes, I grew up with mostly an ethnic background, and so it's comforting.

**You mentioned this briefly earlier, but I'm just going to go back to it. You said that transportation and traffic is pretty bad in Las Vegas. Is that comparing to Tennessee and the Philippines?**

It's just compared to Tennessee, at least where I lived in Tennessee. There was hardly any traffic. But in the Philippines, traffic was bumper to bumper all of the time, as I can remember. Here in Las Vegas, it's not as bad. I'd say it's the middle ground from where I've lived so far.

**Can you tell me about the experience that you had finding employment in Las Vegas?**

**Could you tell me about how you found your job as an Asian American and being able to just get the job in general?**

Oh, I'd say it was pretty straightforward. I wasn't treated unlike anyone else, as far as I could tell. I wasn't treated any differently being an Asian American or being an Asian. It was pretty straightforward. I went to get interviewed, and then it went from there.

**You mentioned that you went to a lot of religious schools. Have you been able to attend churches here in Las Vegas that are accepting of you and your background?**

Yes. All of the churches we went to were accepting of us. We weren't treated any differently.

**You mentioned that you moved to Vegas about five years ago, right?**

Yes.

**When you moved here, was it easy to find a home to go straight into, or did you live in an apartment, and then you finally moved into a home?**

When we got to Las Vegas, we lived with my aunt and uncle for a while until we found an apartment, and then we started looking for homes because, as far as I remember, there weren't any homes nearby where we wanted to live because we wanted to live near our relatives, and then we found a house.

**Was there any specific motivation as to why you didn't go to a private school in Las Vegas?**

Was there any reason, is that what you said?

Yes.

No. I think it was the only school that would accept me midsemester because I moved here while school was still going on. I guess it was the only school that would accept me in; that's it.

**To be clear, you got accepted to Palo Verde High School, correct?**

Yes.

**Were there any sort of scholarships or anything that you attained being an Asian American that were able to help you get through college?**

I applied for a lot Asian-specific scholarships, and I applied for the CSN Nevada Promise Scholarship, too, which basically would pay for my college, or for the most part.

**You also said earlier in the interview that you had a few connecting flights, bouncing around before you ended up coming to the United States. Can you name where those flights were?**

From the Philippines, we had a stopover in Chicago if I remember right, and then after Chicago, we just went straight to Tennessee.

**The flight just had one stop, and then you just went to Tennessee?**

Yes. From what I remember, yes.

**Did you have any different experiences in the short time that you were in Chicago than you did stopping in Tennessee, or was it all just pretty quick?**

It was pretty quick. We were there for an hour or two, and then we went back into the plane.

**Can you tell me more about what your father's job was in the government?**

If I remember right, he was basically the treasurer. He was the head because he handled all the money that went through, after.

**This was in the Philippines, correct?**

Yes.

**And it was for the Philippines' government, or was it for...?**

It's for a place called the NBI; it's the National Bureau of Investigation. He was in charge of...I forgot what it was called. He was in charge of something. They had to pay to get it, and all the

money that they would get for the day would go through him, and him and his team would count everything up and put it in the safe. I forgot...

**Was your mother a nurse inside of the Philippines as well?**

Yes, she was.

**Did you guys own any sort of bigger houses, or were you guys still not well off?**

We were middle class, I'd say. We got off fine, but we weren't rich or anything.

**Did that change when you moved to America?**

I'd say we're still middle class.

**Both your parents got paid around the same when they moved here compared to back in the Philippines?**

They got paid way more because compared to Philippine pesos, a dollar is worth way more. One dollar is like fifty pesos.

**True. Do you know of any hardships that either of your parents experienced when they were having you guys as children or after they got married?**

I just remembered what it was. It's called like a clearance. It's NBI clearance; they paid for that. They just run a background check on you, so you can apply for jobs and stuff, if I remember right.

What hardships? As far as I know, not really apart from just my brother because I remember they told my mom and dad that they would get approved to go to the U.S. in a couple of years, so they were told to not have any other children, and then my mom gave birth to my little brother in the midst of them getting approved. Last minute, they were like, "Oh, you guys are approved." Then we had to take care of one three-year-old as we were moving to the U.S.



**Did the rule give them any sort of hardships when they had the child, or was it just a temporary extra set of paperwork?**

No, I don't think—yes, I don't think there was any extra because they knew of my brother. It was just...yes, it was just harder because my brother was just young at the time we were moving.

**Were there any nerves that you had moving to Las Vegas not knowing what it was going to be like?**

Yes, of course, because that's pretty much with any place you go to, you never know what it's like until you're there. You get everything you know based off of things you see and watch.

**Was the portrayal of Las Vegas within culture a bad misrepresentation of what this city is actually about?**

For the most part, I'd say it's pretty accurate. I expected a lot of casinos and stuff like that, and just a city life, everyone is always on the move going from place to place.

**I think this will conclude our interview. Thank you for being interviewed today, Mr. Villarba.**

You're welcome.

**[End of recorded interview]**