

AN INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE ABRIGO

An Oral History Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

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

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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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.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
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PREFACE



“That’s my journey, and I’m really, really happy because our American dream is coming true. I know it’s not yet full, but in the future... We just have to be patient.”

Originally of Chinese descent but born and raised in the Philippines, Catherine Abrigo recalls a happy childhood with a big family. Her parents ran a recycling business and her education consisted of Catholic school before briefly attending college for medical technology. Dropping out before she could finish because of the birth of her first child, Abrigo ended up working in the medical field as a medical representative selling pharmaceutical products. Her second marriage would eventually lead her to immigrate to Las Vegas, NV.

After moving here, she notes how hard it was to leave behind her family and the process it took to find a job. She began working for the Cosmopolitan in 2011 and quickly found a community through the Culinary Union she continues to be actively involved today. Nowadays, she simultaneously works as a guest room attendant at the Cosmopolitan while handling worker

grievances as a shop steward. Throughout the rest of the interview, Abrigo touches on a variety of other topics such as her family, activism through the Culinary Union, and how she has found the American Dream.

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July 20th, 2022
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

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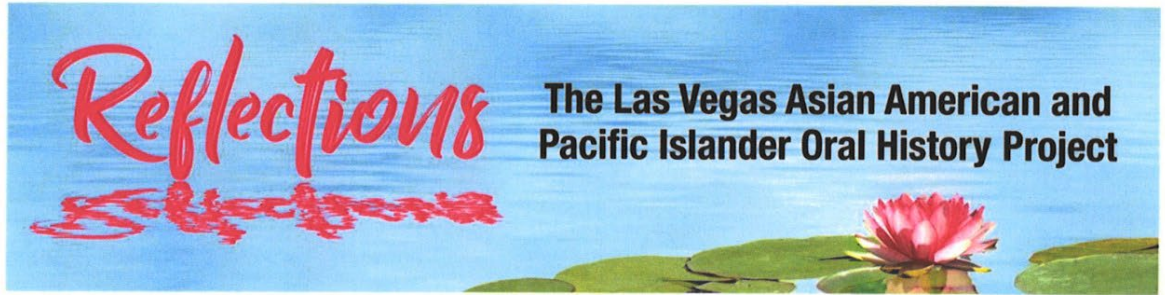
Catherine Abrigo begins by giving an overview of her journey, beginning with her childhood and family in the Philippines. She discusses her post-secondary education experience, briefly going to college for medical technologies, before becoming pregnant and having to stop college. Once settled down with her family, she started working as a medical representative before life took a turn and several family members died. Nevertheless, a string of events led Abrigo to meet her second husband and immigrate to the United States. After moving to Las Vegas, Nevada, she would go on to join the Lord’s Flock and then hear about the Culinary Training Academy that would lead to her placement at the Cosmopolitan Hotel.....1-5

Abrigo recounts her first days working at the Cosmopolitan Hotel and how she eventually became involved with the Culinary Union. Abrigo also discusses her family members and her work in immigrating them to the United States so she can reunite their family. She mentions her Chinese heritage, her experience with Catholic school, and the strong presence of the medical field throughout her family.....5-9

With siblings all across the world, Abrigo dives into the various money-making ventures her family has gone through to sustain themselves including their family recycling company. She continues to touch on topics including the hardest things to leave behind when she immigrated, culture shock, her first impression of Las Vegas, the friends that she has made since moving, and her current role with the Cosmopolitan Hotel.....9-14

In this section, Abrigo speaks highly of her union involvement, taking on roles ranging from being a shop steward to attending rallies. She details how she has her job and the union change during her involvement and where they are heading. She continues to touch on a variety of topics from religion to Filipino cultural celebrations, food, and her early life in Las Vegas.....14-19

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Name of Interviewer: Cecilia Winchell
Stepani Evans

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Catherine Abrigo 0713/2022
Signature of Narrator Date

Cecilia Winchell 7/19/2022
Signature of Interviewer Date
Stepani Evans 7/19/2022

Good afternoon. Today's date is July 20th, 2022. My name is Cecilia Winchell. I'm here with Stefani Evans, as well as Catherine Abrigo.

Catherine, may I ask you to please spell your first and last name for the record?

My name is Catherine Abrigo; C-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E, A-B-R-I-G-O.

Thank you. Can you please tell us about your childhood, where you grew up, your parents, your grandparents?

I grew up in the Philippines. I was Catholic. I grew up with a happy family. We are kind of conservative in the Philippines. My parents are into a recycling business. The paper, you do recycling, and then you use it for a new piece of paper or books or anything like that. They recycle it. That's what my parents did for a living. We are six siblings, five girls and one boy. I also studied in Catholic school. We are always praying. In Catholic schools, there are nuns, and so I grew up like that.



I went to college as a medical technologist, but I got pregnant, and so I had to stop. Afterwards, I get discouraged. I did not continue my schooling. I had to work as a medical representative. We sell pharmaceutical products and sell it to the pharmacies and doctors. In that time, I get married. I got married July 20th, 1996. We lived together. Afterwards, my husband

died from an accident. He drowned accidentally, and then I was single again. Prior to that, I get pregnant again. I have one child. Maybe my child is two years old when her father died.



Our business was okay, but my father died, and so we were bankrupt. My siblings started going overseas. One went to Brunei, and then another went to Ireland. I stayed with my mom to continue the business, but it's not working. I have to do something. It just so happened that my in-laws, who live in Las Vegas, she told me, since I was single, she will introduce me to somebody that she knows to get married to and then come here to the United States. That's how I went here.

We wrote each other. We talked on the phone. Then he visited me in the Philippines during the engagement. Then he got me, and then we get married here. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. It happens that when I came here, I was unemployed. He was working at the Wynn. We really don't get along, and I was not expecting that our marriage will be well, and so we divorce. But we are still okay because I really, really thank him because he brought me here. All the opportunities, it really helps me a lot and my family. When we were living together, I didn't have a job for one year.

Then I joined a Catholic group we call Lord's Flock. Through Lord's Flock, I met a friend there that tells me, "Why don't you look for a job in a hotel? Maybe a chambermaid." He

said it like that. I have no idea because that's not what I'm doing. But I hope it's easy. He said, "Guest room attendant." I said, "Oh, it sounds good, so maybe I'll apply."

I heard about the Culinary Training Academy. The Culinary Training Academy helps people for free to study for maybe a few months for housekeeping, for cooks, for wines, and porter, something related to a hotel job. I said, "Okay, let's go and join." That's how it started, and it's really helped me, the Culinary Training Academy. I just did a quick training, and then I wasn't able to do the graduation because I already have my job. We did a rush, and we send it, and then they emailed me for interview, and I started working in the Cosmopolitan hotel. That was September 19, 2011.

When I started the job, oh my god, I always cry. I don't know if I can make it because we have to do thirteen rooms. It's crazy. When you get to the room, the rooms are dirty, nasty, and you have to do it as quick as you can and, also, up to standard because the manager checks us. They have to check the quality of the room that you do. There are a couple of times that they inspect, and I think I failed, and I knew, and I was about to cry. But I was happy when I got my first check, and that makes me continue. For one year, I don't have nothing. Good thing we have friends that are nice that are helping us. Although my ex was unemployed, he's getting the money.

At that time, I was continuing at the Cosmo, and they only pay us fourteen seventy per hour. I remember a friend from Culinary knocks on the door, which they always do. In order to be a union member, they have to go knock doors for all those that work in the hotel to convince them to be union. I knew about it. But my ex works in the Wynn, and it's a part of the union, and he told me, "This is what it is. It will help you and give you all the benefits, raise, good insurance, pension."



I said, “Oh, really? But what am I supposed to do?” He told me to just sign a card and then help them to convince people from the Cosmo to join.

At that time, I was not busy. On my off day, they go to my house, and then we go house to house. I am one of those who go with the organizer to go house to house and convince them. I told them how it will help them although I have no experience because I have never worked in a union, I just go with the flow. But when we go rallying, I experienced that. I do sometimes speak to the clergy and, also, to the people. It really helps me to remove my shyness. But for me, I can feel what the people need because I know the job is not easy.

Afterwards, we got the contract, 2016. We won, and we are all very proud. That’s how I feel what the union is because the next year we already have increased. From fourteen seventy, now we are already twenty fifty-five plus we have a pension. After five years, we’re going to get a pension that will be vested, and we have a good insurance that includes our husband and our kids until twenty-six years old. That really helps me a lot. My job really gives me my dream compared to my country. I think I became more independent and learned when I was here in the United States without my parents. My journey is really not easy because I have to struggle first.



Now I am enjoying the fruit of my labor because I also petition my mom. My mom got a job here. She arrived June 2017. After a few months, she petitioned my youngest sister who is below eighteen at that time. Right now, she is already lined up for interview. It was delayed because of the pandemic and all, so the backlog for the U.S. embassy. She is waiting for her to come, and because she got pregnant early, including her kid. Not only that, the opportunity also, my sister, because I live in the United States, I have a sister in the Philippines that has visited me in the U.S. She got a ten-year visitor, tourist, so it's another opportunity. I have another sister who works as a nurse in Ireland. She was a nurse there, but her dream is to be in the United States. It's not really in Europe. Everybody wants the United States because when we were young, we watched movies, Hollywood. We watched Disney. We like to go to United States. She said, "In the future, I want to get licensed as a nurse in the United States." But her first attempt, she failed. She has been working in Ireland for the longest time. Now she just got a license, and she got a job in Arizona, and she just arrived June 30, 2022, which is very good because it brings us together. My mom and I are now waiting for my other sister, and then now my sister is here, and not only her, her husband and her kid. Her husband got a job offer, too. He's in IT. He still has the job in Ireland as an IT. He has an offer from a company in Nevada, from New Jersey, and Oregon, but he chooses Nevada. He said that because of me, we are together now.

Not only that, I have a nurse that is my brother. He is already a licensed nurse in the Philippines, but he applied as a nursing assistant. Now he is the process of working as a nurse in Missouri, U.S. He just needs to pass NLEX; it's a nursing license in the U.S. His first attempt failed, but he will do it again. He's not going to stop until he passes. But his steppingstone is to be a nursing assistant, but the agency told him, "When you are here, you can take an exam, and then when you pass for nursing, then you can be a nurse."

It really helps me, my family, although I have other relatives in other states, but my families are really important. Hopefully in the future, we will be all together. We stay on together. That's my journey, and I'm really, really happy because our American dream is coming true. I know it's not yet full, but in the future... We just have to be patient.

I became an American citizen, and it gave me an opportunity to get an American passport, which lets you travel easily. If I'm in the Philippines, I cannot do that. I got an opportunity to travel to Paris, London. I don't have a lot of money, but I just have the opportunity because my sister lives in Ireland, and so we traveled there. But because of the American passport, it helps me very easily just get a ticket and show your passport. Sometimes I think, oh my god, if I'm in the United States, I can travel this country, or I think I can do this.

I was able to learn how to drive only here in the United States because in our country mostly it's only men driving although I don't know about now. But mostly, it's only men. I got a lot of opportunity here. That's why I like my family to be here. It's not easy, I know, but afterwards, you will earn what you have worked for. That's my journey.

Thank you for that. I just wanted to go back and get some details. Where in the Philippines were you born, and what was it like? What did you do for fun? What was the environment like?

In the Philippines, there is a Chinese community. I usually go outside and play with my other playmates. I was active when I was kid, and so I usually go running, play a lot. I have a really good experience when I was a kid.

Where in the Philippines was this?

It's in Santa Mesa, Manila, Philippines.



Thank you. You mentioned you went to Catholic school there. Did all of your siblings go there as well?

Yes. We're all in a Catholic school called Immaculate Heart of Mary College. I have really a good experience going to school. I joined the Marion Choir because I like to sing, and we do concerts, our activities, and we do a lot of activities.

When you said you went to college, you said you went for medical...?

Medical technology. A medical technologist studies the blood. They look in the microscope and see what kind of organism that causes the sickness. When there is a result, they send it to the doctor, and the doctor will tell the patient.

Did you always have an interest in medicine?

Actually, no, because at that time, it was very in. Even if you get nursing, you can go to United States, and you get good pay. Of course, everybody wants to go to the U.S. At that time, medical courses were very in. I don't get nursing. My sister is in nursing, and then medical technologies, and some of my cousins are into medicals.

You said that your siblings went all across the world, to Brunei. Why were they going overseas?

They are in the Philippines, but we always think of, number one, the U.S. We always say, "Oh, in the future, our dream is to go to the U.S. or other country." It's everybody's dream, but only my sister has an opportunity in that time to go to Brunei. It's actually just two hours from the Philippines when you fly. She's into marketing. She got a job there. Her job was like a wedding planner, so that's what she did. Plus, she likes doing a little business, and so she had other sidelines like that. It helps us because our business goes down. Actually, our house that my father built naturally, not sell, we loan it, and then we cannot pay. The money that we have, we

bought a small townhouse, smaller than what we had before. My sister, because of going overseas, she was able to pay. Actually, when I was here, I was also sending money. It's usually what people do; when they go here, we send money. I send money, too. I send products from U.S. But mostly who really helped to pay the townhouse is my sister because she is the first one who traveled and got a job overseas.

When you say business—you mentioned when you were younger that your parents had a recycling business—was this a different business?

I have done that. I go to banks. They have used papers, used cardboard. We go there. "Okay, we're going to pay this per kilo." We buy this for four dollars per kilo. When you thousand kilo times four, that's how you pay it. When we go to the recycling, then they're going to buy it from us at a higher price. We also have people who bundle it, and we have to pay them, and we have a truck to bring to the recycling. You have to have a business license to do that.

It was the same business the whole time?

Yes, that's my parents. Because they are Chinese, usually Chinese—my father's father is like that. Yes, that's our business. It started small and then get bigger. We had a warehouse, but we had to sell it because we need the money because my father already died and business went down. Business goes up, but later on it goes down.

Was your grandfather the one who emigrated from China to the Philippines?

Yes.

Do you know why?

Not really. Maybe it's a World War or something like that. That's all I know. Also, my grandma is from Madrid, Spain. They went to Portugal. It's about World War, something like that. That's why they came to the Philippines.

After you immigrated here, you said that a friend you knew got you into the Culinary training program. What did she do?

Right now, she is also like me, a housekeeper, but she works in Harrah's. She is still there. She is also enjoying the Culinary benefits.

How did you meet her?

Through Lord's Flock. My ex knows somebody in the group, and she is also new in the group, and that's where I meet her.

Have you found a Filipino community here that you belong to?

I have friends, and that's what I call my community. I don't have any Filipino community group, but I have friends who are Filipinos, and they're all okay. Like me, they also bring their relatives here.

When you left the Philippines, what was the hardest thing to leave behind?

Of course, my family. I don't know what's going to happen to me because when I came here, I only have two hundred dollars. Yes, I only have two hundred dollars. I said, "If it doesn't work, I'll probably go back." That's all I think. "If it doesn't work, I'll just go back." But I was already here, and I said, "I have to work in the casino because this is Vegas." I don't like to work in just other establishments. "I want hotel," I said. Plus, I heard it's good benefits. That's what happened.

What year did you immigrate here?

April 2010.

Did you experience any culture shock? Was it hard adjusting?

Yes, very much because I don't really speak English. I went to school, to college, and we have an English subject, and, of course, I also watch TV, but I don't usually speak it. I don't speak

English in our country although in our school, we have to do simple sentences or a paragraph on our projects. That's how I practice my English was watching on TV, and so I have an idea. But the thing is, how will I speak it straight? What happened is, I always told my ex, "Can you talk to me in English?" Sometimes with slang, I can understand, but only if it's slowly or depending on the words that you use. I have to always say, "Hmm." Until now, I cannot speak straight. That's my problem at that time.

But now, because I work with people from different cultures or from other countries, I say, "Oh, I think my English is better than hers." I think I still learned better, and so I feel a little confident. Even though they came from different countries, they're okay. It's just the same level. You just have to try to understand each other. I try to be always nice. I don't want to have problems with other people. Although I heard about problems with race, racism, but not me. Maybe because of my skin color, I don't look that Asian. But other people I heard from, yes. But for me, I don't have really bad experiences in that.

What were your first impressions when you first got to Las Vegas?

I was amazed. At first, I was like, "Why is it hot?" From what I know, I think it should be colder because I went here in April, and the weather at that time is like this, hot, and then it became cold. I was actually amazed when I saw the casinos. I took a lot of pictures of every hotel. I have a lot of that when I first arrived and came here, and that makes me amazed. Of course, I am so excited to eat the chocolates, the chips. When I was in the Philippines, I would expect somebody who arrived to our country to bring chocolates, products like that, Pringles. When we go to the hotel, we bring Pringles. I always eat chocolate.

Are you still with the Cosmopolitan?

Oh, yes, I am still there. I've been working there eleven years already. I never had another job. I have always been with the same company because I grew with them, and for me, Cosmo is already like a second home. I always stayed there and my house. Plus, then our salary is from smaller to bigger. It really makes me proud because the company grows, and I learn a lot from that company, to be independent. In housekeeping, it's like you are in the game. It's not only physical, you have to also know how to use your logic because you cannot complete the room when it smells bad. It may be clean, but it smells bad. We also use devices now. There are a lot of things that helps you improve your logic to finish our job. It's like you're in a game. Okay, start now. But I enjoy it. I like working in a hotel compared to a hospital because hospitals are so depressing. You see sick people, and people die, and families are sad. Because I am sensitive, I don't want that. But when you work in a hotel, especially here in Vegas, you see them enjoying, partying. It really affects me. I tell myself, "If they can be happy, then I can be happy, too." It really helps me to be positive—well, not the bad side that I saw, but more on the positive side.

How much did you know about unions before joining Culinary Union?

As I told you before, I don't know about unions. I have no idea. There are people that say, "Maybe union is no good because you go picketing." Maybe people fight on the street. But they do it in a legal way, in a nice way, and it's better for the worker. That is how the union does. We are actually enjoying when we do the rally. Sometimes they put music, we dance, we shout, and we send message. It's really very interesting, and it helps us.

Can you tell us a bit about what you do with the union now?

Right now, I'm a shop steward. A shop steward is in the middle between management and the worker. Let's say one of the workers has an issue with the management. Then they will do a statement, and step one we do a meeting. What I do is I help her to send the statement. Then we

do the meeting. It helps because it gives an understanding between the management and the worker. Usually, worker is in mistake.



Let's say they give them a writeup, and they cannot accept it. "You gave me a writeup, and I did not do this." But usually, in step one, we fix everything, and they realize that they are wrong. It's like they were in denial. "Why you give me this writeup?" It will go to the record. Because of being a shop steward, I listen first to the manager, and then I have to listen to both sides. If I think the coworker or employee is wrong, then I will say, "You are wrong, and you have to accept that. You have to know the rules." In that time, it helps to fix everything. If it is not fixed, let's say I disagree, then we will go to the next level and follow it up and do an investigation. Then it goes to the union. Afterwards, there is an organizer here, and they will go to grievance. It depends on the situation. What I do is like that. I'm like a mediator.



How have you seen both your job and the union change from the time that you started until now?

Oh, it's really a big change, for the better. As I told you, our salary has increased. I use insurance. Now the union has hospitals, and I think they're making additional hospitals for the members. Also, we have a pension. When I get old, I get something. Those people who work in the union for twenty years, maybe they get fifty thousand if they want to get everything. Sometimes they do a house in our country, and so when they retire, that's what they do. That is the help of the pension. Other things, like legal matter, you have legal problems, they have also an attorney for that. Also, other problems, like rent, the union helps us, too. I just attended a rally in north. Sisolak was there. We are fighting for the rent and, also, mortgages increase. We always participate in that because there is no one who will do it. The more we work together, the more they listen. They do the petition, a long paper petition, and we submit it. I was happy. I

think I heard this: It's kind of slow, the rent, in the south, but I don't know of others. If we continue fighting, then rent and mortgages will go lower.

Are there any other issues the Culinary Union is advocating for right now that you hear about? You mentioned rent and mortgage.

They are still fighting for those hotels that are not a member of the union so they can benefit from what we are enjoying. A lot more. Also, immigration, they help people pass the exam for the citizenship. They do a lot.

Do you still consider yourself Catholic?

Yes, I am still Catholic.

Do you still regularly—

Well, not regularly, but if I have time. I still pray every day, and I always listen to words of God and worship songs. I am still a Catholic.

Are there any Filipino cultural celebrations that you still participate in?

It's just the same thing, whatever is celebrating in the U.S. If they invite me, we go their place, and then we celebrate. Yes, that's what we do.

What about food? What do you eat here?

Until now, I still like other food although, of course, food here is also good. Since I grew up with that, like adobo, pancit, those are the common ones, lumpia, I still like those foods. I'm happy because Las Vegas is like Philippines, too, because they have a lot of Asian restaurants and Seafood City. Everything is there, and I usually go there and buy food, and Jollibee.

SE: Your sister in Brunei, is she still there?

She's not there anymore. She is in the Philippines. But she is visiting me this September because she got a ten-year entry here. Now she is working in the Philippines.

How many of your family are still in the Philippines except for that sister?

The one that I'm waiting is my younger sister and her kid, so two, and the one who is waiting also for the process in Missouri, so four. All of them hopefully will come here.

When you first came to Las Vegas, where did you live, what part of the city?

I just live in a small apartment.

Near what cross streets?

Decatur and Twain.

Are you still in that area?

No. Now I live in Arville and Desert Inn.

How long did it take you to find Seafood City?

Oh, when I was here, they knew already because they're Filipinos, my ex. "Let's go there." We know where to go. When my sister arrived, I bring her there, and she was so happy. She took a picture of Jollibee.

Is there anything you wanted to talk about that we haven't asked you?

So far, I think that's everything. Right now, being a worker in Cosmopolitan and in the union, we are still continuing to help other hotels to be a part of the union because it really helps a lot. Without it, maybe my salary is still very low. Yes, we just participate in what they tell us. "Okay, let's go to this hotel." Maybe we have a meeting or sometimes picketing. You can just see it usually on the news or in social media. Yes, I am very proud to be a part of Culinary. It really, really helps the lives of people especially who want to have the American dream, American life.

That's a great ending point. Thank you so much.

CW: Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you, also, for the opportunity for this. I am actually happy to do this with you and to share because that's what we need more is to share because it really helps, and it gives people an idea of what it will be to be in the United States.

[End of recorded interview]

APPENDIX



