



## **Maggi Espenilla's Oral History**

English Translation

### **Oral History Project**

Interviewee: Margarita Espenilla

Interviewer: Christine Sumog-oy

Date: 28 March 2017

### **What is your name?**

My name is Margarita Espenilla. Or call me Maggi.

### **Maggi, can you share with us a story about your childhood?**

Sure! I come from a poor family. My parents worked as farmers. I grew up as a hardworking child. I am able to retain this character even until now. Poverty forced us to work hard for our future. I learned different types of work skills as a child, which I am able to use until now.

### **Where were you born? What do you remember most about your childhood?**

I was born in Santa Fe, Leyte. But I was raised in Tacloban City. When I think about my childhood, I can remember most of the difficulties I experienced. This is because we were poor. I already started doing heavy work as a seven-year old. I could clearly remember how I learned to work hard as a child. This is also because my father died when I was still very young. My mother eventually learned dressmaking as another source of living. Together with my other siblings, I lived in the house of my sister who was in a better situation compared to us. I was able to go to school through the help of my sister. However, in exchange for her support, she made me work as a housemaid, and I felt treated like her slave. So even as a child, especially during my elementary years, I already have been doing a lot of household work, which is beyond the capacity of a child like me. Today, we already consider this a child abuse. But at that time, it was not considered as such, and is sanctioned by most people, especially in the province. But I endured all the hardships, because all I wanted to do is to fulfill my dream.

My dream was to become a nurse. Because I was focused on my ambition, I endured working as a housemaid for my sister so that I could finish elementary and able to go to college. However, because of financial difficulties, and of the maltreatment I had been receiving from my sister, I was not able to finish nursing. I was influenced a lot by my peers, especially because I haven't had the chance to enjoy my childhood, or teenage years. I never experienced being able to play games with my friends, or to even have a boyfriend. That is why when one time I met this guy in the grocery store owned by my sister where I used to work, I did not know what to do. This guy was a sales agent for Colgate and Palmolive. He came to our store to put up posters for their products. I saw him gazing at my beauty, until he mistakenly stapled his own finger because he



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was not focusing on what he was doing, and just staring at me instead. Since then, he never stopped pursuing me. He got to know about me, through my neighbor, who was his close friend. He asked my neighbour several questions about myself. One day, when he delivered products to our store, I was surprised how much he already had known about me. He knew that I had a strict sister, which meant that he had to woo her to gain her approval. He gave her a lot of Colgate products. So when he visited again, he finally asked permission from my sister, if he can take me to school. My sister agreed to it right away. To cut the story short, he became my first boyfriend, and eventually my first husband.

So that is the story about why I was not able to finish my studies. I had thought that I will be able to finish it even after getting married. I believed in my husband that he will be able to let me finish my college. But it did not happen. Fortunately, I was able to bear three children for my first husband. The sad thing, however, was that my husband passed away at an early age, so I ended up taking care of our three children all by myself.

So I worked really hard. I was alone in raising my kids. I visited Manila. At that time, Batasang Pambansa was still under construction. I applied as a janitress at Batasang Pambansa. Out of 127 applicants, only 17 of us were accepted. I was the only one who is a college level. And the only one with beauty. So I was accepted there. And you won't believe where I was assigned. I was assigned in the area where the President, the First lady, and the Assembly people take their meals. I worked there for four years.

At that time, there was an assembly woman called Putri Pacason from Mindanao. She had an agency that hires domestic workers for Saudi Arabia. She liked me very much. She appreciated how hardworking I was. So she approached me. She talked to me secretly. And she asked me if I am willing to work in Saudi Arabia at that time. I was not very sure at that time because I have three small kids, and if I leave the country, what will happen to my children? But on the other hand, I also know I will be able to earn money in Saudi Arabia to provide food for my children.

Eventually, I did go to Saudi Arabia. I worked there for eight years with a royal family. There were eight workers who were assigned there, from different nationalities, including myself, who is the only Filipina. Every year, the royal family whom I was serving would go on a tour in different countries, and they would always ask me to accompany them. It is because of them that I was able to see different countries, including Paris, where I was able to visit the Eiffel Tower, and then London, and then Spain. So that's what happened to me. My kids in the meantime were taken care of by my mother in the Philippines.

On my first homecoming, something interesting happened to me. I met a guy on my flight back to Philippines. I didn't know at that time that he is a Filipino. My Filipina friend was telling me that the guy kept staring at me. I did not believe her at first. I didn't realize that my friend also



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liked him. When we finally landed the Philippines, I claimed my baggages, and upon noticing that I had several baggages with me, the guy who was staring at me while we were on the flight approached me,, and offered to help me carry my baggages. That's how it started, and after eight months of exchanging letters, he proposed to marry me. So that guy became Mona's, my youngest daughter's father.

When we both went back to Philippines for a vacation, we married through Princess Ali Pacaso, the one who brought me to Saudi Arabia. We had to expedite the process to get married because we only had a month in the Philippines to do it. So to make the story short, we got married. We had Mona. She was born in Saudi Arabia. So I can say that we used have a good life in the Philippines before. Because both my husband and I were working abroad. We were able to buy a house and lot in Tacloban. I could say that I have a better life at that time when we were in the Philippines. We had a house and a car. And our kids were able to go to private schools.

My eldest son eventually got married to an American citizen, who is also a Bisaya. My son was studying at that time for Political Science in the biggest university in Tacloban. This lady visited Tacloban at that time. She had a cousin who is a classmate of my son. When she visited this school, she saw my son, and she really likes my son very much. That's why they met, and they had communication, and eventually got married, and that's the reason why my son came to America.

After several years, my son decided to petition me and my husband to go to America. That's how we were able to come here in 2008. My husband at that time was working in Libya. He's been working there for 19 years. He doesn't have plans to move to the US but because there is no American embassy in Libya, he has no choice but to come to the US, although it is against his will to come here. He had no choice. I was imagining at that time that here in the US, we can have a good life. And I always hear from people that US is a land of milk. I was imagining that here in the US, you will live like a princess. But my expectation was not what the reality is.

So we're finally here in the US with our kids. After we received our green card, I started petitioning my children. My baby daughter was only 14 years old at that time. We let her finish her college in the Philippines as a nurse. When she finished her college, she took the Board exam, which was a requirement here in the US. Until she passed the Board exam. That's the time she came here in the US and she is now working as a nurse in Las Vegas. And the next is Mona. She was supposed to wait for about 18 years. But because she was born in Saudi Arabia, the visa was based on her birthplace which is Saudi Arabia. So instead of waiting for 18 years, she only had to wait for 7 years.

Now that we are all here... I have three kids here....



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### **So how do you describe your life here in the US? And how is it different from the Philippines?**

Honestly speaking, I can say money here is easy, but life is hard. Very hard. All of us know that since we know the life in Philippines. In the Philippines, even if there is poverty, we can still afford to pay housemaids. But here in America, you have to do everything. The difference there is in the Philippines, we have a strong family bonding. But here in the US, sadly, we always have no time to talk with family. Because everybody is busy. But to make myself busy and happy, I joined this group in Chicago. I enjoyed my life here in Chicago. Better than Las Vegas. Because I met more Filipinos in the community. Like the AFIRE. I am so happy and I am enjoying. I am so thankful to Christine for encouraging me and giving me importance in all the activities. Which keeps me busy.

### **What types of jobs have you been doing here in Chicago? Can you tell me more about your work?**

Before I came to Chicago, I have already been working for seven years as a caregiver in Las Vegas. Then I moved to Chicago for good. I have been applying since I arrived here. I was given an assignment a week ago. It was just unlucky because the client already passed away. I am expecting another assignment in April. And God willing, this will be a good start here. I will be more happy and more busy because I will be able to do a regular job.

### **What do you like about your work as a caregiver?**

It is really my passion to take care of the elderly and help their needs. Although I can say, I was not able to help my own mother. When she was getting older. Because I already was here in America. I want to spend all my time with all my clients to help their needs.

### **What did you not like about your work as a caregiver?**

So far, of all the clients I have so far, I can say that generally, I did not have a bad experience with my employers. I believe that this really depends on how we treat them. How we communicate with them. How we take care of them. I noticed that others don't treat their elderly clients well. That's why they also have bad experiences with them. So far, for me, I feel so blessed and thankful that all the clients I had taken care of were very nice to me. Because I am also nice to them. That's all what I can share about the work of caregivers. I hope that whoever we are taking care of, we should treat them well, and we should not count only the money that we are receiving. We should do what is needed, and not just limit our job just because our assignment is only for a particular area. So as much as we can, let us appreciate our jobs. So that next time, people will recommend you to other clients because you are good.



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### **At any point here in the US, did you feel exploited or taken advantage of?**

I had experienced it in Las Vegas, with my first employer, especially Filipino employers in Group Homes. We have 10 clients and we were only two caregivers. And the bad experience I have was because there was a tension that happened among undocumented workers. Undocumented workers received low pay. At that time, I felt that it affected how the employers treated the documented workers. They compared us with the undocumented workers, that if they can receive low pay, we should also be happy to receive the same. So I know that they had taken advantage of the undocumented workers which also disadvantaged us. At that time I was not aware of any domestic workers rights. They are exploiting the Filipino workers - documented and undocumented. Which are not supposed to be.

### **How are you being treated by your employers?**

So far, when I was still in Las Vegas, that's the only exploitation I experienced with my employers, who are also Filipinos. Here in Chicago, I have good experience so far. My employers are nice. And for this upcoming new assignment, with a new client, I also expect a good relationship with my client, as I will do my best to attend to her needs.

### **What do you think are the best practices for fair employment or good working relationship with your employers?**

I know that some elderly clients are moody. In other words, you find it challenging to understand their attitudes. Other clients have tantrums, and you have to divert their attention by telling stories. Or walk them around. Or show them love. Everytime. All the time. As much as possible. So that they feel that they are loved. That's the number one requirement, that they feel loved. And they will appreciate you for that. You must show your care and love for them. So that they will be nice to you as well. That has been my experience so far.

### **Have you heard about the Illinois Domestic Workers Bill of Rights? What do you know about the new law?**

What I remember about the DWBOR is that it promotes the rights of the domestic workers to rest, to be treated with respect, to receive decent pay, and to be afforded with dignity.



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**How will you be able to spread the information about this law to other domestic workers? What can we do so that they are informed about this?**

First of all, our fellow Filipinos should sign up to become AFIRE's member, so that they will receive regular updates about the law. AFIRE is the leading organization that shares information such as this one about the domestic workers rights.

**How do you describe your participation so far with AFIRE? What had been your experience so far as a member?**

Well, I am learning a lot. Even if I am still new to the organization, I already am enjoying. I feel loved and entertained by the other members. I am learning more and I want to attend more forums or meetings. And I want to meet more members as much as possible if I have time.

**What do you hope we could achieve together as a Filipino community here in Chicago? What do you hope we can achieve as a Filipino community in Chicago?**

As much as possible, if we are given the opportunity by God, let us continue helping each other. Let us respect one another, regardless of your socio-economic conditions. We should be friendly to each other. Avoid gossips. Let us help each other as much as we can.

**Finally, what one important lesson did you learn based on your experience in the Philippines and in the United States?**

Most of all, we need to be strong. We need to be industrious. We need to be friendly. So we can gain more support from friends. Meet those people who have the same aspirations as you are. To be helpful. And to be friendly.

**One last question, what message do you have for Filipino immigrants here in the US during this critical time?**

Either documented or undocumented, we need to have trust in ourselves. To do the right thing. So that we do not regret in the end. As much as possible, work hard. Share your blessings. Be open to one another. Let us understand each other better. That's all I can say.

**Thank you so much Maggi for your time.**

Thank you also for giving me this opportunity.