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Ang Buhay sa Nayon-Life in the Valley: An oral history project with the Shenandoah Living Archive

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Ang Buhay sa Nayon - Life in the Valley:
An Oral History Project with the Shenandoah Living Archive
Hannah O. Moses

A thesis project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Abstract

Ang Buhay sa Nayon/Life in the Valley, is an oral history project consisting of twenty-three interviews with seventeen Filipino Americans from the Shenandoah Valley. These video oral histories, including transcripts and donated photographs, are now part of the Shenandoah Living Archive at James Madison University. This oral history collection is also showcased in a digital exhibit: <http://sites.jmu.edu/lifeinthevalley/>. The website touches on a myriad of aspects of Filipino American life, but strives overall to put the interviewees' experiences in historical context and to understand how Filipinos have formed a community in rural Virginia.

Chapter 1: The Research Project

Ang Buhay sa Nayon/Life in the Valley is an oral history project partnership between James Madison University and the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley. Creating oral histories of Filipino Americans served two purposes. One was to provide materials to the Shenandoah Living Archive, a new James Madison University Libraries and Educational Technologies initiative. The second was to create a digital exhibit showcasing the Filipino experience in the Shenandoah Valley. With the digital presentation as the end product for this thesis project, the following questions guided the interviews (See Appendix A for the complete list of questions):

Under three centuries of Spanish rule, Filipinos were purposefully kept apart so that no national consciousness would form. Under fifty years of American rule, English became the national language and Filipinos began actively immigrating to the United States. This country has only had 70 years to form a national and cultural identity. How do immigrants, who come from such a diverse/fractured country, re-form as a Filipino community in the United States? In other states, Filipinos often group themselves based on their regional or linguistic identity. In the Valley that is not an option since the numbers are so small. How do they find identity as a group in the Valley? How has their culture changed since coming to the United States? How do history and tradition serve as a way to give a sense of community or common background? Or do they?

After receiving approval from the JMU Institutional Review Board, recruiting interviewees began at the Harrisonburg International Festival on September 27, 2014. While flyers and sign-up sheets were laid out, only face-to-face requests resulted in interviews. Interviewees also recommended or recruited others to join the project. The twenty-three interviews were completed in the fall of 2014. The project employed a life narrative approach in order to give the interviewees the greatest amount of authority in crafting their oral histories. This approach, where interviewees are asked to tell their story as they see fit, was recommended by the authors of *Oral History in Southeast Asia* as particularly suited for those from a community-oriented culture. Only once the interviewees had finished telling their stories were they then asked follow-up questions. In the spring of 2015, all the interviews were transcribed, edited, audited, and reviewed by the interviewees. All interviewees had the opportunity to make corrections or remove content on their transcripts. Once all transcripts were approved, the transcripts, video interviews, photographs donated by interviewees, and signed release statements were handed over to Lynn Eaton at Special Collections. The collection was officially opened to the public at a reception honoring the interviewees on April 25, 2015.

For this project, fifteen Philippine-born Filipino Americans and two US-born Filipino Americans graciously shared their life stories. Out of a population of 1,110 Filipino Americans in the Shenandoah Valley, it is not possible to say whether these seventeen were a representative sample. The majority of Filipino Americans in the Valley live in the northern counties, but those who volunteered for the project live primarily in the southern portion of the Shenandoah Valley. Yet it is definite that the incredible

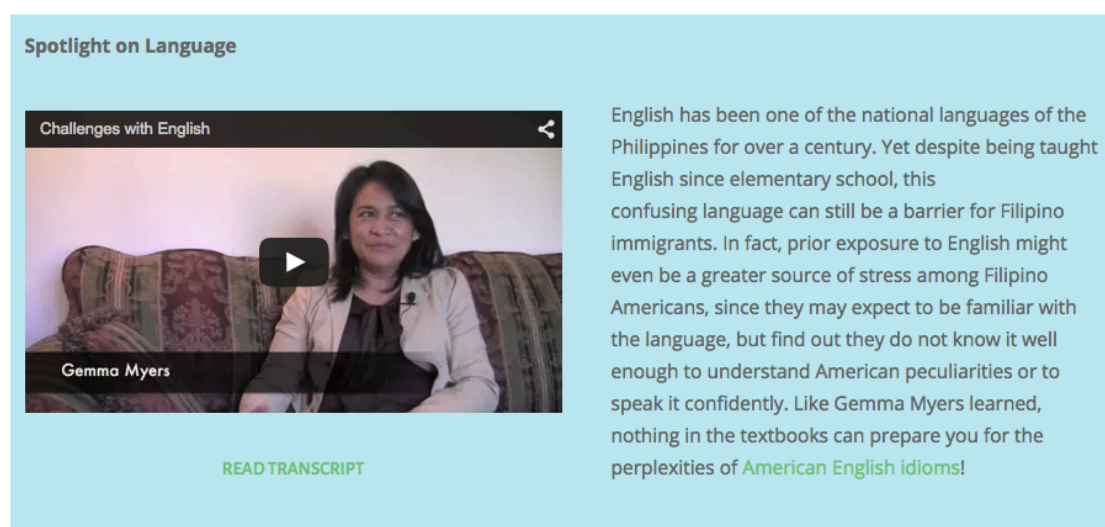
variety of experiences in such a small group speaks to the diversity of the Filipino American community as a whole.

Ang Buhay sa Nayon is a unique oral history project. Most oral history projects focus on recording the experiences of the oldest members of a community or on learning people's reactions to a specific shared event. *Ang Buhay sa Nayon* is a snapshot of a community where people of all ages and all backgrounds live and share life together. The collection contains the stories of those who came to the United States between 1963 and 2010. The scope of this project is another distinguishing aspect. Most immigrant oral history projects are set in cities, where large concentrations of immigrants exist. *Ang Buhay sa Nayon* is set in a rural area and sheds light on the rural immigrant experience. This collection is a rich resource for anyone who seeks to learn about the Filipino-American experience, the Shenandoah Valley, and immigrant communities in the United States.



The bulk of the exhibit is contained in the Stories section. That section is divided into the Philippines, Language, Culture (subdivided into Values, Psychology, and Traditions), Greener Grass, Community, Culture Shock, the Shenandoah Valley, Looking Back, Identity, and Looking Forward. Each of these ten sections explores a specific aspect of the Filipino American experience. In an effort to take full advantage of the digital medium, multiple interviewees' videos are spliced together and arranged thematically. Thorough research, dynamic graphs, and other forms of media surround the videos in order to give them context.

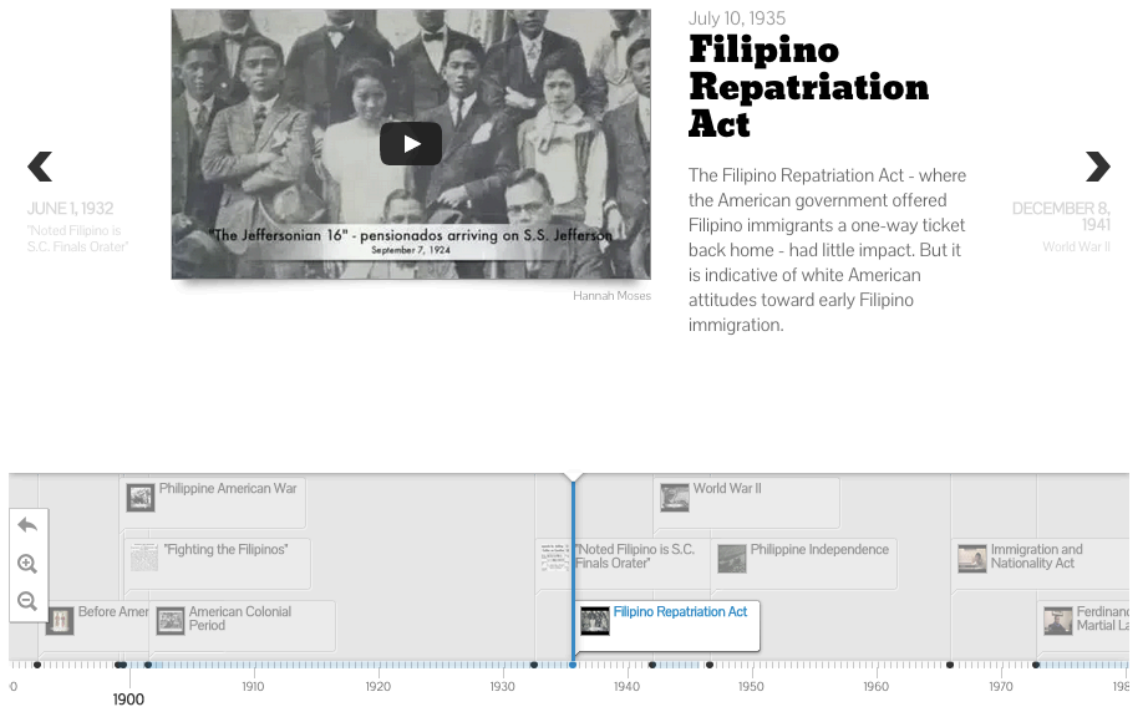
Figure 2: "Spotlight on Language" - A story from the Culture Shock page.



In an effort to put the Filipino American experience in the Shenandoah Valley in historical context, it was obvious that a timeline needed to be created to show the complicated history between a former colonizer and its colony. In addition to showing the history between two countries, it was also important to show how the interviewees

remembered their history, even if their interpretation disagreed with that of the author. Consequently, newspaper articles, images, and videos were spliced together to create mini-documentaries on various aspects of Philippine American history, with an emphasis on how it affected those in the Shenandoah Valley. The timeline contained sections titled Before America, Philippine American War, “Fighting the Filipinos,” American Colonial Period, “Noted Filipino is S.C. Finals Orator,” Filipino Repatriation Act, World War II, Philippine Independence, Immigration and Naturalization Act, Ferdinand Marcos and Martial Law, People Power Revolution, Closing of American Bases, Flag and Heraldic Code of the Philippines, Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley, Typhoon Haiyan, and *Ang Buhay sa Nasyon*.

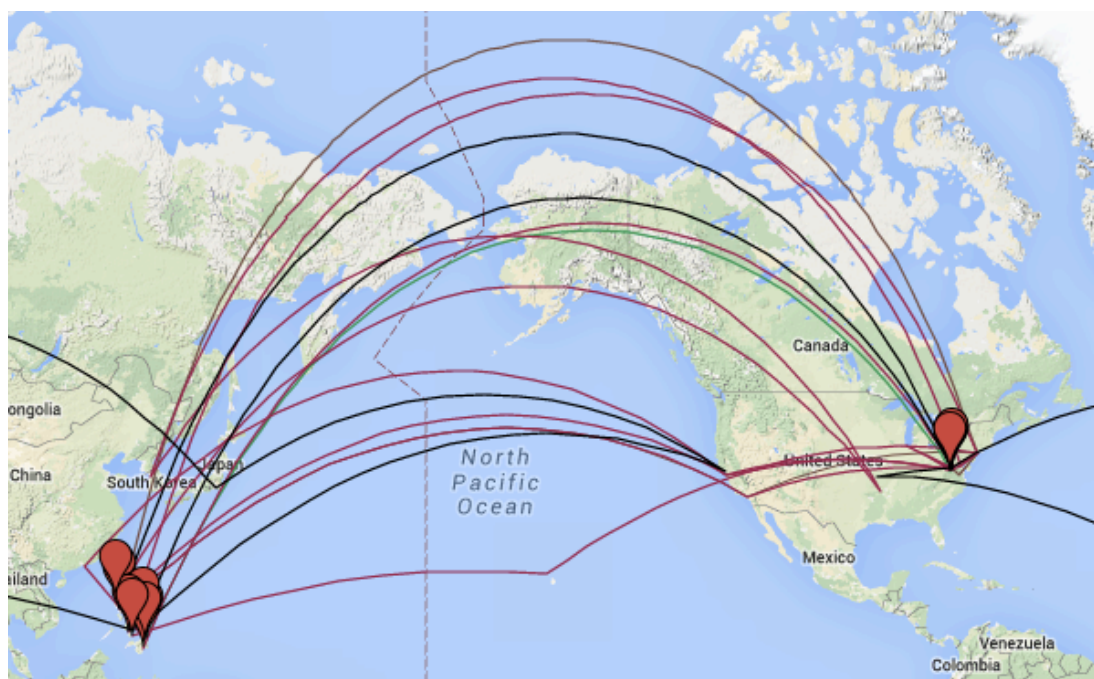
Figure 3: Filipino Repatriation Act video in the Timeline section.



The next section of the website showcased the interviewees. Often oral histories that are organized thematically make it difficult to trace individual stories. By creating a People section, visitors can easily locate an individual, read a biographical summary (see Appendix B), and then follow the links below the summary to find the videos that contain that person's story. This section provides another avenue for visitors to understand the Filipino American experience in the Shenandoah Valley.

In understanding migration patterns, it is vital to know where people move and why they do so. The Place section includes two maps: one that shows the specific routes the interviewees took to arrive in the Valley, and another one that shows the number of Filipino Americans at the county level in the United States. In addition to the maps, information on the Filipino Diaspora is included to help put Filipino migration to the United States in global context.

Figure 4: Map tracing *Ang Buhay sa Nasyon* interviewees' migration to the Valley.



As the *Ang Buhay sa Nayon* digital exhibit is intended to be an education resource, an Oral History section seemed appropriate. In this page visitors learn about the advantages and disadvantages of oral history, how it is unique from written historical documents, and how to conduct their own video interviews. In addition to tips for conducting family oral history interviews, Debbie Pugh at JMU's Media Resources created a video tutorial for properly using equipment for video interviews. The oral history information concludes with a list of useful resources for those who are new to the field.

The last part of the website is the About section. This is divided into Project, Author, Resources, Shenandoah Living Archive, and Bibliography. These sections describe the methodology, the background of the author, the archive that these interviews are part of, resources on organizations and understanding Filipino Americans, and a thorough bibliography that can be accessed on the page by type or through a Zotero group by topic.

Figure 5: Screen-cap of section from the “Project” page in the About section.

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Like any oral history or thesis project, *Ang Buhay sa Nayon* could not have been created without support and help. I, Hannah Moses, would like to thank Luz de Tablan, the founder of the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley, for allowing me to work with her to record the stories of this community.



With thirty-eight pages containing text, videos, documentaries, photographs, maps, poems, songs, and graphs, the *Ang Buhay sa Nayon* digital exhibit is an engaging resource that will hopefully entice every visitor to learn more about this diverse community and the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. As it is online and publicly available since April 25, 2015, it can become a resource to anyone with a computer and Internet connection. Since it showcases a JMU collection and is hosted by JMU, the exhibit should be preserved for posterity. It has been a long and arduous process, but the final product has met with approval by the members of the Filipino American Community and it has placed an important group's experiences in historical context. Most importantly, it is presented in a dynamic way that will engage today's audiences.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Personal Narrative

When and where were you born?

What was your childhood like?

What did your parents do?

How many siblings did you have?

What was school like?

What kind of food did you eat?

How did you hear about the United States?

When you were in the Philippines, what did you know about American culture?

How did you hear about it?

What was your opinion of America/Americans?

Has your opinion changed since coming here?

Why did you want to immigrate?

When did you immigrate?

Did you experience any culture shock?

What was the biggest surprise about America or American culture?

First impressions/first day?

Did you ever experience any discrimination?

How did you have to adjust?

How did you come to the Shenandoah Valley?

What is your impression of the valley – the land and people?

What advice would you give to Filipinos coming to the valley?

How do you react to upheaval in the Philippines?

How do you keep in contact?

How do your relatives back home view you?

What do you do now?

How was the process of getting a job?

Have you ever been confused with being another nationality?

Some people have said that Filipinos have more in common with Latinos than with Asians due to the Spanish/Catholic legacy. What do you think?

Where is home?

History

Do you remember being taught Philippine history in school?

What did you learn?

What was important?

What did you learn about America in school?

What did you learn about how the Philippines became an American colony?

How did you feel about the Philippines being a US colony?

How has America impacted the Philippines? In education, culture, language, etc.?

Does the Philippines' previous status as a colony affect it today? Politically or culturally?

Have you ever heard of the term "colonial mentality"? What does it mean?

Have you seen this in your own life or in the lives of other Filipinos?

When is Philippine Independence Day?

If the Philippines did not gain full independence until July 4, 1946, why is June 12, 1898 celebrated?

Did you learn about the history of Filipinos in the United States?

Do you think it is important for Filipinos in America to know how long Filipinos have been in this country? Why or why not?

Is it important for Filipinos to know their history?

How does history affect their identity?

What do you teach your kids about Filipino history or culture?

How long Filipinos have been in the Shenandoah Valley?

Does it matter if Filipinos have been here a long time?

Identity and Community

Do you identify as Filipino first or as Tagalog/Ilongo/language group?

Are there many differences between Filipinos who come from different parts of the country? In their culture, food, practices, etc.?

Is it important to teach your kids your first language or Tagalog?

What should members of the Fil-Am community speak?

What do you see as your "identity"?

For example, do you see yourself as "Filipino" or "Filipino American" or "American?"

How about your kids?

What are the differences between being a "Filipino" and "Filipino American"?

Is it important to be connected to other Filipinos in the area?

Do you primarily connect with other Filipinos through the organization or on your own?

How do you find other Filipinos?

Are there areas where the Filipinos gather or where you go to find them?

How do you keep in contact with other Filipinos in the Valley?

Do you use the Internet or Facebook to connect with Filipinos? Or is it mostly word of mouth?

Do you connect with the Filipinos in other cities or states, i.e. visit the Filipinos in Virginia Beach, DC, Richmond, or in other states?

What community do you feel most connected with/most at home. Filipinos in the valley?

Your church? Your family here? Your family across the US? The Philippines?

How did you become involved in the Fil-Am organization?

What are the benefits of the organization?

Are there any disadvantages to being part of the Philippine community?

What are challenges facing Filipinos in the valley?

Culture

What kinds of traditions and practices did you keep?

Why do you continue to practice these traditions and customs?

Which did you decide to change or stop practicing?

What kinds of traditions did you pass on or would like to pass on to your children?

Which traditions do your children practice?

What challenges do you face when trying to preserve or practice your cultural traditions?

How do you get the right foods, or costumes or items?

How do you educate the other people in the Valley about the Philippines?

What makes a Filipino a Filipino? What do you consider to be typical Filipino cultural traits?

What is important in Philippine culture?

How do these traits clash or mesh with American culture?

Memory – Marcos

What do you think about Ferdinand Marcos?

Were you or your family affected by him?

What did people say about him?

What happened during the People Power's Revolution?

Was it good or bad?

If you were in America – how did you keep track of what happened?

Did you talk about it much with others in America?

Do you talk about it now with other Filipinos?

What was the relationship between Marcos and the USA?

Appendix B: Biographical Summaries of Interviewees

1. Elmer Bonga grew up in Llorente, Eastern Samar, Philippines. After his father passed away, his mother and older siblings worked together to raise all eleven children. His older brother came to study and then work in the United States in the 1970s. Slowly, members of his family came to join his brother, including Bonga who arrived in 1990. He later joined the US Navy and served for 20 years. During that time he and his wife, Merle, and their three children, were stationed in California, Japan, Italy, and West Virginia. He retired from the Navy and moved to Harrisonburg in 2009.

2. Lynn Buchanan grew up in the Central Visayas and in Davao City, Philippines. Since high school she knew she wanted to marry an American, though she had no desire to move to the United States. She met her husband through a pen-pal catalogue and came to the Shenandoah Valley in 1998. After nine happy years of marriage, her husband passed away. Buchanan continues to live in the house they had together. She is also an officer in the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley.

3. Marites Cortes grew up on the island of Cebu in the Central Philippines. As the daughter of a doctor, she had the opportunity to follow her father to his work in Papua New Guinea and Liberia. After her father passed away, her mother and three sisters remained in Liberia, where Cortes married a Spaniard and had two children. When her family had to leave Liberia due to civil war, Cortes joined her mother and her American stepfather in Missouri in 1985. After a divorce and working for Willow Brook

Foods for a number of years, Cortes joined Cargill when that company acquired Willow Brook. She was recruited to come to the Valley to work in the Cargill chemistry lab in 2008. As of 2015, she is serving her second term as president of the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley.

4. Dionisio de Tablan grew up in Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines. He and his family survived the horrors of the Japanese occupation in World War II. He graduated from Far Eastern University in Manila and taught high school math, physics, and physical education. Intrigued by the possibility of greater opportunities in the United States, de Tablan and his wife, Luz, and their two sons, moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1985. There he worked in residential repair. In 2003, de Tablan and his wife moved to Staunton, Virginia. Though he is technically retired, he stays active in pursuing his photography and construction projects.

5. Luz M. de Tablan grew up in the province of Nueva Ecija in the Philippines. She was the youngest girl in a family of eleven that survived World War II relatively unscathed. She graduated with a Bachelor's in Education and taught at the high school level. In 1985, de Tablan and her husband, Diony, and their two sons moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. When de Tablan visited her son in Washington, DC, she fell in love with a house in Staunton. The de Tablans then moved to Staunton in 2003. In both California and Virginia de Tablan has been an active member of the United Methodist Women. She also helped found the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley.

6. Pamela Flavell grew up in San Fernando City, La Union, Philippines. Her father was a city judge and her mother a schoolteacher. Flavell graduated with a Bachelor's in History and English, and later got her Master's in Teaching Education. It was while teaching Tagalog at Wallace Air Force Base that she met her husband. After traveling with her husband to air force bases in Arkansas, South Korea, and Maryland, she and her three children settled in her husband's home in Elkton in 1998. Now, after her divorce and remarriage, Flavell works at Massanutten Resort.

7. Elery Kadile's story begins in Dumaguete City, on the island of Negros. There he majored in politics at Foundation University, but was unable to complete his schooling due to his involvement in anti-Marcos protests. He came to Hawaii as part of an agricultural student exchange program in 1983. When his program ended, he overstayed his visa and traveled across the United States working odd jobs. Kadile invested in some property in the Shenandoah Valley and moved to Elkton in 1997. Now a naturalized American citizen and an employee of Cargill, he hopes to return to the Philippines in the near future.

8. Manuel José was born in Manila, Philippines. Manny was born an American citizen since his mother was the daughter of an American soldier who mustered out in the Philippines after the Spanish American War. When he was 10 years old, José's family moved to southern California. Ten years later, he visited his sister, Lita Zapanta, in Harrisonburg and fell in love with Virginia. José transferred to Madison College in 1974. After graduating from Madison College and getting his PhD from Virginia Tech, he lived

in Illinois and Ohio before coming back to the Valley in 1999. Today he teaches Business through Liberty University Online and lives with his wife, Connie, in Bridgewater.

9. Jinky Knox grew up in Prosperidad, Agusan del Sur, in the midst of bitter fighting between the New People's Army, a communist insurgency, and government forces. After her father was killed by the NPA, her mom raised all ten children by herself.

Knox majored in computer science and then worked in Hong Kong for five years. She met her husband through a pen-pal catalogue. Later, in 2001, she joined her sister in Staunton and got a divorce. She has since remarried and now works as a nurse at Augusta Health.

10. Maria Gemma Cagalawan Myers grew up in Tandag, in the Province of Surigao del Sur. Her childhood was marred by the struggle between the New People's Army, a communist insurgency, and government forces. Myers, like many from that area, was sent away to go to college in a safer place. After graduating from a college in Cebu, she taught sixth grade in a barrio (a small town). There she met her future husband, who was serving as a short-term missionary in the Philippines. They married and moved to his home in the Shenandoah Valley in 1991. She is the proud mother of two and currently resides in Fishersville, Virginia.

11. Hannah Myers, the daughter of Gemma Myers, was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia and has lived most of her life in the Shenandoah Valley. Growing up in a mixed ethnicity household, Myers had to figure out what to take and keep from her father's American

Mennonite background and her mother's Filipino Catholic background. She and her brother also had the experience of being one of the few minorities in a predominantly white high school. In May 2015, Myers graduated from Liberty University.

12. Michelle Silao Gumanib Ott was born and raised in Ormoc City, on the island of Leyte. As the youngest of thirteen children, life was not easy. In addition to struggling to keep food on the table, Ott's family also lived in an area prone to natural disasters. Ott and her family survived Tropical Storm Thelma, known locally as Tropical Storm Uring, which killed 5,081 in 1991. In 2010, Ott's friend created a profile for her on a dating site. There, Ott met her husband. She then married and moved to her husband's home in Elkton.

13. Gicela Isanan Roy grew up in Tondo, Manila, Philippines, in a single parent household. Her childhood was not easy as her family lived in a squatter area. But at the age of twenty she married, and later became the mother of three girls and four boys. In 1988 her mother, who remarried an American, petitioned for Roy and her brothers to come to the United States. Finally, in 2005, Roy and her family came to the United States to join her mother in Elkton, Virginia. Though their first few years in America were very difficult, she is now an active member of the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley. Most recently, she has been the community's choreographer and keeps the group dancing each year at Harrisonburg's International Festival.

14. Eva Gealon Tran grew up in a small town in Ilog, Negros Occidental. When her policeman father got let go due to a change in the political administration, Tran did her part to help keep food on the table by helping her parents. Yet she had the ambition not to find a career that would allow her to uplift her family. Through the help of an aunt, Tran became a midwife. She came to New York City in 1983 in hopes of finding better work. Instead of finding success, she found fear as she learned about visa regulations and realized that she had become an illegal alien. Tran worked as a nanny while also trying to become a legal permanent resident. After nine years, she married and became a citizen. Her husband is a podiatrist, and together they came to Harrisonburg to start his practice in 1995. It was in Tran's house where the Filipino American Community of the Shenandoah Valley was founded in July of 2007.

15. Andrew Zapanta was born shortly after his parents, Conrad and Lita Zapanta, moved to Harrisonburg in the early 1970s. He grew up as the youngest of three sons and as one of the few US-born Filipino Americans in the Shenandoah Valley whose both parents are Filipino. After graduating from Eastern Mennonite High School, Zapanta completed an accounting degree from Virginia Tech. He now works as an auditor for the University of Virginia Physicians Group in Charlottesville, Virginia. Zapanta is active in the running community at Charlottesville and in his local church.

16. Dr. Conrad Zapanta was born in Manila, Philippine, eight months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. His father was a member of the United States Armed Forces in the Far East and worked undercover against the Japanese. After the war, his mother became the

vice president of the World Wide Women's Temperance Union. Eventually, both parents became missionaries. Dr. Zapanta graduated from medical school and came to New York City in 1966 to complete his residency. He got married and moved to Richmond to attend the Medical College of Virginia and specialize in ENT – Ear, Nose, and Throat. He came to Harrisonburg in 1974 to set up his practice as an ENT surgeon. He retired two years ago but stays busy leading medical mission trips around the world.

17. Lita Zapanta was born in Manila, Philippines, in the middle of World War II. Her family survived the war by leaving Manila and living in a neighboring province. She graduated from the University of the Philippines with a degree in accounting. Because her stepmother was an American citizen (the daughter of an American soldier from the Spanish-American War), Zapanta was able to come to Los Angeles in 1963. She later married Conrad Zapanta, and followed him to New York, Richmond, and Harrisonburg. Their third son, Andrew, was born just after they moved to the Valley in 1974.

Zapanta helped her husband in his ENT practice and worked as the office manager and accountant until they retired two years ago. She is an active member of the Filipino American Community and accompanies her husband on medical mission trips around the world.

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