

In Memoriam: Alex Edillor

Herb Delute

I am the current president of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) Delano Chapter, of which Alex, was the founding President. Alex and I initially had lived our lives in parallel and separately, intersecting at various times of our lives. What we had in common was being Filipino, Filipino in Delano, and Filipino in America.

Alex's father, Carmelo, was a Manong who lived in the labor camps and worked in the grape fields, but he served as a Philippine Scout during World War II (WWII). With the passage of the War Brides Act this law allowed his dad to bring to the United States: Alex; his sister Filomena; and his mother, Natividad. Alex's father with several other Filipino WWII veterans from Delano were proudly awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in a ceremony sponsored by FANHS Delano in 2022.

When Alex arrived from the Philippines, he was assigned to our first-grade class at Fremont School. My first impression that I had of Alex was very positive and that he was the best reader in our class. This was the direct result of his mother who was teacher in the Philippines, but she could not teach in America. I remember how Alex and I first connected in being Filipino. In our class each student had to give our first name, middle name, and last name. My middle was David because it was my mother's maiden name. Alex's middle name was Ballesteros, his mother's maiden name. I thought I was so connected to Alex to have the same reason to have a middle name after our mother's family name. Alex and I had the same class for all eight grades. Like almost all the Filipino students in Fremont we all played an instrument. I learned to play the trumpet and Alex learned to play the trombone. The only reason I can think he played the trombone was that he had longer arms. Our band class introduced Alex to one of his first passions, music. In eighth grade, Alex grew to almost six feet tall. Alex and I began playing basketball and his new passion became sports.

In high school, Alex and I had less classes together. Our friends would share the LA Times sports page and legendary Jim Murray's sports column. We would pass this paper to each other during the day to read the sports page and Murray's column. Alex became involved in his passion journalism by joining the school newspaper, The Live Wire, which he became an editor-in-chief for his senior year. He later worked at the Delano Record and Bakersfield Californian newspapers.

Alex went to University of California, Los Angeles but moved back to Delano. He connected with Roger Gadiano who became his good friend. Roger was always there for Alex and visited Alex before he passed away. Roger introduced him to Larry Itliong and Philip Vera

Cruz, leaders of The Delano Grape Strike. Roger led the tours for college students to visit Agbayani Village, Filipino Community Hall, and Manong Larry's grave. Alex learned to conduct the tours and became more involved with Filipino American History.

When I came home from college, I went to the Delano recreation center one evening to play basketball. The center was filled with Filipinos playing basketball. Recreation Director Gary Romriell and Fred Dulay came up with the concept of a Filipino Basketball League which I wound up being the director of the Filipino Athletic League. We needed referees and Alex with the Salim brothers volunteered. This became his passion, and he led him to become a well-respected basketball and football official. This also led to Alex connecting with the Filipino community via the Filipino players.

In 1975, Delano held the first Philippine Weekend with the Barrio Fiesta, Parade, and the Statewide Basketball Tournament. Roger Gadiano mobilized the college and high school students with the Van Guard Task Force. The youth took on different projects; Roger—parade, Barrio Fiesta; I—basketball Tournament with the Johny and Eddie Cristobal and Chris Bernido; Alex—Souvenir Program; Benny Ordiz—Filipino Marching Band; Max Bacerra—high school students to decorate the Queen float; and Domi Tomate—writer and director of the play. Alex was able to see firsthand how to pull off a major project with the Filipino community.

Life happened: girlfriends, jobs, and family. Alex met and married Kathleen and had a family. In 2015 Alex and I organized and formed the FANHS Chapter in Delano. Alex was president, I was vice president, Roger Gadiano was treasurer, and Judy Agbayani was secretary. With the support and leadership of the late Dr. Dawn Mabalon and Dr. Robyn Rodriguez, FANHS Delano planned and celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Delano Grape Strike. Alex, Roger, and I recruited members to join FANHS. Roger led college tours. Roger and Alex spoke at colleges and Filipino American History Month events in October. Both were spokespersons for the Filipino community. Alex, Roger, Nickie Tuthill-Delute, Suzanne Villaruz, and Erwin Mina served as consultants for the Musical of Larry Itliong. Max Bacerra and Alex were involved in the planning of Delano's Larry Itliong Unity Park which will be dedicated on May 11.

For the last few years, Alex struggled with his health, but he stayed involved with FANHS. After COVID we held our first in person meeting in August 2023 at Agbayani Village. Alex's wife Kathleen drove him, and he was able to be with his FANHS family. Alex's last project was to have Delano City Council have a proclamation to celebrate the Manongs leading the walkout to start the Delano Grape Strike. I wrote the proclamation and Suzane Villaruz accepted it from Delano City Council on a Tuesday. Alex died peacefully the next day.

A quote from Uncle Fred Cordova, who was the cofounder of FANHS, is the reason why I am telling Alex's story. "Everybody doesn't have to be a hero; everybody doesn't have to be famous. Each person who's Filipino American, to me is very, very important as a story ... Our stories are really in our people. It's not so much in what the achievements are ... as much as what is the story itself."

Alex's story is similar to many of our own family stories. Alex's father was born in the Philippines. His father was a WWII veteran and Delano Manong. His mother was teacher in the Philippines. His family immigrated to the US. Like many of our families they worked in the Delano grape fields and were able to buy a home and to live the American dream. Like many second-generation Filipinos, Alex assimilated into US, achieving academically, and living his life as an American. Our journey, Alex's journey, comes full circle when he was able to reconnect to his Philippine roots and to learn about his Filipino American History and identity. These past years Alex proudly shared and taught others his story about what it meant to be Filipino, Filipino in Delano, and Filipino in America.