

A Fil-Am activist's transnational search for home

Melinda Paras / As told to Mila De Guzman

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Melinda Paras, a member of Kabataang Makabayan (KM) or Nationalist Youth and an organizer of American G.I.s in the Philippines who opposed the Vietnam War, FACEBOOK

Two years after first setting foot on Philippine soil, I found myself with other American activists on a plane bound for the United States. It was November 1972, two months after martial law was declared in the country. The Marcos regime ordered our deportation back to the U.S. When the plane landed in San Francisco, I already knew that I would continue working to help bring back democracy in the Philippines.

Search for my identity

My desire to stay in my father's homeland was partly rooted in my search for my identity as a Filipino that began when I was growing up in Midwest America during the tumultuous 1960s.

I am the daughter of a Filipino doctor and an American nurse. My father, Jorge Paras, was the son of Ricardo Paras, the Chief Justice of the Philippine Supreme Court from 1951 to 1961. Jorge left for the U.S. after the Second World War and began his psychiatry residency at a Cincinnati hospital, where he met my mother, Miriam Gebhart. In 1950, my father brought my mother to the Philippines to settle down. My older brother and sister were born there.

My mother, an independent woman who grew up in Ohio, had a hard time dealing with some aspects of Philippine society. She could not go out or do things on her own because it was considered inappropriate for a woman. She also had a hard time seeing the poverty around her. Being a nurse, she did what she assumed she had to do for people who were sick. She started treating, for free, the neighborhood children who had tuberculosis and malaria, unsettling her husband's family because the kids came from families who were informal settlers. These

impoverished Filipinos lived in makeshift houses on abandoned land in urban neighborhoods. In trying to understand why there were so many poor people in the country, my mother became interested in learning more about the Huks, the Communist-led movement demanding land reform and social justice for millions of peasants.

The country's devastated postwar economy discouraged my father from staying further in the Philippines. He was one of a few licensed psychiatrists in a country still reeling from the war, limiting his ability to practice his profession. My mother was also unhappy because her husband's parents did not approve of their son marrying an American.

After two years in Manila, my family returned to the U.S. in 1952 and set up residence in Middletown, Connecticut, where I was born a year later. My father, limited by discriminatory licensing practices against foreign doctors, was only able to work in a state hospital setting. He later got a job at the University of Wisconsin's Diagnostic Center in Madison.

It was in this Midwest college town known for its liberal politics, where I first became aware of my Filipino heritage. Because my father held a faculty position, he became a mentor to graduate students from the University of the Philippines, his alma mater, which had an exchange program with the University of Wisconsin. He hosted parties at our house for his compatriots.

At times, some of these students rented our basement apartment during their stay. Hearing these students talk to my father in Tagalog was my first exposure to Filipino culture because my father never spoke his native language with us. Before that, enjoying my Dad's rice and *adobo* was the extent of my being Filipino.

My confusion arose not so much from being the child of an interracial couple, but from being half-Filipino in that setting. Growing up, I experienced racial discrimination though I did not label it as such until I was 15. People called me "Jap" or "Chink," so I knew that the way I looked provoked bullying from other kids. All I heard about me had a negative connotation because I looked different.

As I got older, it became clearer to me that racism had a major impact on my life, and I became more determined to find out what it meant being Filipino and discover something positive about it.

My search for my identity coincided with the rise of student activism, creating turmoil in American universities. It would not be long before my own family would be drawn towards the issues that polarized the U.S. in the 1960s, and changed American life and politics significantly.

Beginnings of my activism

My mother and I became involved in the civil rights, anti-war and labor movements in the late 1960s. My mother, who had given up her nursing career to care for her four children, organized cocktail parties and coffee gatherings with other middle-class women to discuss race relations and raise funds for the civil rights struggle in the South.

She supported the grape boycott spearheaded by the United Farm Workers; sometimes I even joined her in the UFW picket line in Madison. I learned later that Filipino farm workers in California, led by Larry Itliong, began the grape strike in Delano and were instrumental in the formation of UFW, together with the Mexican workers, led by Cesar Chavez.

I was 12 when my mother went back to college and did an undergraduate course with history as her major. She later took up graduate studies on Southeast Asian history, focusing her research and writing on the Philippines and the Huks. Together with other graduate students, she helped form the Committee to End the War in Vietnam, the first national anti-war organization based in Madison. The committee caused controversy by holding demonstrations against the war at a time when few Americans had heard of this Southeast Asian country. I remember going to a protest in 1966 attended by only about 15 people. The bystanders yelled "Communists!" and "Go back to Russia!" at us, demonstrating the resilience of the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era of the 1950s.

Once, a right-wing radio commentator started reading the names and addresses of antiwar organizers, whom he called "communists." While sitting with my mother in the living room, we heard him read out her name and our address. I did not fully understand the moment, but I felt the fear that the message had aimed to elicit.

I believe that my mother's provenance can help explain her politics. She came from an Ohio family that held a Midwest tradition of distrust in corporations and banks. Although mostly white and regarded as conservative, many farmers and small business owners in that region held progressive politics due to the influence of the populist Farmer-Labor Party. They opposed American involvement in the First World War and in 1948 backed the nomination for president of the Progressive Party's candidate Henry Wallace, who opposed segregation and supported economic equality, universal health insurance, and voting rights for African Americans.

I consider my mother the greatest influence in my own development as an activist. I remember coming home from junior high school and sitting on a stool in the kitchen, talking politics with my mother while she was cooking dinner. Our extensive discussions inspired me to visit the student union at the university, where card tables were set up for different causes. I would watch students from groups, ranging from the right wing like Young Americans for Freedom, to the progressive, like the Committee Against the War in Vietnam, sometimes sitting next to each other, yelling and arguing about Vietnamese history and U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. It was where I learned the ABCs of public debate. I went on to become a member of a school debate team that competed in state tournaments.

I barely knew anything about my father's politics because he never talked about them. However, a few years before he died, I got to know him more. During the Watergate hearings, he was completely riveted watching the TV coverage. He was a registered Democrat and never liked President Nixon.

I was the only serious activist among the children. My older brother was politically sympathetic and was teargassed at a demonstration but he did not become as involved. I don't think my older sister ever participated in such actions, while my other brother, who is ten years younger than I, was not old enough to understand what was going on.

The turmoil in my family reflected the societal rupture in the country during the 1960s. American universities had become the setting for major protests against the Vietnam War, which divided the nation for several years.

By the time I was 14, I was doing mostly political organizing in school. My classmates and I worked on the 1968 campaign for president of the Democratic Party's candidate Eugene McCarthy, who ran on an anti-Vietnam War platform. My mother gave me a lot of support but I became a little more radical than her and my classmates. I would walk out of my classes to attend sit-down strikes to protest the war. My grades suffered, and my extracurricular activities put me at odds with the school administrators.

I was suspended several times, and once, the FBI came to see me in school because of my anti-war activism. As part of their intimidation tactic, they also contacted my father. Many years later, when I retrieved my FBI and CIA records via the Freedom of Information Act, I was surprised to see my high school files, as reported by the FBI office in Milwaukee.

Broadening my political vision

In January 1970, when I was 17, I left school and signed up with the Venceremos Youth Brigade for a two-month trip to Cuba, which allowed young people to learn about the revolution in the tiny socialist country and show solidarity with its people. I also thought that this time abroad would help me become more independent. It was the first time I would travel long distance without my family.

In Cuba, I met Filipino Americans like Nemesio Domingo, Jr. and Bill Sorro. A son of Filipino immigrants, Nemesio was a leading activist in the Asian

American community and anti-war movement in Seattle, Washington. He told me that he had been encouraging his sister Cindy, who was also 17, to join the Brigade. Bill Sorro, an experienced housing activist and trade unionist from San Francisco, described the role of Filipino Americans in the ongoing struggle to protect low-income housing at the International Hotel, where many elderly Filipinos lived, in the city's Chinatown.

I was elated to learn about Filipino activism in the U.S. However, it was the radio broadcasts about the Philippines that intrigued me. The information I heard surprised me at first; it later changed my life.

From Cuban radio, I learned about the growing protest movement in the Philippines. I was encouraged to hear about the massive demonstration led by students opposing the policies of President Ferdinand Marcos, including his support for U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, and demanding improvement in school conditions and academic reforms.

The political upheavals during the first three months of 1970 rocked the country and became popularly known as the First Quarter Storm. I thought that it would be an exciting time to go to the Philippines. However, learning about Filipino-American activism from Nemesio and Bill sparked my interest to visit California first upon my return to the U.S.

From Madison, I hitchhiked to the Bay Area and stayed with someone I met in Cuba. Her apartment was above the White Horse Bar, a well-known gathering place for gays in Oakland. One day, I heard from our window the loud chants of demonstrators in front of the bar. Although I was still grappling with my gender identity and had not yet come out as a lesbian, I went down and joined the picket line because I supported gay rights.



Melinda Paras, a member of Kabataang Makabayan (KM) or Nationalist Youth and an organizer of American G.I.s in the Philippines who opposed the Vietnam War, speaking at a KM event in the early 1970s. (Courtesy of Stephen Jaffe)

At the International Hotel, I painted walls while other volunteers fixed the plumbing and cleaned the rooms. The activists from diverse progressive groups had been fighting against the eviction of tenants and to save the hotel from demolition, a struggle that would last nine years. During my Bay Area stay, I met a number of Filipino Americans working on this effort, with whom I would reconnect a few years later.

Although the tenants were eventually evicted and the hotel demolished, determined grassroots groups worked for years lobbying city officials for low-income housing, paving the way for the opening in 2005 of a new I-Hotel at its former site. In 1996, Sorro and other Filipino Americans like Emil De Guzman and Al Robles had established the Manilatown Heritage Foundation to promote social and economic justice for Filipinos and ensure that the history and legacy of the I-Hotel struggle are kept alive. The

foundation was able to secure space for the Manilatown Center on the ground floor of the I-Hotel for the community.

While it was an eye-opening experience for me to work with my own community, I wanted to pursue my passionate vision of helping advance the national liberation movements brewing all over Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Without any hesitation, I decided to move to the Philippines. I was going to learn what it really meant to be Filipino by going to school, learning Tagalog, and joining the movement.

I returned to Madison and wrote to my grandfather, whom I had never met, to tell him that I wanted to go to college in the Philippines. A few weeks later, I received his reply, which included an airline ticket for my trip. Since I had dropped out of school, I took and passed a high school equivalency test, enabling me to obtain a diploma and qualify to enroll in a Philippine university. At the airport, I said an emotional goodbye to my family because I did not know whether I would ever return to the United States. I was aware of the risk I was taking and even thought of the possibility that I might be killed there.

Discovering my roots

I arrived in Manila in November 1970, a year after Marcos had won in a contentious presidential election wracked by violence and cheating. I stayed with my grandfather in one of the three houses at the family compound in Paco, an old district in Manila, founded by the Spanish friars in the 16th century. I had two uncles living there, while one uncle lived in Green Hills, a residential area in another part of the city. While I had some knowledge about the Philippine movement, I had no idea about my father's family until this visit.

Like my mother two decades earlier, I underwent a cultural shock. I experienced my mother's frustration at the restrictions on women. My female cousins were very sheltered. When I told them that I wanted to go to the state-run University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City, about eight miles from my grandfather's home, they became very worried.

"You can't go to U.P. How will you get there?" I replied that I was going to take a bus or a jeepney, but they could not understand why I would even consider it. They did not take public transportation and were brought to school by my grandfather's chauffeur. As soon as I learned the routes, I

took jeepneys everywhere. After all, I knew how to find my way to new places in the States and even traveled to Cuba on my own.

I was used to making my own dinner and washing dishes and was surprised to learn that my grandfather had domestic workers who prepared the meals and took care of cleaning up. Yet we did not have hot water. I would bathe by using a *tabo* (plastic or tin dipper) to scoop water from a big pail. I desperately wanted to learn Tagalog, but my cousins often wished to practice their English with me. They were very interested in American music, fads, and blue jeans, looking up to the United States. My grandfather had nationalist leanings, the only thing on which we agreed. However, he supported Marcos, his good friend, who was rabidly pro-American. I often argued with him about land reform, which he passionately opposed because he was a landlord.

Everything had been turned upside down for me and I often felt homesick. In America, I was called a “Jap” or “Chink,” which clearly made me feel that I did not belong. In the Philippines, I was wearing blue jeans and doing things girls were not supposed to do and did not fit either. It took me a year to grasp the paradoxes of Philippine society, which was largely aided by my growing fluency in Tagalog.

After a few weeks of getting to know my relatives, I decided to pursue the main reason for my trip. One day, I took a bus to the university to look into college courses and seek out contacts, who could introduce me to the movement.

Joining the Philippine movement

I went to see my parents’ friend, a U.P. professor, who was one of the graduate students who had stayed at our house in Wisconsin. He introduced me to some members of Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youth), who were painting red banners on the lawn outside Vinzons Hall that housed the Student Union.

At first they were suspicious, but the professor’s introduction helped me to fit in. My physical features also helped in my integration. Standing just a few inches over five feet and with light brown skin, I could easily pass for a Filipina. However, I did not join KM right away because I was a bit wary. Back in the U.S., I had witnessed intense infighting among American left groups.

In 1971, the Philippine state university mirrored the turbulence at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s. The student movement was continuing to make advances after having successfully organized a series of huge actions following the First Quarter Storm.

I continued to hang out at U.P. to figure out the differences between KM and a competing group, the Samahan ng Demokratikong Kabataan (Democratic Association of the Youth). I talked to a lot of people but still felt a little nervous about making an organizational choice, and hard as I tried, I did not see much ideological divide between the two. But after hearing about a split in the SDK, which I thought sounded petty, I talked to a KM member and expressed my interest in their group.

As part of my orientation, I was given a copy of the book *Philippine Society and Revolution*, written by U.P. professor Jose Maria Sison, founder of KM and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), under the pseudonym Amado Guerrero. The PSR was considered a primer on the role of U.S. imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism in Philippine society. I brought the tome home, read it chapter by chapter, and was completely blown away. I had never read a more comprehensive analysis of a country's basic problems and strategy for winning a revolution. I decided to join the U.P. Diliman Chapter of KM.

In late January 1971, U.P. students declared a sympathy strike in support of passenger jeepney drivers who protested the steep increase in gasoline prices and paralyzed a crucial means of transportation in Manila. The nine-day action became known as the Diliman Commune after students erected barricades around campus and resisted efforts by the Philippine Constabulary to enter the university.

I joined the barricade behind Vinzons Hall and got my first taste of confrontation with the military. The students removed the barriers only after the government had assured the university officials that it would respect academic freedom and remove members of the military and the police from campus.

I started getting death threats on the phone at my grandfather's house. The main message from unidentified callers, who I assumed were Marcos agents, was "Stop what you're doing or we'll kill you." Not surprisingly, my grandfather got extremely upset and he prohibited me from going out late

at night. He was not very successful, as I was close to one of the domestic workers, who would let me out whenever I had a meeting.

After auditing some classes at the U.P. for a few months, I enrolled in the Arts and Sciences Department, where I planned to major in Philippine history. I also took a Tagalog class. As soon as I started school, I moved out of my grandfather's compound and roomed with another American student in an apartment in Quezon City, close to the university. Now, I could come and go as I wished, free from the constraints of my overprotective family. Luckily, my grandfather had agreed to keep supporting me financially.

I had been with the Diliman Chapter for one month before I was assigned to the women's department of the KM national office, also in Quezon City. For six months, I worked with Raquel Edralin in organizing textile workers and helping coordinate strikes by female high school students.

Together with Lorena Barros, the founder of MAKIBAKA (Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan or Free Movement of New Women), Raquel and I spearheaded the first International Women's Day March in the country on March 8, 1971. We three also had joined the Diliman Commune the previous month.

Lorena was so courageous in establishing a feminist organization at a time when she risked, and received, ridicule not only from society in general, but also from some men in the movement, who became angry and abusive because they felt challenged by anything that concerned feminism or women's liberation. She later joined the New People's Army, the armed wing of the CPP, and was killed at age 28 in an encounter with the military in 1976 in Quezon province.

Raquel, another staunch feminist, became a political prisoner under the Marcos regime. After the fall of the dictatorship, she co-founded the Women's Crisis Center that provided shelter for survivors of domestic violence. She passed away in 2001 after a long fight against cancer. Both trailblazers, Lorena and Raquel opposed patriarchy and led efforts to advance women's rights in the midst of the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship.

As I got more steeped in the work, I started feeling a greater sense of belonging because I was finally getting more fully integrated into the

movement, which was one of my main reasons for moving to the Philippines. I also developed a romantic relationship with a male comrade. But it would not take long before I had to uproot myself for another political assignment.

Organizing anti-war G.I.s

I left my studies at U.P. and moved to Olongapo, Zambales, a 95-mile drive northwest of Manila, where a major U.S. navy facility, the Subic Bay Naval Base, was located. KM had assigned me as a full-time organizer of American service men who opposed U.S. policies in Vietnam, working at the naval base and Clark Air Base in Angeles, Pampanga, forty-five miles east of Olongapo.

I was happy to meet two people from the States, who were doing work in support of the American G.I.s: Dale Borgeson, who was sent by Pacific Counseling Service to provide counseling for anti-war service personnel about their rights; and Elaine Elinson, a Bay-Area journalist, who was touring Southeast Asia with the Free the Army (FTA), an anti-Vietnam War show, to counter Bob Hope's pro-war USO tour.

I traveled with actors Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland and singers Holly Near and Len Chandler, who performed in the show all over the country to support the G.I. anti-war movement.

As part of my assignment, I traveled to Manila whenever American G.I. activists arrived in the country in order to bring them to Olongapo. On September 22, 1972, the day before martial law was officially declared, I went to Manila with Dale to pick up a new G.I. organizer. The following morning, we all got up early to go to the bus station for the trip to Olongapo. I looked for a newspaper but did not find any. I thought it was odd but did not give it much thought. We got on the bus, where I finally saw a kid selling newspapers, but they turned out to be from the day before.

Declaration of martial law

After our group arrived in Olongapo, we found out that Subic Naval Base had been repeatedly issuing calls for American personnel to report to their posts and stay there until further notice. That was when I knew that something catastrophic had happened. Some GIs smuggled us into the base so we could listen to the U.S. military radio. After confirming that

Marcos had indeed declared martial law, I immediately concluded that I was now on the government's wanted list.

Olongapo is a coastal city in a province with a vast mountainous region.

The Philippine military in Zambales hated activists because the New People's Army had a sizable operation in this province. They did not have the subtlety to separate a legal organization (KM) from the NPA and did not really care about the distinction, as long as they could capture someone to prove that they were doing their job.

In the past, the Philippine Constabulary had picked me up during a KM march in a small barrio between Iba, the capital of the province, and Olongapo. They turned me over to the barrio's authorities. Fearing reprisals from the NPA, which had strong support in that area, the police chief released me and told me not to communicate with my "friends." With martial law in force, however, I knew that I might not survive another arrest.

Most Filipinos, especially those who were in the movement, had known that martial law was coming, especially after the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus the previous year. We held rallies almost every day and shouted at the top of our lungs, "No martial law, No martial law."

Many believed that the government had staged the bombings and attacks on government officials in Manila in the past year to pave the way for Marcos to declare military rule. Everyone was aware that he desperately wanted to keep himself in power, as he was on his second and final term.

Still, I was completely shocked when martial law was finally announced. Despite all of our preparations, it still felt unreal to witness first hand the suspension of democratic rights. It was extremely disorienting to wake up to no TV, radio, newspaper, and other forms of communication and realize that exercising one's civil liberties was now considered against the law.

A month before the declaration of martial law, KM had given us instructions on how to go underground, but my unit was not very organized. I was just beginning to integrate into my new collective and did not know all the emergency details, so my comrades and I acted quickly on our own.

We abandoned the GI movement headquarters, took the mimeograph machine to a little barrio outside Olongapo, and checked into a hotel. One

day, after we had transferred the equipment, members of the Philippine Constabulary surrounded the barrio. One of our organizers, who was arrested in Olongapo, had been beaten very badly in the local jail.

I decided to return to Manila two weeks later although I knew it was going to be a risky trip. Then, Olongapo's main road was the only way one could travel to and from Manila and military checkpoints had been already positioned at both ends of the city. I was ready to go underground but did not know how and where to find people from the movement. I decided that I would have a better chance in Manila, where I could try to contact someone from KM.

I left early one morning on a Victory Liner bus bound for Manila. I was terrified, knowing that there would be checkpoints along the way. I was wearing a pair of jeans and tee shirt, confident that I could easily blend in because I looked Filipino. As soon as I got on the bus, I spotted a Caucasian priest and decided to take the window seat next to him. After finding out that he was Irish and supported Irish liberation, I started talking to him about Ireland and the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

As I had predicted, the military checked the bus several times. Two of the soldiers, who were holding photos, would enter the bus to see if there were activists among the passengers while the others stayed outside. At each checkpoint, I would turn my head toward the window and pretended to be asleep. The priest covered my face by holding up the newspaper he was reading whenever the soldiers would come near us. Though I did not tell him that I was an activist, he did all this as if it was the most natural thing for him to do. At one stop, the soldiers pulled a boy with long hair off the bus and pushed him around. Because of these delays, the trip took four hours instead of two. It seemed to have lasted forever.

As soon as I got to Manila, I went directly to Ermita, the tourist belt, where I thought I would look less conspicuous. I found a cheap hotel and stayed there during the next two weeks. I went to American movies in air-conditioned theatres almost every day not only to escape the tropical heat but also because I thought the dark would shield me from scrutiny.

Because of all the disarray brought on by martial law, I had a hard time contacting my KM comrades. Feeling a bit desperate, I decided to go to my grandfather's house to see if my fiancé, who had already gone

underground, had left any messages for me. I thought that he would be able to help me connect with someone from the movement. I was disappointed to find out that he had not called.

I picked up my collection of political books and went back to the hotel without incident. I read the volumes from cover to cover during the next several days. I only took a break to go once more to my grandfather's compound to check for messages.

Experiencing political repression

I had been in my uncle's house only a few minutes when a household member approached me and told me that there were people looking for me. When I asked her who they were, she responded with a funny look on her face. I knew right away the identity of my "visitors."

"Miss, we just need to ask you some questions," the head of the Philippine Constabulary squad told me. Aware of what that phrase meant, I packed a small bag of clothes. The officer put me in the first of three jeeps in a convoy, and we left immediately. I felt extremely frightened throughout the whole trip but kept thinking of a way to escape. However, I knew that I did not have a chance with two jeeploads of soldiers following us.

At Camp Aguinaldo, the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines located in Quezon City, they put me in a cottage next to a block of offices surrounded by barbed wire fence and guarded by soldiers armed with machine guns. I did not recognize any of the nine other women also held in that small house. The male prisoners were detained in another part of the camp.

Two days later, at midnight, the guards brought me to a small room in another building for interrogation. A colonel of the Philippine Air Force began asking me questions like "Where is Jose Maria Sison?" I said, "I don't know." He also asked me about the whereabouts of other people. I said I knew nothing about them. The officer proceeded to interrogate me for eight hours, without any breaks for food or use of the bathroom. He showed me my photos taken secretly at demonstrations and alternated his questions with threats of execution by firing squad.

By the time I was allowed to go back to the cottage, it was already morning. I exchanged stories with the other women, some of whom had been

tortured. To relieve the tension at the camp, I started socializing with the other prisoners. I played guitar and sang revolutionary songs with them.

One day, some soldiers came and plucked me from the group. They pushed me around, probably irritated by the songs, and put me in solitary confinement. After two days, I was brought back to the cottage, where I stayed for another ten days. I was transferred to Camp Crame, the nearby headquarters of the Philippine National Police (PNP), where I was assigned to stay with other women detainees in a little mezzanine above the gymnasium.

At the new prison, I saw an acquaintance, who reported that the military was preparing criminal charges against activists, such as subversion and treason, which were punishable by death. The authorities at the camp had told me that I would be charged with “attempting to overthrow the government by the use of armed force and violence,” which carried a death sentence.

Despite the macabre atmosphere, I felt more hopeful at this camp, which housed about five hundred political prisoners. I went around the gymnasium and saw several people I knew, who were able to give me news about other KM members.



Demonstration against the Marcos dictatorship, co-organized by the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP), in Washington, D.C., 1982. (Ang Katipunan file photo)

During the day, I would walk around the main floor. That was how I found my uncle, Alejandro Lichauco, an economist and former delegate to the 1971 Constitutional Convention, who opposed Marcos machinations to control the proceedings. He was the author of a well-researched critique of U.S. control of the Philippine economy titled, "The Lichauco Paper: Imperialism in the Philippines" that was published by the Monthly Review Press in New York. As soon as I found out that his family brought him food and bottles of Coca-Cola every day, I visited him often so I could share his ration of soft drinks.

It was already November 1972, two months after Marcos had imposed martial law and one month after I was arrested and detained. The military still had not filed any charges against me.

One day, the guards brought me and the other American detainees to the office of the head of the Philippine immigration office. He turned out to be

Tuting Reyes, an uncle. When he realized who I was, he called my grandfather. My cousins and an aunt brought me some fried chicken and the rest of my clothes. That evening, my uncle allowed me to sleep in his air-conditioned office. I thought of escaping but there were guards posted outside the door.

The next morning, a group of police officers told me and the other Americans to pack up our things. A military convoy drove us to the airport and put us on a plane bound for the United States. The uniformed men accompanied us until Guam, the first stopover, to make sure that we took the flight to Honolulu, our point of entry into the country.

I stayed in Honolulu for a few days before proceeding to the Bay Area. As soon as I arrived in San Francisco, I immediately linked up with members of the National Committee for the Restoration of Civil Liberties in the Philippines. The organization immediately sent me on a national speaking tour to inform the Filipino American communities about the conditions of the country under martial law.

The NCRCLP had formed two months earlier, in late September 1972, at a conference of Filipino immigrants and Filipino Americans who happened to be meeting to discuss their support for the Philippine movement when word came that martial law had been declared in the Philippines.

The participants immediately agreed to establish a national committee on these points of unity: oppose martial law, demand restoration of civil liberties, release political prisoners, and oppose U.S. support to Marcos.

A year later, I helped found the Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino or Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP) to cohere revolutionary Filipinos and Filipino Americans in the fight for social justice and equality in the U.S. and for national sovereignty and against the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines.

Finding my “home”

During my two years in the Philippines, I had come to deeply appreciate my Filipino identity. I became confident in my understanding of my family history and Philippine culture and traditions, as well as achieved my goal of contributing to the liberation struggle right in my father’s homeland.

I consider having a home in both the Philippine and U.S. movements for social justice. When I came out as a lesbian, I also acquired another home in the gay and lesbian movement.

Over the years and in these many different struggles, I learned that my true identification lies in fighting for causes in which I believe and to work wherever I can best contribute.

Melinda Paras has been active in movements for social justice for over 50 years, including the U.S. anti-Vietnam war movement, the Philippine liberation movement, the Filipino community civil rights movement, the LGBTQ movements, and the struggle for health care access in the US. Paras was the founder and CEO of Paras and Associates (PAA), leading the implementation of new language access solutions, using video call center technologies. The Paras and Associates team created the Health Care Interpreter Network (HCIN), a cooperative of hospitals and clinics sharing interpreter services over a shared video platform. She has since retired after selling the company to its employees.

Mila de Guzman is the author of Women Against Marcos: Stories of Filipino and Filipino American Women Who Fought a Dictator.