

Cynthia Palmaria

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Camera: Don Bouzek

CP: I am a faculty at the University of Alberta Radiation Therapy program. Radiation Therapy has been my profession since the late '90s. I'm also a community organizer for Migrante Alberta. My family and I moved to Edmonton in 2013 and it was my job as a radiation therapist and I eventually became a faculty at the University. That's what attracted us to Edmonton. My family and I lived in Quebec and then Toronto and then Alberta. I came to Canada through the sponsorship of my parents, who came to Montreal as caregivers in the 1980s. My parents were looking for a greener pasture for me and my sister, so they left the Philippines when I was 11 years old and my sister was nine. But they first went to Spain to work as caregivers for about six years, then to Montreal. After nine years of separation, we finally were reunited with my parents in Montreal. As a teenager I was able to see the situation of my parents, the abuse – financial, verbal, emotional abuse from the employers. They didn't really stand up for themselves for their rights because they thought that they just should be grateful for the opportunity to be able to come here and bring my sister and myself. I questioned that. That was like a dinner table conversation with my parents, that I did not agree with them. So that's how I became a community activist, just questioning why we had to be separated growing up in the Philippines, why they had to put up with situations like abuse in the workplace. Being a teenager in Montreal, that's how I was able to see with the other youth the same experiences of separation and conflict of families as migrant families. So that's how I became a community organizer from Montreal to Toronto and to Alberta, just being involved in the issues that touched the issues of youth and then eventually women, then here in Alberta when we started Migrante Alberta in 2013.

Q: What kinds of abuse did your parents experience in Montreal?

CP: The abuse that my parents experienced were times that as a couple they were working for affluent families in Montreal. They would be taking care of the kids, cooking, doing everything in the household. They wouldn't be allowed to eat the same food that employers were eating. There was yelling, so verbal emotional abuse. The worst was the financial abuse as well. For years they stayed with this employer that was only paying them \$10,000 a year, and then they weren't paying their taxes. So in the end when my parents retired, that's how I saw my parents living in the low poverty level. They weren't able to get a pension that would support their existence as seniors, as retired workers. That lingered, that impact of that financial abuse on my parents as workers in Montreal. That's something that I still see in the workers that we organize here in Alberta.

Q: Can you talk about your experience of being separated from your parents?

CP: As a teenager when my parents left my sister and I, I was 11 years old, and my sister was nine. We were living with two separate aunties in two different cities. This is in the early '80s. We only had letters. My parents would write letters and the news would come to us two weeks later; then the same, we would respond. So it was very slow. There was no Internet at the time. We would have cassette recorders and record messages and send it by mail so that was our main form of communication. During the span of eight years that we were separated we were only able to see them once. That's how our relationship was, it was just through letters. From my parents' perspective, same thing, we were connecting through letters. It was my auntie that really saw us through poverty, through growing up. When we got reunited in Montreal my parents were working from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. My sister and I were [16 and 18] at the time, so we were able to handle things on our own. But my parents would come home from work, and they would be bringing us little presents like chocolates coming from work. I felt like a little kid. But years later it occurred to me that I think they were trying to make up for the time that they missed. I thought that was something they were trying to make up for.

Q: Can you talk about your schooling in Montreal and how you adjusted to society?

CP: Moving to Montreal... I was actually planning to go to med school to Medicine; that was my dream growing up. I had no Plan B. When my parents were able to get their permanent residence, I told the auntie and uncle that raised me, I said, "I'll be back after a year; I just want to spend a little bit of time with my parents." My uncle is, like, "No, you're not coming back." I said, "I'll be back, I just want to see my parents, and then I'll go to med school." But then when I went to Montreal, my uncle was right, so I stayed. In the Philippines I was in my third year of university doing pre-med and I only had a year left before going to med school. But then moving to Montreal, I decided I want to stay with my parents, but there's no accreditation of whatever courses I took. Montreal had a different system, so I had to go to CÉGEP, which was the pre-university program. After one year of being in CÉGEP, then I went to University of Waterloo and did my bachelor's there. In the end, I realized it's very competitive to go to med school and it's very expensive, so I ended up finding this career called Radiation Therapy. I went back to school after my bachelor's, and it's been a career that I've enjoyed since 1996. As I was doing Radiation Therapy, I realized that I enjoyed teaching students [...], so three years into the career I started teaching in Quebec, which I continued in Toronto and here in Alberta.

Q: Do you work within hospitals or within cancer centres?

CP: My work was mainly in the cancer centres. It's a very specialized field. I worked in different parts of Quebec. I had to learn French; otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to practise my profession. It's been quite challenging but a rich experience. So, working in the hospital cancer centres and then teaching in the clinic as a clinical instructor, then also teaching in the college and university. I think being an educator as a profession, that's something that really helped me in my organizing work. I've been doing a lot of education in the community, like, even here at the Orange Hub where we do a lot of education sessions. That's been something that has benefitted my organizing work as well.

Q: Can you talk a bit about the education sessions that you do here at the Orange Hub?

CP: When we started Migrante Alberta in 2013, one of the things that we heard from the community was the barriers for the temporary foreign workers to be able to apply for permanent residence and be reunited with their families. One of the requirements which they needed to apply for permanent residence was to have a certain English-language proficiency. We heard about the frustration of the workers because they have to take this exam and, if they don't pass this, then that jeopardizes their chance to be with their family in Canada and build a future with them. Part of the campaign that we've been working on in Migrante is to eliminate that requirement for permanent residency – the language requirement. But in the meantime, we thought we should do a review with the workers, like an English-language review in preparation for the exam. So we developed a curriculum so that the students can practise speaking, reading, writing and listening. The topics we would use is about their work situations, their immigration and separation from their family, so that it gives them that confidence to talk about something that they know and experienced, to build their confidence in writing that exam. We started with the Filipino community but then we were able to get inquiries from different communities. The classes now we would have, say, 30 students with Filipino, Spanish speaking and different communities. What we do also during the language sessions is, we try to provide them information about different supports that they can get like settlement support and all that. So we have information sessions with them. Then the lessons – if we're talking about speaking – then they speak about their work situations. The English sessions have also become like a support system for the workers, which has been something that they look forward to. They're in a classroom, they're talking to other workers about their experiences, and at the same time building their confidence to write that exam.

Q: What other language groups attend the classes?

CP: Aside from Filipino temporary foreign workers, we've had students who are temporary foreign workers coming from Colombia, Chile, Mexico, India, Iraq, Iran. We've had a whole variety of different ethnic groups. In a way it was good because, if it was just Filipinos, between

classes, they'd be speaking in Filipino. What we try to do is get them to practise English so that they can get to that comfort level. By having different communities together, they have no choice but to communicate with each other through English, so it gives them practise.

Q: Where do you live in Edmonton?

CP: I live in the west part of Edmonton, Jasper Place, Lynnwood area. We've been living there since 2013. We chose the west part of Edmonton because, when I first moved to Edmonton, I had a friend who lived in West Edmonton. I've become comfortable in the area going to work at the Cancer Centre to the university, and I was more comfortable in the area. When we started looking for a place my husband and I figured that we want a place where... as community organizers, we wanted a place that's accessible to the community members so that we can easily connect with them. It's funny because the real estate agent kept taking us to the suburbs of Edmonton. I was like, "We want something that's accessible by public transit, that's close to everything." So, when we found this house where we're living now, we saw that it was close to [...] where everybody goes. There's a lot of schools, a lot of churches, and the bus route was close. So we are really happy to have found this house. Ten years later we have members of Migrante, [...] they would just knock on the door. Filipinos, usually we don't call, we just pass by the house, "Oh, we're here, let's pass by." So our house has been a revolving door of community members just coming by. Sometimes they will just [come by and say], "I cooked this and just wanted to drop this off." Or they would come by and say, "Ate Cynthia," – Ate being "big sister" – "I need help with my application. Can you do this with me?" So it's been really convenient for us and for the community members as well.

Q: Is there a large Filipino population in Jasper Place?

CP: Yeah. In the neighbourhood, I go for a walk and a block away I see Filipinos working on the front yard, or they became friends with my daughter. There has been a lot of Filipinos. The Catholic schools around the area are where we see a lot of Filipino kids going to school. The

parents that I have talked to, their kids come to the Orange Hub for dance workshops and stuff. Everywhere we go – there's Filipino stores a few blocks from where I live. So, yeah, I've seen a lot of Filipinos in the community although I've seen different ethnic groups as well.

Q: Who else lives in the area?

CP: My neighbours, there's different ethnic groups, like, from India. I was looking for a physiotherapist one day and I saw an ad; she had an Indian background and she's two blocks away. So that's been really convenient. I walk around and see different shops that's owned by different community groups or neighbours like Indigenous neighbours that I was able to see in my breast cancer survivors support group [...]. So it's been quite the friendly neighbourhood in the area where we are.

Q: Why do Filipinos and other ethnic groups choose to live in this area?

CP: From what I hear from the members of Migrante Alberta that live around the area, it's accessible. I had some people who just came to Canada as temporary workers and then they ended up in Mill Woods. But then they moved to West Edmonton last weekend because they said that it's more convenient. They're close to the mall, and that's the hub for transportation as well. There's Filipino grocers like Seafood City, for example, and the grocery stores, and it's close to their work. Then, if we have our community activities here at the Orange Hub, everything is within reach by public transit. For example, if they're renting a room in a house that's owned by Filipinos, for some temporary workers that's also something that helps because they have that support system if they live with somebody who's of the same culture and the same language. So it's been really convenient having the support system around them, having the community close by. Those are some of the few factors for the decision to live in the area.

Q: Could you expand on the concept of *Ate*?

CP: In Filipino culture we do have terms that we use for different family members, although community members would use that even if there's no blood relation. *Ate*, which means "big sister," is what a lot of the community members would use when they talk to me. They would say, "*Ate* Cynthia, can you help me with this?" or, "*Ate* Cynthia, I have this problem with my work." So it's always "*Ate*." When we're with the younger members of the community, say, when we're having workshops with... like, my daughter's having a workshop with the young members of the community here, I'm surrounded by these young Filipino women. They would say, "*Tita*," which is like an auntie. I'm a *tita*, I'm an auntie, and so that's something that you would commonly hear. I guess part of it is respect but also, even if we're not blood related, that's something that brings us closer like a family. That's something that we have in the community.

Q: What's the relationship between the Misericordia and the community?

CP: The neighbourhood is close to Misericordia Hospital and right next to it there's a long-term care facility. A lot of the members of the community who have finished, for example, the Caregiver Program, have gone back to school to train as a healthcare aide, for example, or nursing assistant. After finishing those programs, then they end up in the healthcare profession, so they end up working in the Misericordia Hospital or the long-term care; so they live in the neighbourhood and then they work in the hospital that's nearby. That's something also that you would see a lot within the hospitals. You see a lot of Filipinos working in a hospital, whether they're in housekeeping staff, the long-term care in the neighbourhood, and working at the hospital. We would have activities here at the Orange Hub, for example, on the weekends and the members would say, "Oh, *Ate* Cynthia, after our session I have to run over to my work," which is just right by the hospital. This is something that they're able to do conveniently because it's close by. The churches are nearby also, so that's something that they would say. Okay, after our session in the morning or afternoon, I would just go to church first, which is walking distance from here, and then they would just come to the Orange Hub and join our education sessions. I think the close vicinity of everything around the neighbourhood has made

it a choice for a lot of the members of the community here, because of the convenience of having everything around us.

Q: What role do temporary foreign workers play in providing long-term care?

CP: A lot of the women that came from the Caregiver Program ended up working as a healthcare aide or licensed practical nurse and ended up working in long-term care at the hospitals. During COVID that was something that we heard – they had a lot of challenges not being able to get PPE, the proper equipment to care for their patients. But the ones who were not permanent residents yet were afraid to speak up. They were afraid that, if they complained, they will lose their job. It's not easy for them to be able to get a new work permit because their work permit is tied to their employer. So it's a closed work permit – they cannot work for anyone else while they're a temporary foreign worker. On the other hand, those who are already permanent residents or citizens have a little bit of a voice. So they have a bit more courage to join their union if there is a union in their workplace, they have a little bit more freedom to express their voice because they're not afraid of losing their work permit and jeopardizing their chance to become permanent residents. One issue also that they have voiced to Migrante as working for long-term care was the fact that, because they are breadwinners supporting themselves here in Canada and supporting their families in the Philippines, working \$15 per hour is not sufficient. They're forced to work two or three jobs even; so they work seven days a week just so that they're able to make ends meet and support themselves and their families back in the Philippines. When COVID happened, they were legislated to work only in one workplace. That was really difficult for them. That was something that was a challenge that they faced, not being able to meet their financial needs of supporting themselves and their families back home. So that was a real challenge for them because it seems like they're still legislated into poverty. These women who were trained as nurses, as professionals back in the Philippines, there was no accreditation moving to Canada. Even if they worked in other Commonwealth countries, they worked in Saudi for ten years, but then they moved to Canada and that's not recognized even if they're able to get some points in the immigration system.

When they work here, they're legislated to work as caregivers. Then after five years of losing that practise and that profession, they would've had to go back to school. But they can't afford to because they have to survive so they would choose something that they can study for for six months only so that they can work right away. They end up as healthcare aides working in long-term care facilities; so they're still earning \$15 or \$17 per hour, but they're trained nurses and trained midwives who have lost their profession because there's no accreditation.

Q: What experiences were people going through during COVID?

CP: During COVID everything had to stop and we were not able to have face-to-face sessions; we learned quickly to adapt to technology. [For] our education sessions, our community gatherings – which was a way of supporting the community – we had to turn to using the technology, like Zoom, for example. We did regular education sessions through Zoom where we would talk about some of the support systems that Migrante was able to provide to the community, updates on what's happening. There was a lot of backlog in immigration applications, so years of delay of permanent residency applications was something that was commonly experienced by the community members. There was a lot of worries, a lot of concerns; that was a big source of stress for community members. We were able to gather through Zoom, although those who weren't able to cope with the technology demands, we weren't able to reach that, so still through phone was how we were able to connect with them. In Migrante we were able to gather some financial assistance from our brothers and sisters in the unions. They were able to give donations and through that, we were able to have care packages, especially for the undocumented, because they weren't able to do the usual work that they were doing in order to survive. For the care packages, it was like the undocumented members who had a car were the ones who were trusted by the other undocumented members of the community to go house to house and deliver care packages. We were able to get groceries like some bread donations – those were the kind of things that we put together in care packages. It was the undocumented organizers who connected with other undocumented, and then they were the trusted ones to go to the houses of these undocumented workers.

Access to vaccine was also another issue. We pushed the settlement organizations to support us in the call for access to vaccine for the undocumented. They did not have a healthcare card because as soon as their work permit expires their healthcare card is also not renewed, so they have no other way. By having mobile vaccine campaign, that was one way for us to be able to get access to vaccine for undocumented workers. We have a convoy of Migrante organizers that drove to the meat plant workers, the two meat plants where the workers had the huge outbreak – in Brooks, yes. We were able to go there and, again, we had our Migrante organizers from Migrante Alberta in Edmonton. We met in Brooks; we were at a park, and families of the meat plant workers were able to come. If the parents were sick, we would have young kids – 12 years old – that would come to the park on their bikes to get the care packages so that they can bring it home. That was something to see, young kids coming to us from the different families to pick up care packages.

Q: Can you explain the difference between undocumented workers and temporary foreign workers?

CP: The temporary foreign workers come through the Temporary Foreign Workers Program which was started with three streams. They could be either caregivers or temporary foreign workers working in different industries like hotel industry, food and service industry, or the seasonal agricultural workers. The seasonal agricultural workers have no chance of applying for permanent residence. These farm workers would come here during the harvest season and planting season, and they would leave. Every year, they would do that; they had no chance to apply as permanent residents. A lot of the Filipino temporary workers have come through the Caregiver Program where, after the completion of two years of the requirement of working as caregivers, they can be eligible to apply for permanent residence. Same with the Temporary Foreign Workers Program in the hotel industry, food industry – they have the chance to apply as permanent residents. Where they become undocumented is, for example, if the employers do not renew their work permit; if they're not able to find a new employer and their work permit and visa expires, that's where they become undocumented. In 2014 when the immigration

minister then, Jason Kenny, implemented the moratorium on temporary foreign workers, there was a “four-in, four-out” rule where it states that, if the workers have been here for four years, and after that period they haven’t applied for permanent residence, they have to leave Canada, and they cannot come back after four years. So a lot of workers were deported. This is the time when we just started Migrante Alberta. A lot of the workers were deported but a lot of the workers have made the difficult decision to stay undocumented for the reason that they are the breadwinners and there’s nothing to go back to in the Philippines. Even if they were professionals in the Philippines, there’s no decent wage for the job that they will do to support their family. So they decided to stay and become undocumented, working under the table. So they continue to work under the table which, in that situation, they’re the most vulnerable workers. They’re precarious – they cannot complain if there’s abuse that’s happening, if they’re not being paid even with the minimum wage. So with the fear of being deported, they’re forced to put up with the abuse in the workplace.

Q: What are the two different groups of Filipino workers here in Jasper Place?

CP: What I’ve seen in the community here is, it’s either the mom who would come as a caregiver and then, when they apply for their permanent residence, then the family is able to join them. Even with the minimum wage that they’ve been getting as a temporary foreign worker, once they have their open work permit, they work two jobs, three jobs, saving up. The dream is to have a house so that when their family is able to join them, then they have a house that they own where they can live with their family. A lot of these workers, even if they have their permanent residence or citizenship or even if they bought their house already, both parents end up working two or three jobs because they seem to be legislated in the low wage field because they weren’t able to get accreditation of their profession. So they get stuck working in the low wage industry, working two or three jobs to make ends meet, both the husband and the wife. Sometimes the children also work and contribute to the household. They’re happy to be able to have a stable home that they own but, working two or three jobs, you’re not able to spend that quality time on the weekends when your kids are off from school

because you're forced to work to pay for the house and to support the family. On the other hand, those who are under the temporary foreign workers program, a lot of them come here alone while the family – the wife or husband and the kids – are left back home. If they're caregivers, they live in their employer's home during the week and then on the weekend they either stay in the employer's home... but, because they're living in their employer's home, even if it's their day off, they're forced to still do some work in the home of their employer. Once they meet a friend, for example, when we're here at the Orange Hub in their English classes, that's where they meet other members of the community. They're like, "Oh, you're renting a room; maybe I can rent the room with you." We have a member that's sharing a room, for example, so they share a room together on the weekends so that they can save up money. For example, the caregivers are only off on the weekends, so they only stay in the room of their friend on Friday night and Saturday night, then they go back to their employer's home. The other temporary foreign workers rent a room in a house; they would look for, say, other Filipino families that have a room for rent. So they rent a room until their family comes [...]; then they're forced to find an apartment where their family can join then, then end up living in a basement, for example, like a basement suite with their families – or rent a room in a house if they're still on their own here in Edmonton. They're forced to do that because of the minimum wage that they're getting. How do you survive in Edmonton on your own while putting aside money to send to your family with your kids going to college, where you have to pay a huge amount of money for education? So they need to save up money and that's why they're forced to just rent a room or share a room so that they can still send the remittance money back to their family in the Philippines.

Q: Can you talk about the importance of those spaces where people can connect?

CP: In our Migrant work when we were still in Toronto, we did the research as to, "How do you find a support system if you have come to Canada alone? How do you end up connecting with the community?" A lot of them have said that the church... a lot of Filipinos are Catholic, so a lot of them will just find a church and that's where they find the other Filipinos. If the church has,

for example, a migrant ministry or something like that, then they would join that so that they're able to connect with other members of the community. Others would find, for example, when they go to Filipino stores, then end up meeting other members of the community there. They chat and become friends, and that's how they're able to talk about, "Oh, have you heard about this community organization or programs, like English language program? They do it there; why don't you join me?" So those are some of the places where they're able to connect. Some of our members have found us through the website. They're curious about the programs that we offer, some of the support systems that we're able to provide. When they see that they need this language exam as a requirement for their PR or permanent residence, then some of them have indicated, "Yeah, I've seen this on the website, or I've heard about it from my friend at church that goes there for English lessons." That's how they have connected. I've seen members of Migrante Alberta who have stayed friends after the language program. They tell me, "Oh, Ate Cynthia, I've worked at the fast food and I only know how to get to the mall from my house; I just go there for work. But then last weekend," – for example, they said that – "this is the only time that I got to enjoy going around the mall with my friends, laughing and eating together." So they become friends after meeting each other in our language classes whereas, before, it's all about work and they didn't know anyone. Our members would say, "I looked forward to being in the classroom because it reminded me [of when] I was a nurse [going] to school." And, even being able to have that dignity of being able to connect with others and gaining that confidence, I think that was important and something that they hold onto even after the English review sessions.

Q: Is there anything else about Jasper Place that you wanted to talk about?

CP: Yeah. Maybe I'll talk a little bit about the undocumented. During COVID I was talking about how we were providing care packages to the undocumented. We had a list at Migrante of undocumented members we would contact and say, "Care packages, we're delivering these," and all that. For years I had names of people that I never met. We would have Zoom sessions but the camera would be closed so we never really saw them. In the last year when we had

campaigns for a couple of our undocumented organizers like Vangie and Danilo... they have become the faces of the campaign for regularization, asking for status for undocumented migrants here in Canada who have been here working and contributing to the economy and yet living in the shadows. Vangie and Danilo became the faces of the regularization campaign, talking about the situations of undocumented workers. They have become an inspiration to the undocumented workers. In the last few months when we have our regular Migrants Café session, for example, we were talking about the situation of undocumented, we had more undocumented members that started attending. We would have the café and they would bring food. They would bring, like, their baked Filipino dessert and they'd be like, "I'm *kuya* this," and, "I'm *kuya* that" – *kuya* means "big brother," [...] but I'm only seeing them for the first time. Then the next café, they would join and talk, and start sharing their experiences. I thought, "This is something that's really significant in our organizing. The workers are here participating, but the undocumented showing their faces when they've been living in fear all these years – ten years, eight or twelve years – of living as an undocumented worker, living in fear all the time. Yet they're here with us sharing food and talking and introducing themselves." I think for Migrante, that's a victory in itself, gaining their trust; as an organizer, for the undocumented workers to be able to have that confidence and say, "Here I am and I'm ready to participate," I think it's an amazing experience as a community organizer.

Q: Can you explain regularization?

CP: Migrante Alberta is part of an umbrella organization called Migrante Canada, which is a nation-wide umbrella organization of Migrante groups from different parts of Canada. We were a founding member of Migrants Rights Network, which is [based] in Toronto. Migrants Rights Network, along with different organizations across the country, have launched campaigns to support temporary foreign workers [and the undocumented]. One of these campaigns is regularization, which [calls] on the federal government to grant permanent residence for those workers who have become undocumented – workers who are here and have become undocumented. Along with the regularization is the call on "Status for All." Canada had different

regularization programs, depending on the needs of the economy. For example, last year Toronto had a regularization for construction workers. They needed construction workers, so they had a cap of 1,000, [...] so they granted a thousand applications. There has been many in Canada's history. During COVID, for example, Canada needed healthcare workers in Quebec, and they did that, they opened up the system so that we can get workers in the healthcare industry to fill the needs of the healthcare industry in Quebec. Regularization is calling for permanent residence for these undocumented workers who are already here. Right now, our call is for a regularization program that has no cap. Statistics Canada says there are 500,000 undocumented workers in Canada. Anecdotes say there are 1.2 million undocumented workers in Canada hoping for this regularization program to happen. These are workers who are skilled, who have been contributing, who have made Canada a home.

Q: Can you talk about the national Migrante organization and how it plays into the creation of the local chapter?

CP: As a young organizer when I was living in Quebec, I was part of the Filipino youth group, and then it became a Filipino women's group. When we moved to Toronto, I was also part of a community organization called Migrante Ontario. When we were there, we saw that there have been like-minded organizations, so in 2011 we formed the umbrella called Migrante Canada. I think at the time there were 11 or 15 organizations across the country. Having a national formation gave us more voice. When there was a call, for example, for caregivers to eliminate the second medical requirement for permanent residence, we were a national body that called for whatever the campaign was. We were at the founding of Migrante Canada, which was held in Ottawa in 2011. When we moved here to Edmonton there was no Migrante organization. I was here to work and my husband and I were thinking, "Okay, there's no Migrante organization." Our friends here were saying, "I think if we had Migrante here, that would really help the community." When we started Migrante Alberta in 2013, we had a really warm reception from the community. Right from the start we heard that one of the needs of the community was having a consular office in Alberta that had one of the highest numbers of

temporary workers; we had one of the bigger communities in Alberta. They were going to Vancouver consular office – the Philippine consulate there – to renew a \$70 passport. They would lose two days of work, they lose wages, the flight, for a \$70 passport. So when we started Migrante Alberta in 2013, we launched a campaign to have a consular office in Alberta. We had a petition, and different Filipino organizations in the community joined the campaign. We were able to collect 5,500 signatures in that campaign to have a consular office in Alberta. So we sent the petition to the Philippines where our partner organization – Migrante International and Gabriela [Women’s] Party-list, who’s sitting in the Congress of the Philippines – they brought the petition to the Philippine Congress and, in the end, there were two countries where they approved to have a consular office – Alberta was one of the two. We were really happy that that was a victory; the first campaign was a victory for Migrante Alberta. We ended up with a Philippine consular office, although it’s in Calgary, and we still have to travel three hours. But it’s still better than having the workers lose two days of wages to apply for a Philippine passport. That’s something that Migrante Canada supported us in our cause. When we moved here, we were right away part of the Migrante Canada umbrella, so that really gave us a voice as a national organization. When we have a campaign for Vangie to let Vangie and Mckenna, her daughter, stay in Canada, that was like a national wide campaign with Migrante Canada and the Migrants Rights Network. A few weeks ago, we heard the news that Vangie and Mckenna have their permanent residence, so we celebrated that. Then the “Let Danilo de Leon Stay in Canada” campaign that’s ongoing, again the Migrante Canada network is supporting Migrante Alberta’s call for that, along with Migrants Rights Network, along with our network of the unions and community organizations and different groups. They have been supporting us in our calls for these campaigns.

Q: Can you talk about the campaign for Mckenna to access medical care?

CP: I met Vangie back in 2013. At the time, she had six-month-old Mckenna, [and when they came over to our house], she was crawling in her living room, and she was just a little baby. [Vangie] brought the issue of her being undocumented, and because she was undocumented,

she had no access to healthcare when she gave birth. Because she's undocumented, even if her daughter Mckenna is a Canadian-born child... she was a Canadian citizen on paper but she had no access to any kind of social services that other Canadian citizens would have without question. With Vangie, even if she was undocumented, being part of a community organization gave her the courage to campaign for her child Mackenna. When Mackenna was about two years old, we saw that other kids [who were] undocumented – they were Canadian-born children but their mother was undocumented – so these kids had no access to healthcare. They can go to a doctor or hospital, but they have to pay out of their pocket – but they were Canadian citizens. So then Vangie agreed to have a campaign for these Canadian-born children to be recognized as real Canadian citizens wherein they would be able to access any social services that other Canadians can access. We launched a campaign; because this is a healthcare campaign, it was a provincial campaign; we called on the Province of Alberta to recognize Canadian-born children of undocumented mothers. So we had a petition, and again it was our network from different community organizations, from the unions and other progressive organizations, that supported the petition. They circulated the petition, and we were able to gather signatures, and [...] the Province of Alberta recognized the rights of these Canadian-born children. Of course, they still had to apply for it; it wasn't instantly. Vangie was helping the other moms to apply for access to healthcare for their Canadian-born children. It was a victory, but implementation is still painful even up to now. The mothers have to apply for it; there are still barriers. A lot of institutions are not aware of this, so it's still a struggle. But that was a victory in itself, being able to fight for the rights of Canadian-born children of undocumented moms, and their access to healthcare.

Q: Is there an issue with access to education for these children?

CP: The issue of children of migrants, that's something that we have seen in the past. As Canadian-born children of undocumented moms, they weren't able to get the monthly child tax benefit, for example. Even if the moms are paying taxes, for example, because they're undocumented, their kids are not able to access whatever child tax benefit that they're entitled

to, and other social services. For children of other temporary foreign workers, if the parents have lost status then, by the next school year when the kids have to register, the registrar would be asking the parents, “Are you a temporary foreign worker?” They’d be asking for that visa work permit. If that’s expired, your child will not have access to education, even if education should be a universal right. Right now, we have issues of undocumented families – not just Filipinos, but other nationalities – that have come to Migrate because of their situation. As undocumented, their kids cannot go to school; they cannot continue their education when, in the past [when their parents had status], they were able to. But because the parents have become undocumented, all of a sudden, they cannot be admitted into schools anymore. It is an ongoing campaign. Right now, it depends on the school, if they have a progressive principal who is supportive of the cause. Otherwise, they would say, “Well there’s no budget.” Migrate and Aware, our partner organization, have brought this to the City and have been having conversations about that, so it is an ongoing campaign. The access [to school for] children of undocumented workers [...] has been denied because of their parents’ status.

Q: Is the system still in place where social insurance numbers are coded to indicate immigration status?

CP: When you come into Canada as a temporary foreign worker, what’s tied to you is this unique identifier. You have a file number that comes along with you, and in your trajectory in Canada as a worker, that unique identifier comes along with you. That’s also tied to your social insurance number. I believe it starts with a 9 is what it is, but the social insurance number is coded so that you’re boxed into a certain category. That’s something that could be used against you, for example, if your social insurance number is tied to a certain category. Once your status expires – your work permit or your visa expires – then everything else along with it expires. Right now, undocumented workers, once everything expires, they have no valid identification. For them, that prevents them from accessing or even being able to rent an apartment. If they’re asked for an ID, they have no valid ID. As insignificant as we might think it is, the undocumented members of the community do not have any government-issued ID that would be recognized

anywhere. That really deprives them of any kind of service, so they're stuck. That puts them in an even more vulnerable and precarious situation, whether it's housing, whether it's in a workplace or their health situation. So again, being able to get a valid government ID, even if they're undocumented, would restore that kind of recognition instead of living in the shadows.

[....]

Q: What's the role of immigration brokers?

CP: In my family growing up I've seen aunties and uncles leaving to go abroad, the men going to Saudi in the '70s and '80s, the women going to different countries to work as caregivers. It's not an easy process. First you need a lot of money, and that, a lot of these migrants don't have to begin with. But because life is so hard in the Philippines... like, there's no opportunities. Even if you were working in your profession, you still don't get enough wage to send your kids to decent schools, so they're forced to migrate. To leave the country, first there's government fees and different government agencies that you have to go through so that they'll be processed as a migrant worker. Then, to be able to leave, a lot of them go through an agency that will process your application to go to another country, and that alone would cost you thousands of dollars. So where do you start? You end up selling whatever piece of land you have, if you have any, or borrowing money. You start in debt; as you leave the country, you're in debt thousands of dollars. You can go to countries like Hong Kong or Singapore or Japan, but there's no opportunity for permanent residence. Going to Canada offers an opportunity to be eligible to apply for permanent residency so that you can have your family with you, so that's appealing. A lot of these migrants would hire an immigration agent, recruitment agency, where they would pay \$10,000 or \$15,000 so they can go to Canada. Aside from paying government fees that could add up to thousands of dollars, then add to that \$15,000 or so to pay your immigration agency. So that's a lot of money to begin with. Unfortunately, some of these consultants provide false hope and false information. We have terminologies like "released upon arrival". The migrants would be recruited by these immigration agencies who say, "You have a job offer from

this employer.” So they would pay \$15,000, and then they get to Canada, and the employer did not need you – so they used the name of the employer on paper. So then, right away, these migrants are stuck in Canada, not knowing anyone, without an employer. Right from the start, it’s a struggle looking for an employer in a place that you don’t know. You owe \$20,000 – and in pesos it’s like hundreds and thousands of pesos already – starting from scratch in a country that you do not know. Then they end up hiring another consultant so that they can find an employer. So, it’s like a series of these unfortunate circumstances where some of them become successful and they’re able to find employment and stay with their employer and get permanent residence. But we’ve heard of people who were deported because of that or not able to find an employer, owing thousands and thousands of dollars; and some of them become undocumented because of that. We have an immigration consultant here in Edmonton, and a lot of migrants complained to Migrante Alberta. [...]. He had an immigration consultancy practice, but a lot of the migrants have complained about not being able to get what they paid for, so they have become undocumented. A lot of them were sent home during the moratorium and a lot of them have become undocumented. So there are a lot of predatory immigration consultants; there’s some good ones out there. But even if there’s a legislation in Canada that says they cannot charge here – that it should be the employer that they should charge – in the end, there’s a lot of loopholes and the employees would still be charged; they would still have to pay. Or the agency would charge them while they’re still in Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong – charge them \$15,000 – only to find out that they have no employer when they arrive.

Q: Can you talk about the economic realities of the Philippines that force people to seek opportunities abroad?

CP: Globalization has opened up the gates of countries to facilitate migration. Migration is a right, but if you have no opportunities in your country to be able to have a decent life, they’re forced to migrate in order to survive. That’s the situation in the Philippines. Oftentimes, in an event when you ask them, “Who amongst you came to Canada to experience snow or winter?” they’d be like, “What is that? We live in a tropical country. I would want to go visit and

experience the snow for a little bit.” A lot of them would say, “I’m here because I’m looking for greener pastures.” Like I said, globalization has facilitated the migration of people, but the governments have facilitated the movement of people first to answer problems of poverty and unemployment. There’s no opportunities in the Philippines. [There would be] uprising if they cannot provide jobs. There’s no means of livelihood. But the Philippines is rich, it’s rich in natural resources. It’s very attractive to countries like Canada where there’s a lot of mining companies that would come to the Philippines to extract natural resources. But these lands, for example, belong to the Indigenous groups in the Philippines. Mining companies in Canada, Australia and other countries would come and extract the natural resources from Indigenous lands of Indigenous Filipinos. So these Indigenous people from that area are driven away out of their lands to work in the cities, but there’s no opportunities in the cities. [Or] they would end up working in factories where there’s no decent wages. So, in the end, in-migration within the country, it’s not sufficient. So then, they have no other option but to move to countries like Canada. If Canada is in need of workers in the food and service industry... the Indigenous peoples who were driven away by, say, TVI Mining based in Calgary [who] would come to the Philippines. And then these indigenous people were driven out, and then they would now migrate to Canada [...]. You might meet workers serving you coffee in, say, Tim Hortons who were driven out of their land, because there’s no livelihood in the Philippines. Countries like the Philippines have realized that, “Wait a second, there are fees that they have to pay; immigration consultants are making money out of this.” Then the migrants, once they leave, send money back to the Philippines. It’s been keeping our economy afloat; they’ve been facilitating this migration of workers. They even call it, “internationally shared tools”, “modern economic heroes,” because they’re keeping the economy of the Philippines afloat. In the meantime, Canada offering all these possibilities of being reunited with [their] families in Canada, is very attractive to migrants. They’ve been wanting to go to Canada because there’s that pull from Canada, that offer of a better future for the families as permanent residents, as citizens. So there’s the push factor from the Philippines – there’s poverty, unrest, political and economic unrest pushing people out. Canada is pulling them, inviting these guest workers. Some of them are successful; some of them are unsuccessful because of the ever-changing policies and have

become undocumented. It's been the same cycle. My parents came here in the '80s as temporary workers, and I've seen that as a young member of the family. I saw the abuse, I saw the psychosocial impact of migration. But it's funny, because that was in 1987; we're now in 2023, and it's the same story. As long as the situation in the sending countries like the Philippines, as long as the situations don't change, migration will continue to happen. In the past there were only 2,000 migrants leaving the Philippines every day. Now it's up to 10,000 people leaving the country on a daily basis because things are not getting better.

Q: How does that migration benefit Canadians?

CP: As migrants leave the Philippines... I was saying earlier that their contribution to the Philippine economy, the dollar remittance that they send back keeps the Philippine government afloat, the economy afloat. In the meantime, in the countries where they contribute as workers... say, for example, we have the caregivers who work in other countries as nurses and teachers, they work for these families as caregivers; they work for families taking care of the elderly with high medical needs or taking care of the children. So you have teachers – professionally-trained teachers – working as caregivers in countries like Canada, making \$15 or below as caregivers doing everything in the house: cooking, cleaning, tutoring the children, taking care of high medical needs. They're not recognized as nurses but they're working with their skills and training as nurses, making below minimum, living in Canada, and contributing to the society. How do these countries benefit from the workers? They benefit from the skills that these workers are able to contribute from their previous training, but living under the shadows of caregivers and food service attendants, yet professionally trained in different countries. So they're highly trained professionals filling the labour needs of Canada. They're trained in Canada, they contribute to the economy of the city or province they live in. That's the benefit that they provide to the countries where they work in.

[...]

Q: What's happening in the healthcare system in Alberta at the moment?

CP: As a healthcare professional, yeah, there's a big shortage right now of healthcare workers. Different provinces and different institutions are offering different incentives. My students are excited to graduate because there's all kinds of incentives from different provinces. Even the shortage in nurses and healthcare workers, that's something that we're experiencing right now. There are a lot of workers here – migrant workers – who trained as professional healthcare workers and graduated with a bachelor's in Nursing or different professions, but they're not allowed to practice here because there's no accreditation – those who are already here and not recognized. And yet, Canada, because of the shortage, is willing to recruit nurses now from the Philippines. What's the difference? These are Philippine-educated nurses that they're willing to hire now that they need it because there's a shortage, but there are workers here trained as nurses who've practiced in the Philippines and other countries, that... normally, if you're from that country, if it's a Commonwealth country, there's accreditation. But because you were foreign-trained from the Philippines, it's not recognized. So again, this is where you will see that discrepancy based on the needs of Canada; they would only recognize you because they need you now. But those who are already here and have become undocumented but they were professionally trained... we're still calling for regularization for them so that they'll have the legal status to work. There has been a lot of waste of skills of these professionals that are already here and yet not recognized by Canada.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

CP: I think the solidarity network that we have in Edmonton, in Alberta, the strong solidarity network has given courage to our migrants. I heard it from the undocumented workers themselves, and they were just amazed and touched by the support of the different networks calling for regularization, signing petitions and presenting at the rallies, and being able to provide spaces like this, the Orange Hub, from our partners here, like The Learning Centre. It's been amazing and we've seen how that has impacted the courage of the undocumented. Even

after years and decades of living in fear, I think the solidarity movement here has brought strength to the struggle of the migrants. So thank you for your support.

[END]