

Edrien "Eddie" Yalong

May 8th, 2023, Edmonton, Alberta

Interviewers: Cynthia Palmaria, Colette Lebeuf and Don Bouzek Camera: Don Bouzek

EY: They call me Eddie here, because they're having a hard time pronouncing my name, Edrien. So I just put it Eddie, that'll be better.

Q: Tell us about yourself.

EY: Myself, I was born in Manilla, Philippines. I was the eldest of the family, came from a family of musicians and hairdressers. I was in Philippines for quite a while until I moved here at the age of 30, a couple of years ago. Back then there was hardship, hard times in the Philippines, especially if you went to school because there's a lot of people. After you finish school, you couldn't find a job. That's the reason why I thought of becoming a hairdresser, just to get what my mom taught me, what she fed me. Then my girlfriend at that time, she got pregnant. I was so scared because I couldn't find a job, couldn't find a stable job. During that time I was just playing on my computer. I thought, "How about I submit a resume? I haven't been anywhere around the planet". So I was just playing and I sent in a resume and then, hmm, I want to submit more. So it eventually became a worldwide resume submission for being a hairdresser. Really, I got no idea where I'm going. So I got this response from this lady from Grande Prairie, and one in Quebec, so there were two. But I got no idea it's Canada, I thought it's Australia. So I was so excited, "Hey mom, I got an email, I think I got a job." So I replied and then I told her, "Oh, by the way, my resume is not your typical resume that's targeted; I've got an eight-page resume with pictures of my achievement being a hairdresser." She got interested in me and then I started to talk to her. I told her, "You know what, I'm really broke; I don't have any money. If you can assure me a job and if I can fly now and pay later, will that be possible?" I think at that time she's losing her hairdresser in Grande Prairie, so she said, "Yes." So that was January and then I got no idea how to work out with the... I don't know what's LMO and I don't know what is a work permit. I've been asking all over Philippines, "What do you mean by LMO, what's that

one?" I got no one to talk to. It's a good thing there's a couple of groups of Filipinos there that help her fix my documents. Months later, next thing I know, I'm flying to Grande Prairie. I was broke, I had no money. I only got \$40 and luggage with me. My girlfriend at that time gave birth so it's like, "Yeah I need to do this." So I took the plane November, it was cold. I'm used to plus 35, and at that time I think it was minus 20 or minus 15, and it's Grande Prairie. It was all green. The first thing I saw in the airport was, "Oh, my god, people here are pirates," because I saw my employer wearing a pirate suit with that thing on her eye. "Okay, so did I went to the right place?" I don't have any jacket. I bought a jacket in one of those thrift shop, which is not suited for here. But, for me, as a Filipino, I thought it's warm but, as soon as I get there, I'm freezing to death. So there's my story. Next morning, I saw her. There's a lady start talking to me and she doesn't have that Halloween costume. This lady's talking to me and it's kind of weird, I didn't know she's my employer. I thought I went to a place full of pirates. It's my first time. I took the plane, and I'm a little religious at that time, and I was praying all the time calling all the saints and the gods. So the shop is at Superstore; the name of the store is Hair for You; it's inside Superstore. She gave me a room where I got no idea I need to pay the room, I got no idea that I need to pay the medical. Back then you need to pay for medical card. I got no idea about systems here, so I was just trying to figure out everything by myself. Day-to-day, I just survived on those Superstore food, bread, and the value for me is so expensive. A dollar is 46 pesos at that time, "Ah I don't want to spend it, I want to keep it." Then my house is like an hour walk and I don't have the right winter suit for that one. At that time the bus is about \$1.50, so I don't want to take the bus, "I'll just walk." It was like -30 or -40 in Grande Prairie and I'm like, "Oh, I need to go home." I was just frozen every day. I got four pants in all of my luggage – clothes every day, and I just switched them over. Then they told me, "You want to be an immigrant here? You need to be a permanent resident." I think my category when I moved here was being a hairdresser. You can be like a journeyman; you get the journeyman certificate, so you're legit to be a permanent resident. They gave me the books and everything. It's so hard if you haven't read a book for a long time. You try to put it in your brains. The hardest part for me is adopting, because I grew up where I spoke Tagalog. For me to process it in English, it takes a while. So I took the exam, got lucky, then they said, "You can be a permanent resident here." So I went

home after a year and married my girlfriend, which is my wife now, and my daughter. After that, I went back to Canada to carry on with my paperwork to be a permanent resident. I started here 2007 on Halloween where I thought people here are pirates. Then I dealt with the process. I was living with a bunch of people, a bunch of... groups of Filipinos. That's how I survived, and I slowly learned everything about the ways here in Canada. When my wife and daughter got our permanent residency, they moved in 2011. But the thing is for me Grande Prairie is kind of a small town. I grew up in Manilla where I'm used to a very crowded crazy area. I grew up in a slum area; I'm not a rich guy; I'm just one of those guys who, even you have nothing to eat you're always happy; I'm one of those guys. I don't care, "I don't have a bed, I don't have a bed." The thing I remember is we got a table there, and on that dinner table that's where I put the carboard and sleep. That's where I sleep every day. I only had a bed when I moved here. Then, my wife and daughter moved here. But we grew up in a big city, so she thought of moving to Edmonton after a couple of months. She said, "No I can't do this, it's so different." Yeah I know, I understand. For me, I kind of like it there but, yeah, I still want to be in the city, I want to be in a very crowded place. So, after that we moved there by West Edmonton Mall, and I got a job there at West Edmonton Mall at Spasation. That's where I've been cutting, and I rented a place at Boardwalk. But the thing is, I'm a very adventure guy, I love adventuring, seeing things. I never stop until now. So, because I'm a hairdresser and most of my clients are guys from oilfield, I've been hearing stories. "What's oilfield, what's with that?" Everyone knows about oilfield money, so you'll be overwhelmed with the oilfield money, like, "Holy, you really got that one?" I'm only making \$12.50 an hour. So alright, "That's oilfield." Then I try to figure things out on that pathway where I thought, "How about I pursue my Engineering degree?" Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, I took up Engineering back in the Philippines too. But the thing is, you took that course, and you couldn't find a job; there are a hundred million people, and the lineup is 10,000, and I'm just an average Joe. The average Joe can't get the spot, so that's why I got into hairdressing. So I thought of trying to pursue it here. But then I went to this place, just a different institution, the Mennonite Centre. I thought, like, they're showing you the path, they're trying to show you the path where to go and what to do. You got some questions for me?

Q: What education did you obtain after that that led you into the trades?

EY: The thing is, with the Mennonite Centre, they're talking, "Go with the Engineering degree." But when I found out about the government requirements to be an engineer, you need to do this process. It's like, "Okay, I need to go back to school." It's like, "Oh, I'm not good for it. I just want to work." I'm the type of person who wants to work. So, under the Mennonite Centre they got the word "instrumentation" under your title there, so that's where I thought of looking for a job, under "instrumentation." But since... then I realize I cannot be an engineer here under the instrumentation, because you've got schools here that molds kids to be on that place. So the only way I can – because I got a family and I need to feed them – for me to get into that field is go to the trades. I got no idea about the industrial life here. From a hairdresser, a guy always clean... and that's where I met Cynthia too. She was one of my clients back then at Spasation. So I got a job under construction at Firebag Husky under [Sunrise] and yeah I was so happy because I got into the industry. I got no idea what I'm doing and where I'm going. So they gave me coveralls and said, "Oh, it looks fancy. You got your tools, right?" I didn't know that. Next thing I know they give you plane ticket, you got a hotel, and then you got free food and that stuff. Took the plane going to Fort Mac. Next thing I know I was on the bus, and I was passing by this big refinery, "What am I doing here?" So next morning I got the orientation, next morning I went to the job. I tell you, I'm scared of heights, I'm afraid of everything. I'm the type of guy that's like soapiness and everything. All of a sudden, you gotta have these tools. So, "Yeah," the foreman says, "go up on the second level." I looked at him, "No, I can't do it." So I climbed the ladder. As soon as I get on the ladder, I was just crawling. "What are you doing?" "Uh, trying to work." Since then, that's my story of becoming an instrumentation guy. That paved my career path. So I started in industrial construction, learned instrumentation more on construction, and then I've been on different projects at Fort Mac. But the thing is, my family is here. I thought, "Yeah, I've been doing this for a while, I don't want to be away from my wife and daughter because I've been away since 2007. I want to be with my wife and daughter." So I thought of looking for a job close by with the same industry.

Q: Did you face any racial discrimination?

EY: Yeah, there is. Back then, I call it racism, because I don't understand it. It's the reason, maybe miscommunication. As soon as you stay here, you're gonna learn people, like, "Oh, it's more miscommunication – not racism – because you don't understand each other." They'll talk to you in English like people born here. It'll take you five minutes before you process what he said, and by that time there's a feeling in yourself like, "Oh, you're offended." But as soon as you walk by, "Oh, I'm not offended." But number one is language barriers, that's the first thing. That's why I tried to develop my speaking. I got a big accent. I don't speak English when I moved here; I hate English. I just try to develop the way I speak, try to study by myself the accents.

Q: How did you decide to move to the area of Edmonton where you bought your house?

EY: Oh, that one – back story again. I grew up in Manilla, Philippines, so google it up, boom, zoom it. It's crowded. I'm more of a guy who loves a crowded place, and my wife too. So that's why they're wondering, "Why did you buy that house?" There's a lot of crack heads there. Yeah, it's more home for me. I can't live in a place where it's too quiet, I want to see action. As soon as I stand in the back yard on my porch there and sit down and have a coffee, I'm going to see crack heads walking around screaming and yelling. Oh, it's a regular day. Safe? Yeah, I feel safe. There are more places that are unsafe. I don't know, it's what my wife and I felt about it, that's why we've been here since 2014. It's kind of weird, but it's what my wife and I are used to, that kind of environment.

Q: What do you like about the neighbourhood?

EY: It's still quiet for me. It's a lot of interesting people you meet and stories you gonna know. It's about moving the filter and seeing what's in there. Here you're gonna see real people. If I'm a crack head I'm a crack head. Yeah, you can talk to them. People thought these guys are lower

society, but they're not. Every morning they're the people who are gonna wave at you, "Hey." Even if we don't understand each other, "Hey." Anyway, it's how I felt for them. I'm more comfortable than if you put me in a subdivision. I'm scared in that place because you don't know everyone, you don't know your neighbour.

Q: Have you experienced any discrimination or hardship in the neighbourhood?

EY: No. Yeah but the thing is sometimes because you got a small house, you hear from some people, "Oh, you got a small house, blah blah blah." You know what I mean? But I grew up in a small place, I don't need a big house, and it's hard to clean. Keep it simple.

Q: How do you get around? Is it easy to get to shops?

EY: So good, I love it. I work in Redwater, I work in a refinery centre there. Going to school and everything is easy. The mall is there, and you've got extra small stores there. Late at night you can still go out and walk around. Even if you don't have a vehicle, you can walk around here. Accessible, accessibility, there you go.

Q: What about your daughter and Janelle, their work and school?

EY: My daughter did well in her schooling, which I'm so happy. Education here is so good and I'm so thankful for that one. I'm not really expecting anything from my daughter to be the finest, but I just want her to have a good education. The neighbourhood gives it. Also, I want her to see the positive and negative side of reality; that's why we choose to stay here. Having your kids to grow up in a place that's all positive, when he or she goes out to the real world she doesn't know what to do. My wife used to work in Target, then Superstore, typical jobs. Then she got a job at Home Depot, started out nightshift there, and worked her way up. She did a good career and I'm so happy with the system here in Alberta, and generally Canada. People 30 plus still got an opportunity to show yourself, to learn, to have a career. It's a never-ending

opportunity here, which we found. Now my wife is like a supervisor in Home Depot there at west side there – Terra Losa or something. She did well. I didn't expect her to be – after she did the school, being sponsored by the government, which is I'm so happy, she finish her Business degree – I was not really expecting her to be, "Wow, you got a degree now." It's good, she did well on her part.

Q: Tell us about your work experience in Grande Prairie.

EY: Okay work experience there. So what happened there is, at that time, I'm kind of new. I was struggling with the study, because you need to study and work. You need to study to pass the journeyman certificate, wherein I got no idea the books you got here. I've learned my skills in our language, so the curriculum there is different to the curriculum here. So I really need to catch up. Then the system on how you work in Philippines is different, the system how you work here is different. In Philippines you got assistance blow drying and shampooing and everything – you just cut the hair. Here you do everything from washing to everything, and you comb every mom's hair, "Yes, thank you mom," and then the client will say, "I'm not your mom." "Yes, mom, yes, mom." "I'm not your mom." So I learned a lot on that side. At that time, it's like I brought all of the Filipino communities in our shop. Grande Prairie is a small town in the suburbs of Grande Prairie. It's like a wildfire, and they say, "Oh, there's a Filipino guy there, let's go there. Let's go to that store." So, pretty much, my clients are Filipinos from inside and outside Grande Prairie. We became big. My employer hired another Filipino guy, and he also did well, so pretty much most of the workers there are Filipino guys. Then she thought of expanding, "All right, Eddie, I'm gonna bring you to Fairview." Yep, I grew up in the city, and she brings me to Fairview. Next thing I know, it's, like, one IGA. Oh my god, I have no vehicle. I was sitting there. It's funny, because as soon as I walk in the salon, there's a client there. I haven't started any conversation and the client said, "So, you got a wife and a daughter, right? And you moved here 2007?" I was shocked, like, "How did you know that instantly? Holy." Yeah, it's a small town. People there know my story before I even open my mouth. Then, oh my god, that's the worst thing, because this is a salon, and they got a divider. I was just sleeping there. But I agreed with it. My boss is

really good, I love her. It's like one of those... because I'm still a contract worker, it's like, "Yeah, I need to secure my immigration." But it's so hard because you're sleeping on your day off, just laying down, and you're gonna hear those blow dryers. Only a divider, I'm not kidding. Then you need to take a shower, so you've got this towel. You're gonna look first that the hairdressers are not looking, and you gotta run to the washroom. Then, there's one IGA, so the prices there are expensive than the prices here. I went to try to buy food, oh my god, everything is expensive. The only thing I survived with there is scrap ham, those edges of those ham that are put together. That would take me for a week. I experienced doing Christmas there by myself. Good thing there's a little liquor store. In front of the mirror I was just crying, I was just crying: I had a good time in Philippines. But I said, "Yeah I need to do it for my daughter." I was just by myself. I can't go back to Grande Prairie because I don't have a vehicle, and they got one bus. During that time, there's Greyhound bus, and the bus only comes once a week, like Wednesday. Your days off, you go out of Fairview, you got nowhere to go because there's nothing. I just treat it like a good memory for me, but it's kind of really difficult if you're not used to it; it's not your lifestyle. Then I told my employer, "No, this won't work for me, I need to go back to Grande Prairie." My buddies are there, the ones surviving me. Pretty much I got my clients there and I got different groups of Filipinos like they call the [30:57] Visayan, Ilocano, and Igorot or whatever. So what I do is every Saturday, I go off in different groups, so I party with them and then at the end of the party, hey Eddie. What? Bring this bunch of food. So I got free food for the week. That's how I survived. It's just funny, looking back.

Q: Is there a Filipino community that you associate with here in Jasper Place?

EY: No, I'm more of everyone... I'm more hang out with everyone. But now it's like, because I switch my career being an instrument guy, I work seven days. During my days off I just want to relax. Then I have my old clients, like Cynthia. I'm not anymore doing a lot of hairdressing since I became an instrument guy working for the refinery. I still want to have time for myself. Back then, being a hairdresser, you're busy seven days a week; you have no time for yourself. Just to

keep up with your clients. That's why I need to cut it down. I just want to save these people, that's it.

Q: How do you connect with the Filipino community in Edmonton or here in Jasper Place?

EY: We're just friendly people, we just talk to anyone. Like you. If I see you there on the street, I'll just talk to you. That's just us. My wife and I we're like that – we see you, we just talk to you instantly. We're that kind of people.

Q: Are there any Filipino businesses?

EY: Oh yeah, they got good Filipino, that's why I like it here. Accessibility on store shops and different stuff and our needs is just here. Back then, when I was in Grande Prairie, the only place that they're selling a little Filipino is Superstore, and just only they're selling milkfish. That's the only thing. Having Filipino ingredients is really so golden for us. That's why we moved here, a little more accessibility. The Chinese store sells a lot of Filipino stuff too, and now it's more diverse. Everyone – IGA, Save-On Foods – you gonna see them – Walmart.

Q: What about Filipino stores and restaurants in the area?

EY: Everywhere. We just hop in. Now we got the Seafood City and Jollibee and then the local ones are... what are the local ones? Manilla Grill Empanada. They got what you need instantly, that's what I like. It's not like when I was in Grande Prairie. I'll talk to someone, "Hey, are you going to Edmonton? I'm gonna give you \$50 just to buy me a \$5 thing." That's how it works. They jack up the price. That's why those guys coming from Grande Prairie, at that time, they go here with nothing and when they go back to Grande Prairie it's full of groceries, their vehicle. They spend thousands of dollars just to bring those ingredients there.

Q: Regarding your house, are you renting?

EY: No, my wife bought that house, so pretty much I'm just sleeping there. It's an old house. It's one of those fixer-upper, which I like. I've learned how to use my tools. I make it in my own way, but sometimes you really need to have those professional guys to do the work. It's a small house with a nice yard. That's all I can say on that place. I don't have a yard back then.

Q: When you say old. . .

EY: It's 1969.

Q: You mentioned that the people around the neighbourhood have lots of stories. Can you share some of them?

EY: People you meet from all walks of life, different trades. Some people you gonna meet there, they got better lifestyle. But the thing I like in this place, everyone is equal. You don't see the triangle, you don't see the hierarchy. Everyone here in this place is equal, even if he's making ten grand, he's making two grand, one grand – everyone's equal. That's how I like it, the people here. If you move into those big places, you feel like when they talk to you, it's like, "Yeah, already." I'm not into those kinds of conversations.

Q: Are the people in the neighbourhood from all different places?

EY: Oh yeah, different places, different race, different nationalities. They got different beliefs, which really amazed me. I love learning stuff from different people. I don't want to close my eyes on... like, a full Filipino being a Filipino. I want to learn everything. I don't care if you couldn't talk in English, that good, it's all good. I'm also in that shoes too back then. I only sounded good.

Q: What places are they coming from?

EY: Fiji guys, East Indian people, Black people coming from Africa, or I don't know where. Then the Middle Eastern people too. Talking to them, it breaks the boundaries of your old thinking about them. They're also people, we're all the same. We just speak differently.

Q: Could you talk about your immigration path?

EY: I tried studying on my own. Good thing that my employer was a former cosmetology teacher, so she got a book, "Hey, Eddie, read this one." All right, I was reading it, that put my foot in becoming an immigrant. To be honest, I'm not a book person. I got no idea how I read that book. Looking back two months ago, I was looking at my score, my grade on that exam. Believe it or not, I think I got 70. Either I cut my head back to the Philippines, or I'm here. I just got lucky with that one point. Holy, I'm just lucky. My inspiration is my daughter because I want to give a better future for my daughter. It's not me, because my 30 years of life in the Philippines, I've enjoyed my life. But I don't want her to experience what I experienced there, struggling to get a job. Even if you got 10 courses, you'll still have no job because of the lineup. Here it's like, "Get this course and you can easily get a job." Right now, I'm still studying; I'm doing electrical. I'm taking another trade. It's a never-ending opportunity.

Q: When you were applying for immigration, was your employer supporting you in that?

EY: Oh yes, she is, she is. She is really in full support on me on that time. We never missed a step, so pretty much everything is in line. Then there's a couple of groups of Filipina that help her. The thing is, she got no idea about the system on how to deal with foreign workers and those steps to become a permanent resident, which lined up well for me. The only bad for me that's so sad, because she was looking forward to be me with my family. It's like after – from 2007 – it's like, after two or three months, we moved here in Edmonton. I really felt so bad because I gotta leave her in reality. But you gotta do what you gotta do, right? But until now, we're still talking. She's really good; I call her grandma. She wants it, she wants it.

Q: We don't often hear stories from temporary foreign workers where the employer helps.

EY: Yeah, she's a nice lady. Theresa Epp, that's her name. I'm really thankful to her. If not because of her, I would still be in the Philippines. If not because of that email. I have no luck in going abroad, going somewhere else. I have no opportunity. All my cousins are successful, like, "Yeah, you're 31 years old and you're still living with your mom." "It's free." Then she helped me with everything. But the thing is, the first thing I remember is so funny, it's like when she first introduced me to microwave. Do you know this one? Yeah. But she's good, it's good.

Q: When you worked in Fort Mac, how were you getting back and forth to Edmonton?

EY: I got with the big companies with PCL or those industrial companies, so we take the plane every two weeks. They charter us from the airport going to Fort Mac, then two weeks there, then one week off. At the beginning it's kind of good because, number one, you're sober. Number two is, you don't spend money, you got the money; you don't eat your gas, you don't eat your own food. But the sad part is being normal, being mentally well. Being away is the hardest part. It's not like, "Oh, my daughter is sick, I'm gonna take the bus or take the cab – boom." No, you can't do anything with it. You're stuck there. Plus, you've got your mom and brother in the Philippines, which is another thing for me to think of because I'm the eldest. I'm the one supporting everything. So pretty much my \$40 until now is still \$40, because I support. I live with that number in my wallet.

Q: You're still sending money home.

EY: Oh yeah. It has become a system.

Q: Most people don't understand how much money flows from other countries into the Philippines.

EY: Yeah. If I look back, how many years have I been here – 15 or 16? The only thing I'm thankful is, it's a good thing I grew up without prioritizing money. I grew up prioritizing happiness, so that's why you don't think of anything.

Q: Now that you're working in Redwater, how do you get back and forth from Jasper Place?

EY: I need to wake up early, like, I need to leave at 5 and be there by 6. So I drive every day for seven days, because I got 7 days on and 7 days off doing instrumentation there. You become a journeyman; now I become a maintenance in that company, so I maintain the diesel refinery, which is good. At least the paycheck is a little different from going to Fort Mac, but it's better because I'm home.

Q: So during the week on, you're driving back and forth.

EY: Yeah. Every day, Monday to Sunday, which is good. I don't mind working 12 hours, at least I get 7 days off. I got time for myself. I can do TikTok. That's why I'm not camera shy. I'm the only social media guy at home.

Q: When you do the TikTok stuff, is it in Tagalog or in English?

EY: Oh, it's everything, it's more musical. That's why I'm looking at your studio, oh, my god it's nice.

Q: What kind of music?

EY: Everything.

Q: Do you sing or play?

EY: Yeah, because at the beginning of my story... I came from a family of musicians. I'm the last musician that want to be a musician. So I just push myself and start singing. I love music, I love music. I used to perform in Philippines like on stages, those shows. That's stuff that I miss doing now. I'll have no life here being a musician. Good thing they invented the social media where you can show off yourself.

Q: What do you perform?

EY: What I do is those funny videos. If you got a cat, we gonna put some beat on the cat. I'll show you one. You just collaborate with people from all over the world and make it a [49:51]. I'll show you, it's funny but it's good. It keeps me busy. After I clean the yard, I gotta do something for myself. I don't wanna be in a band because the thing is you need to practise and then you gonna get tired. I just want it simple. You got the gadget, ping.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add in closing?

EY: In closing, me? Nothing much. Just go with the adventure of life. The thing I know is I just close my eyes, next thing you know, I'm here. I never expected to be here, never thought I'd be speaking with you guys speaking in English. Never in my life. Here's my story. I was just one of those bums sitting at the bottom of the power cable, sitting there on that post smoking, looking at the sky, "How does U.S. look like, how does Canada look like? How does it feel to be in an airplane?" Next thing I know, I'm here. Oh my god, I'm starting to see the world. That's my main goal, just to see the world. Now I got it.

[END]