

# UC Santa Cruz

## Oral History Collaborations

### Title

Ruby Baniaga Kaldonis interviewed by Markus Faye Portacio

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### Authors

Baniaga Kaldonis, Ruby  
Portacio, Markus

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## **Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis interviewed by Markus Faye Portacio**

**Speakers:** Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis and Markus Faye Portacio

**Date:** August 12, 2022

**Scope and Contents:** In this interview, originally recorded via Zoom Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis speaks with Markus Faye Portacio, a member of the Watsonville is in the Heart project team. Ruby shares her family's migration experiences in Hawai'i and Watsonville, California. She recalls how her family arrived in the US and explains how her father Romeo Vea Baniaga and her mother Betty Magarin Baniaga, met. She discusses Romeo's and Betty's work in the agricultural, industrial, and domestic sectors. She also discusses Romeo's affinity for gardening and Betty's skills in strawberry picking. Ruby talks about the community networks her family established in Watsonville and her relationships with her relatives that live in the Philippines.

**Markus Faye Portacio 00:00**

The recording. Okay, this, this first part is just for like the recording sake. It is 9:29am August 12, 2022 and I'm Markus Faye Portacio, and I'm interviewing—

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 00:20**

Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis.

**Markus Faye Portacio 00:23**

Yeah, alright then. So to begin with, let's start with how your parents got to Watsonville, if you can kind of tell me the story about that.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 00:34**

From what I was told by my mom is that—so, my grandmother, Macrina Magarin, was an actual natural citizen of Hawai'i. And was, when it was found out that she was actually a natural citizen in the Philippines, she was able to migrate over to California in 1960, and then ordered my mom, Betty, to come to the US to join her. So my mom had migrated over, and joined them in the Central Valley, but wasn't able to handle the heat in the Central Valley, and just decided to make the move to Watsonville, where we had some distant relatives who were already living there. And that was Eucibio Baniaga and Maxima Baniaga. And so she went to go live with them since—I think it was like 1968 that she made the move to Watsonville, and lived with them for a bit, and then had gone to Philippines in 1969 on vacation. It was supposed to be a vacation and ended up, actually, set up with my dad, Romeo. And ended up getting married on that vacation.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 02:43**

So there was an arranged marriage from what she had told me. So that's, and, then they, they definitely had their hard times working in Watsonville. I mean, my mom was pretty lonely from what I had to, what I had gathered from doing a little history from her talk back when I was in college. I did a little, had a little assignment to find out exactly how is it came about to be. And so, and I'm guessing that's— in one sense she, it prompted her to actually get married. To go back and get married. She—I mean there was a lot of other pressures in Watsonville from other, I guess, from other people around, in the community that were saying that she needed to get married. And some people—I mean, there was a lot of single gentlemen around, but my mom wasn't interested, actually, in marrying the older manongs that were around. She just wasn't interested, or they weren't around. But my mom was very religious, and so she was basically looking for someone that had the same faith and beliefs as her. And then when she went back to the Philippines on that vacation, it was fate that my dad who was minister in the, in Lipay at the time, they got married.

**Markus Faye Portacio 04:34**

And what faith did they share?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 04:37**

Well, it's, it's the Assembly of God, um, but I you know, it's always been—to me it was always Pentecostal Christian.

**Markus Faye Portacio 04:48**

And so were they, they shared the faith that was pretty different than those in Watsonville, correct?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 04:56**

That is correct, yeah. Most of the community in Watsonville are—they were Catholic, Roman Catholic. Um, so it was kind of a little different growing up. Most of them were Catholic, and then there was a little church in, in the Watsonville area out in Freedom called the Grace Temple Assembly of God. And there was, there, it was a Filipino congregation. And so able to grow up with some, I guess, little friends—Filipino friends—of the same faith, and who I still keep in contact with today. So I mean, in order to keep us, I guess, interested there was quite a bit of activities on weekends that they would pick us up and have choir practice, things like that. And there was also the Filipino American Convention that they would have annually, and that would take us to, like, Southern California, different parts of California. You know, especially Southern California, in particular, where there was the, like, Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm and SeaWorld. So those, those were, that was kind of, that was actually nice, because it was not, uh—my parents were not adventurous in traveling around at all. They just pretty much stayed in Watsonville. Most of the time, yeah. Hardly, hardly ever traveled.

**Markus Faye Portacio 06:43**

Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about like the Filipino American Convention? Like what, exactly, were kind of the events that were held for this?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 06:52**

So annually, it would be pretty much the Assembly of God Churches—the Filipino Assembly of God Churches—and so, it first started in Watsonville, at the Freedom California Church, and then it expanded. So there was churches in San Jose, Los Angeles, and San Diego as I recall. I mean, there's more now, and there was quite a bit of people involved, but it definitely started in Watsonville, if I recall correctly. So that was kind of nice to meet all kinds of different Filipinos, all around California, and was able to fellowship with them, and eat Filipino food [laughs].

**Markus Faye Portacio 07:45**

Of course, the most important part. So your parents, their socialization with a lot of people in Watsonville mainly connected to the church?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 07:56**

It was mostly that, we, I mean, it was just, it was just an automat—I mean, automatically, it was always every, every Sunday, it was always a church day, worship day, it was—growing up, that was pretty much the main activity. There's always, you know, there was church on Wednesday nights, and then, and then Sunday worship on Sunday mornings. And then there was also a service in the evening, about six o'clock. And then Saturdays as kids, we were kept busy with the choir, and then prepping for Sunday morning worship. So we were pretty much involved in the church growing up. Yeah.

**Markus Faye Portacio 08:53**

I see. So other than, kind of like, this, this socialization, like, what exactly did your parents do? Like what was their work?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 09:03**

Okay, so, um. Like for 10 years growing up, my mom and dad were sharecroppers—strawberry sharecroppers. And so that was their work for over ten years. But before—I mean, my dad actually was doing the sharecropping with my mom, but he also had a main shop at the time, and he was just an irrigator, worked in the fields. Most, most of the time, I hardly, I hardly saw my dad during the summer, summer months because it was very long hours. Like he would be already up and gone before I even, we even woke up. And then he would come home late at night. Usually after, it would already be dark during the summertime. But he, you know, he would come home from work and, but the next, you know, he would be out in the garden. He'd

be out in the garden, tending to vegetables, the Filipino vegetables out there, you know with the green beans and the [indiscernable] and sweet potato tops. And so he was busy—and growing tomatoes, if I recall correctly and along with the, trying to grow a bitter melon as well. They always, you know, that was one thing, is that they always were—my parents had this emphasis of growing food in their own backyard. So that was the main thing in the house, pretty much.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 10:44**

And my mom was always cooking, there was always something cooking on the stove, or either something baking as I recall growing up. So yeah, that was for the majority, yeah, ten years, they did sharecrop. And my mom before that was doing odd jobs: working at the dry cleaner, working as like a home health aide after the strawberry. And then after that, she was actually a, became a certified nurse's aide, and that's what she had done until she had retired. But she was doing—when she first came to Watsonville, as I recall correctly, she was working in the cannery on, with the a lot of the other Filipina ladies in the community. And that's where she got to know quite a bit of them and was able to form a quite a bit of friendships as well. A couple of them became my godmothers who were there for me, actually, my whole entire life. So that was kind of a nice, it was a nice relationship that my mom had with them. They were able to give her advice about how to handle things, how to do things, how to—especially in Watsonville, where she kind of had to figure out how to get things done. Right. So, because there was like other—you know, I remember the specific time my mom, she didn't know how to work a pressure cooker, and I remember going over to my ninang's house, and she had, my ninang, had to teach her how to use the pressure cooker. And, you know, how to maintain it. So I thought that was—and I just, for some odd reason that comes to mind is she, they were always there trying to help her out.

**Markus Faye Portacio 12:46**

Amazing, well, what were the names of your ninangs?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 12:51**

So one ninang, the one that specifically helped with the pressure cooker, she—that was Ninang Delphina Ancheta. She lived down the road from Grandma and Grandpa Eucedio and Maxima Baniaga, and so that's why my mom, in some sense, gained a relationship with her because she was only down the road when she first started living in Watsonville. And then there was another godmother, Esther Tabancay, who my mom always looked up to, and asked her, you know, for advice on, you know, raising, like, her kids, because us kids were different because we were born and raised here in the US, as opposed to kids being raised in the Philippines. My mom just didn't know how to handle—but you know, and Esther, she has like five kids and was able to guide my mom as much as she could. So I was grateful because she was able to give me a whole lot of freedom. For quite a bit of things.

**Markus Faye Portacio 14:13**

Amazing, amazing. And so, is there any other stories that your mother may have told you about the canneries and what it was like working in them?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 14:23**

What I recall is that it was just, it was hard. It was difficult. And it was, you know, the conditions weren't all that great. But I think about the fact that she had the camaraderie amongst the older ladies there, that it really helped to have that. And it was just, you know, to share food, to share stories, so that was actually, she said that was like one of the best things. But it was unfortunate when the cannery shut down, that they all had to spread out and find other jobs. So that was just a little difficult back then.

**Markus Faye Portacio 15:09**

And then from there, she did some odd jobs until returning back to the Philippines?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 15:13**

She, um, she went back to the Philippines, yeah, she went back to the Philippines and then married my dad, and then came back, well, came back, and my dad was able to get that job working as an irrigator with West Coast farms. And he was there for a very, very long time. Um, but yeah, I just remember my mom doing many, many hot jobs, as much as she could, just to make sure that the rent would get paid, and to save money, that was—my parents were really, really big on saving. Because they had their goals of, like, wanting to buy a home. My mom was just—my parents were just not into paying rent. They did not like that at all. So they really scraped and saved. And they were able to buy us a home in Watsonville, in 1975, with a little bit of extra land where they could do the, you know—it was a piece of lot, it was actually two lots of the purchase, and the second lot, they could actually have built a second home. But they just, had just, it was just the big garden, with the big walnut tree in the middle. And that was, that was what they had always planned. Was that, was the always tending to the garden, that was their focus. Yeah, so that was always something that had to be done. And it was, they, I mean, my parents tried different things, like to make money with the garden, like doing, like cherry tomatoes. Like growing cherry tomatoes in the back, in the garden, but that, you know, after a couple years, it just, there wasn't a market for it. So my parents just stopped after that. Because it was just like, my parents were just like, too bad that didn't work.

**Markus Faye Portacio 15:13**

It's very hard work. So I guess, going back to some other parts of your family, you mentioned your grandparents, or like grand-- great uncle Eucedio and, what was the other name. Eucedio and—

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 15:41**

Yeah, but then, um, you know, when the Tomasello company in Watsonville was looking for people to sharecrop with them, my mom and my dad, along with, if I recall, there was two other families that were also—decided to do this as well. There was the Kovita family and then the Abellera family. So, and the—Oh, there was one other family, called the Vasquez family and they also—so there's four families, I remember that did the sharecropping with Tomasello, Tomasello company in Watsonville. So, but, yeah, my mom was really good at picking strawberries, I really had no idea. Um, you know, it wasn't until I was out there with her, along with my brother, out there picking strawberries. And it was something that she was really good at. But you, I mean, she learned how to speak Spanish back in high school, and that really, really helped her to be able to get farm laborers to come out to help us pick strawberries. And back then it was really hard. I mean, the conditions for the, you know, for bathrooms weren't ideal. And back then it was only, payment was only like \$1 per crate back then. So I just remember that—it was just really long days out there, but I remember my mom saying it was the time that she was fittest in her life. Yeah, yeah.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 18:54**

Maxima?

**Markus Faye Portacio 19:03**

—and Maxima. So well, so those were like the great—were they your great uncle and aunt?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 20:12**

Yeah, they were great—I'm sorry—grand uncle on grand aunt, yeah.

**Markus Faye Portacio 20:20**

Do you recall, kind of like, growing up with them? Like, what do you recall with growing up with them and kind of like, what they did when you were—what they did?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 20:31**

You know, grandpa, by the time I was, what I recall, I mean—by the time I came around, and grandpa and grandma were already retired, by the time I got there—I mean, when growing up around them, they had already retired. I mean, Grandma Macrina, she passed away when I was a little girl, around 1976, I recall. Yeah, so she wasn't around after that. Um, but then there was also her daughter's, Lolita and Erlinda, who were there. And we always—what I recall always was getting together for Thanksgiving, when I was a little girl, going up there to go see them. Um, but yeah, grandpa had, grandpa and grandma had a nice piece of land out there, out on Hillcrest Road. And so, yeah, he was also into the vegetables as well. Um, but yeah, with Grandpa, I just remember him being into guns. And just [augh], he loved being out there with his gun, and he would go shoot at things, that, that's something I remember. But he

just—one of my memories of him is I just remember him being in his little pickup truck and just roaming around from house to house, visiting everyone. He would come to visit us in our house, just randomly, just come visit. That's one of the things I remember about him. But he's always, he's always one to joke around and you know, he's the grandpa that always pulled the quarter out of your ear. Little things like that. And with his [laughs], his little tobacco as well, I just remember him having the chewing tobacco that he would always carry and always make it out to be like candy, as if we wanted candy from him, with his chewing tobacco. So that's definitely my memory of him as a kid.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 23:09**

So I was grateful to his daughters, though, Aunty Lita and Aunty Erlinda because they were there to like, show me how to bake cookies. Like chocolate chip cookies. Also, like make—one thing I remember from from Thanksgiving is pineapple upside-down cake. And that was, that was just something normal that we always had at Thanksgiving. So it was kind of nice to, I guess they also taught my mom how to, how to do a turkey—how to bake the turkey, how to prep the turkey, make the stuffing for it. And, you know, that was—because I was, for the longest time, I was like "how did my mom learn all this?" Like cuz she was really, she was good at it. So um, that was something she prided herself in, pretty much. And then taught others, and taught my other cousins, my other cousins who came over later on years, years later and taught them how to make—how to cook a turkey and stuffing and all that. Yeah, I just remember a distant cousin of mine who had just come from the Philippines and my mom was trying to teach her how to do the turkey and the stuffing. She was just amazed that my mom did all this work for Thanksgiving and was just amazed by the abundance of food. That's just it's just not something that was that's normal in the Philippines, right, this big, like you know fifteen pound turkey that you prep for a day. So, but it was a—in some sense it's always, there was always activity in the kitchen is what I remember. Always quite a bit of that.

**Markus Faye Portacio 25:13**

From my interview with Tony he mentioned that a lot of the Baniagas kind of like, emigrated to America, like, kind of like, slowly in waves. Do you have a lot of memories of just like meeting new relatives from the Philippines as you were growing up?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 25:31**

So, yeah, I mean, my mom had a relative—her aunt, actually, on my grandmother's side. Yeah, Nora Valdez. She came here when I was a little girl, and she actually came and lived with us. And then eventually married, actually, one of the men in Watsonville, apparently. An older gentleman, if I recall correctly. So I remember that in particular instance. I do remember that one of my distant, other distant relatives called him Uncle Pedro, his last name was Reyes, he married, actually, one of the ladies—widowed ladies—in the church that I grew up in. That was like an arranged marriage, but it was more of a matchmaking thing of my Aunty Nora, trying to



bring him over. And eventually they did get married, and he was—yeah, he got married to her, and they lived in Watsonville, and then eventually brought over his daughter, Menina, and so—which was great. Because my first trip to Philippines in 1995, I met Menina, in Bacarra. And my first memory of her when I went to Bacarra and I was trying to find her—because she wasn't there at the house when I got there—my memory of her was that they told me she was out doing laundry at the river. So, that's my first memory was, of her, was going to the river. And she was actually out washing clothes by hand out there. So it was nice to actually see her again. To have her back—I mean to have her come from the Philippines to Watsonville, and actually be together there. And so, yeah, she still is here. She lives in the Central Valley in Visalia, California, and has her family there with a couple kids. Yeah.

**Markus Faye Portacio 27:58**

So you mentioned you visited the Philippines in 1995. So, kinda like, what prompted that trip? Was it just kind of like a trip to reconnect with family? Was there a reason for this trip?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 28:09**

So back when I was in high school I, I wanted to, I wanted to go to Philippines, actually. When I, you know, most—when I was in high school, it seems like that was, like, the, like, the passage trip that a lot of the, um, a lot of my classmates were going somewhere on a trip for, you know, as a graduation present of some sort. And so I wanted to go to Philippines, but there was all this uproar, in some sense, with the, with the Marcos regime at that time. Um, and so it wasn't recommended to go. And then back in 1995 one of my mom's friends, apparently a distant relative, um, Augustina Guevarra, she was going to, was going to the Philippines on a trip and she um, she's actually recently from Baccara. And so I wanted to go. I desperately wanted to go. And she was going at the time of Christmas, Christmas time. And so I was all set to go with her and just to, just to tag along. I didn't know exactly what to expect. I was just, I mean, I just had heard all these stories about how hard life was in the Philippines. You have to walk miles to go to school. There's lots of, you know, rice fields, that, those were the kinds of stories I heard. And so I was just curious, I was curious to really want to visit the homeland, you know, get to understand exactly where my parents were from. And so, it was a surprise to me when my mom said she would come along on the trip it was, she had decided—what apparently had happened was that—what changed her mind about coming on the trip was that my, my godfather, Emilio Ilagas, found out that I was going to go, that I was going on this trip with Augustina. And he, he actually was so upset with my mom. You know, he was just, he was pretty much like, You should be happy you have a kid that wants to go, that wants to visit the Philippines because none of the kids, none of his stepchildren ever had an inkling or a desire to go. And so, and, and they were all, they were all much older than me, but as far as I know, to this day up, I've not ever heard of them ever going to Philippines to ever visit. So he guilted my mom and said, you know, pretty much, You need to go show your daughter where you're from.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 31:13**

So, so my mom came along and I was quite surprised. But we were able to, as she took me—we ended up, we landed in Baccara after the, after the bus trip from Manila. And that was an experience. It was cause it was an overnight bus ride, but it was a long bus ride, like, eight hour, nine hour bus ride from Manila to Baccara, if I recall correctly. But then, um, and then we had to hire, hire a jeep and a driver to take us over to Lipay and [indiscernable] is where my my grandparents are from, and where my mom and my dad are, were born. So that was definitely an experience. I was, I was quite taken aback when the Jeep, um, the Jeepney that we hired was basically crossing the river and I was very, I was a little in shock because there wasn't a bridge. So that's one of my memories is that I was a, I was a little nervous. And I just remember one of my auntie's telling me to relax. And just, because the jeeps are strong that they could just drive through the river [laughs] to get to the other side to the road.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 32:53**

So I was quite surprised about how really simple it was there. Like, just, even, just the housing there. Um, it—I mean, I guess they didn't last because of typhoons. Because when I asked my mom like, you know, Where's your house? She was like, Oh, the house is gone. And I'm like, Why? Why is it gone? She goes, because of the typhoon and the flood, it's been gone a long time. And I was, I was just so surprised by that. I, just something that I, I did not actually realize that the home just, you know, just washed away with the flood and the typhoons there in the Philippines.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 33:48**

But I was also surprised by, by the people there. They were so loving and so—how do you say, like—so happy to see my mom when we got there. Because that's the first time my mom had gone, had gone to Philippines since 1960, 1969. She married my dad and hadn't gone back since that, since that trip. 1995. So it was interesting. Some of the older ladies there saw my mom and then they saw me. They were just like, Oh Is Ruby here to get married? And my mom was just like, No, no, no. No, my Ruby is here on vacation. She is not here to get married that, that is not her plan. She is here on vacation. So that kind of—the, the thing is that she did not tell me about that conversation with that lady at all until maybe a year or two afterwards, after we came back from the Philippines. I was actually quite surprised. But that, I found that just too—I found that really funny. But I guess in some sense, being the age that I was, I was 25 at the time I—you know, they just automatically thought I was, I was there to find a husband and get, you know, get married. So that, actually, yeah, that kind of got me a little shy about conversing with a whole lot of other male cousins.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 35:33**

I was quite, I, in some senses, I stood out quite a bit, because I had, I had very long black hair down to my waist and so everyone knew who I was. When I was in a Laoag City, and Baccara you know, word got around about who I was. So I was actually quite surprised when someone—my Auntie Sonia, who, you know, we had left in Baccara you know, she had heard that I was, I had gone to Batac where—I had gone to Batac to see the body of President Marcos encased in glass. So, but, somehow she heard it through the grapevine that I was there cause I, because I stood out. So, but I just, I guess I look like a, definitely a typical American I guess, in some sense. Because everyone else—I had no idea that the regulation for going to school there was having short hair. I didn't know that they had rules like that back in the Philippines.

**Markus Faye Portacio 36:50**

Interesting, I also hadn't heard about the, about the hair thing. That's very interesting. And have you been back to the Philippines since or was that the last time you went back?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 37:03**

I actually went back to Philippines in 2007. I was, actually, I was gonna get married. And I brought along my my fiancée, and we had gone to the Philippines to actually purchase wedding invitations, and barongs, and have dresses made, get wedding favors. We—I ended up going with my best friend who is from Cavite, just outside of Manila. And so my, I got to show my fiance what Philippines is like. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to bring him to the north yet. So that is something—hopefully, after this pandemic is over, I could bring him to the north. And bring another—actually there's other relatives, actually, who had also expressed their interest in going and making a trip to the north to actually show their families where they came from. And also, y'know, like my niece and nephew, they're curious about the, about where their family comes from as well.

**Markus Faye Portacio 38:30**

That's amazing. That's, that's so funny that where your best friend comes from because I'm also from Cavite, my family is also from Cavite like, like literally all of us are from Cavite. I tried to ask, like, I tried to ask, like, if my family has, like, roots in any other places in the Philippines and my—

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 38:48**

Oh?

**Markus Faye Portacio 38:49**

—and my grandma was like, No, we're all just from Cavite. Like every, like so many generations of us are all just from Cavite.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 38:55**

Okay so, so the thing is my, my best friend they're not, they're not from Cavite—I mean they have a house in Cavite, that's where they, they purchased their, I mean, their—my best friend's dad and mom, they, that's where they decided to buy a home in, a custom, a custom made home, because other, other relatives were there in Cavite. So there was just an empty plot of land, and so they were able to build a custom home there. So we been able to, we were, you know, been able to go there. And they basically built that home for their children, as a house to go back to. As far as I know, they're originally from Nueva Ecija and Nueva Vizcaya. So, yeah. Oh, actually, prior to that, though, I did go to—prior to 2007, I was able to go on a trip with them initially to, to go to Nueva Ecija and Nueva Vizcaya to see where they're from. Like that, I think that was in 2004 when I went with them. I didn't go to the—I mean, I didn't go to the north, to where my parents from, but I got to see where my best friend came from. And there in the Philippines—you know, I, you know, going to, you know, from going to school at UCSC, I got to meet a whole lot of different other Filipinos from, you know, from all different parts of California. And, and, in some sense—I, you know, I'm not, like, I guess, in some sense, I just couldn't coordinate exactly who was from where, and who, you know, what parts or what groups were from, you know, certain parts in the Philippines. And it was interesting to go to Nueva Ecija and be in the, just walking down the road, and there's, you know, some food vendors out in the road, and they'd be so surprised, you know, when I would say, you know, I am Filipino. And they're, you know, they would look at me, and they're just like, No, no, no, you're not Filipino. And I said, No, I'm full blooded Filipino Ilocano. And they're just so surprised. They're just like, no, you look Taiwanese. And I was just like, No, no. No, I'm not Taiwanese, I'm definitely full blooded Filipino. So that was, that was the kind of thing that I was just not, you know, I never thought of myself as, you know, somewhat of Chinese descent. Just always, just always thought of it as just, I'm just pure blooded Filipino. So. So that actually caught me by surprise. And now these days—well when I was living in San Jose, in the Milpitas area, people would be surprised when I would say that I was Filipino. They're just like, No, you're, you're different. And I'm like, Well, um, okay. Well my parents are from the very northern top of the Philippines. So, I'm a mix. You know, I, you know, I, as far as I know, there could be a mixture of Japanese. So it could be that way from, from what I, my dad had told me a while back, he did say there was some part of us that's just a little bit Japanese. So I'm just like, okay, yeah, so I go, well, you know, Filipinos are just a different mix of people. So, so, yeah, so. One other time I was asked if I was Vietnamese, just, No not Vietnamese. I'm not sure, exactly, how is that. Being labeled as Vietnamese, not sure. So, yeah.

**Markus Faye Portacio 43:10**

Interesting, I experienced that too. Honestly, one of my classmates, when I was like, younger in elementary school, I thought I was Japanese. And I was like, I—no, to be honest, my, my town doesn't have a lot of Asians in general. And so I think, I think that may have been one of the few like, Asian countries that they knew of—

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 43:29**

Oh, I see.

**Markus Faye Portacio 43:31**

Stuff like that. Because I was like, I was, I was much more like, I was much more tanned than like most Japanese people, so I was like, I don't--okay. But yeah, so that yeah, that's, that's interesting. So, so when you were in the Philippines, like no matter what it--you seem to have, like, stuck out as either like, as American or they somehow didn't entirely think you were Filipino?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 43:55**

Right. I was, you know, it's also you know, they would say things like, you smell different. And I'm just like, okay, all right. We smell different. Okay, that's interesting. You know, I wasn't used to that. I mean, I never would hear those things. Right. But, you know, and it was always this thing. There was also this feeling of my safety. When I was in the Philippines. That was one thing that was really a main concern that my, my grandmother in the Central Valley that was one of her main concerns about going back to the Philippines was that, you know, I could get kidnapped or held for ransom, things like that. That was or feed me or poison me. That was just something that was just very, very, like, please watch who you get your food from, please. And I never forgot that. So, and even my mom, I had gone out with my cousins in Laoag City, just walking around town and I came across an empanada vendor. And well, he was also selling empanadas, and selling fried fish balls or [indiscernable] any type, I guess like that, what I recall. But, you know my cousins were just curious as to see if I actually wanted to try anything. And so I was just like, well, I'll try the empanada. So, you know, I came back, you know, to the house and my mom was just like, where did, where did you get that? You know, where'd you get that food? And I said, oh, it was from this--the vendor, the street vendor. And she was like, okay, all right. Okay. All right, that's fine. Okay, just like, did you make sure that it was, you know, they, they made that in front of you? And I'm like, oh, kind of sort of, but, you know, everything's okay. So she--I had to reassure her that everything was fine. So with the food in particular, so, um, so that was a I just remembered that being a main concern. Yeah.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 46:02**

But, you know, you know, it's funny, because people asked me after that trip to the Philippines is did I have, did I have a good time? Did I enjoy myself? And you know, people, some people were quite surprised when I you know, when I said loved it, I absolutely loved the Philippines. It's just a simpler way of life. Things are just a little easier. You know, they're not as hurried. You know, heart, you know, not much stress. You know, when I met, when I met Menina, for the first time in Bacarra, I asked her what she did for a living, and she goes, nothing. I was like, nothing? You don't do anything? And she goes, there's no jobs here, Ruby. And I was like,

really, there's no job? And so it's just, I was just, again, I was just quite surprised by that. It's just like, what? I'm like, just like, do you work? And I said, Yeah, I work. I've been working since I was 10 years old, you know. And so the, they're, they're quite surprised when I say, you know, living, living in the United States is not easy. You know, you--I've been working since I was 10 years old, with mom and dad in the strawberry fields. And so and, you know, trying to make ends meet and, you know, save money. And, you know, it's not cheap to just get on a plane and come to the Philippines. It's, it, it takes quite a bit, you know. So. I think they were also quite surprised when I was just pretty frank, about the realities about working, working in the United States. I think that they were just quite surprised. Like, it's not that easy as you think it is.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 47:49**

So, but I was also, I think, as they were also surprised that I was pretty to the point, with my cousins in general about smoking. But you know, smoking was, you know, just a regular thing. It's a rite of passage there. Right. And so, cousins were just smoking like chimneys there. And so, you know, I was pretty much like, if you want to come to the Philippines, you know, smoking is--you need to quit, quit smoking. That is something that a lot of us are---we don't, we don't actually, they don't condone it. I mean, I was raised in elementary school, not to smoke. So that was something that was that was taught to us. And I told him to because he, he was studying to become a nurse. And I was just kind of like, no, you need to cut that out. And so, and my mom apparently told me later, he was offended by that. I said, that's true, but it's the truth. I said, it's the truth. So I said that was that's the way that they taught me in elementary school. And that's the way I think it's just like, nope, smoking is not a good thing. So yeah, yeah. Right. Like, my cousins were, what I recall from my cousin's in, in, in, in [Unknown], in the north, they were, I think, they were so excited to see me but they got really shy about speaking to speaking to me in English. And that's just because I spoke. You know, I spoke it really fast. And so they were kind of quite taken aback how fast I spoke. So, it just took them a while to get used to me. So, yeah.

**Markus Faye Portacio 49:41**

I guess going all the way back. So you mentioned that you had been working since like you were ten. So like, kind of, can you describe kind of like a typical day for your family when it comes to the strawberry fields?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 49:55**

So um, you would be getting up about six o'clock. So, I, you know, I basically my brother and I, we basically worked, you know, every vacation every, you know, spring break, summer vacation with my mom and dad out there. But, you know. So it'd be getting up at six leaving the house about, you know, having breakfast and then leaving the house about seven or so. And then my mom would drive around with us in the truck to pick up the workers in downtown

Watsonville. And then and, and then drive off to the fields. So that's basically how it was starting off mornings. And then it would go until about maybe four o'clock in the afternoon, four or five o'clock in the afternoon, just depending on how, if there was enough to harvest on that day in particular, it just, my parents were just, they had a certain area where they would go. And it would also be checking with, I remember the, the foreman as to if the strawberries were at their peak time to be picked. So yeah, there was I just remember, there was always good days and bad days. No is when it rained, it wasn't good. So, you know, it was it was good for the rain in the winter. But then when it rained during the summer, it was not good, because it would definitely harm the strawberries. And it wouldn't be good for, you know, as being sold as fresh fruit. And when the strawberries were bruised, it would be it would be picked for for jellies and jams and things like that. So it wasn't as profitable as the fresh fruit, as I recall. Um, but I mean, on top of the, on top of the strawberry, on farming the strawberries, my parents also had another side job where they were janitors for a Christian church and preschool, down the, down the road from where I--where we lived. So my parents were basically the janitors for the church in the preschool for a long time, as well, as I recall, even to the time after I after I started college, they were doing that as well. So yeah, they were just even though they were doing the strawberries they were still, had that side job as well, of being janitors. Yeah, that's what I remember.

**Markus Faye Portacio 53:12**

And so for the other three families were you all close with the other three families or was it pretty much just like work and you didn't really see them outside of work?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 53:23**

Yes, yeah. Pretty much it was work. i It would be on occasion that I would see them at at a party. Someone in the community was having some type of baby christening or a, a birthday or celebration or graduation or wedding. That's--I hardly would see them out of work actually. But the kids like the Kovita family, the boys there, Darren an Bian Jr. We would see them just because of like school, school things. Um, my brother and Darren and Bian, they hung out together in high school, if I recall correctly. So they, they got to be close friends. So that's, that's all I recall from that is that they they ended up being close friends. Yeah, unfortunately, there was hardly any girls from the other three families I bonded with. I mean, I went to high school with Amy Abellera but I wasn't, I was not close with her.

**Markus Faye Portacio 54:38**

Were you guys friends with a lot of the Filipino kids in the area or not so much?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 54:47**

There was from the, you know, from the church, from the, you know, from going to school with some of the kids from the church that was you know, they became good friends. And then just

like my best friend from junior high and high school, you know, I that's basically who I hung out with the most--that's, yeah. And she was just trying to my, my best friend was just trying to learn English as well when she, she had just immigrated here. And so she was learning the ropes from me. So yeah, that was, it was, that was only who I hung out with pretty much was that, was just other Filipino families basically. You know, things--my parents were really busy, you know, with the, with the, with the strawberry farming and then the janitor, you know, being janitors. It was, it, it was never, we never like we never went, like I said, we never went on family trips together. It was, it was hardly, it was rare in that. But my mom always made time to go visit, take us to go visit her, her parents and her family in the Central Valley, that was the only other time she ever made, you know, made an effort to go see some family. But it was always about, it was always about getting the Filipino vegetables. You know, because of the fact the other relatives have big gardens we're and we're also selling, you know, selling vegetables. And so my mom she was she was always like, packing up the car when we were leaving the Central Valley, it would be just filled with eggplant and bitter melon and saluyot and tabungao and, and just bring it with us back home to Watsonville. And she would sell it basically to other, to other relatives or their Filipino families nearby. So it was always it was always about the vegetables. Just the, I just remember the trunk or the truck always filled, always filled with vegetables. So that's that's what I remember a lot. Yeah.

**Markus Faye Portacio 57:30**

Do you have any other like memories of your grandparents? Like any specific memories growing up? And seeing them other than the vegetables? Like do you? Did they ever tell you stories about kind of like how they came to America? Because you said your mother was, I mean your grandmother was a citizen of Hawai'i. But do you know anything about how your grandfather got to America?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 57:54**

So from what my, from what what I recall is that so he left Philippines in 1946. Before he even knew that my grandma was actually pregnant with the second daughter, Helen. And so he left the Philippines. From what I know, he left the Philippines along with his brothers, his older brothers, Angel and Eniceto. They ended up in Hawai'i and as I recall, they were, they were picking pineapples. I just remember this one photo of my grandpa with the pineapple in the pineapple field. I remember that and, lets see here, and then in 1960, from what my aunt told me was that he migrated over to, to California. And so, and ended up in the Central Valley just outside of Yetttem, California they were able to purchase about like six acres of property out there. And so, and I guess you could say all the, all the guys actually lived out there from what I can recall correctly. It was a really really old, old home out there that, that my mom had actually when she came to California, that's where she ended up going to was living there with them for that time when she went to high school. And was able to graduate from high school then, and then and then moved over to Watsonville.



### **Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 59:58**

But yeah, it's always it was always farmworking for my parents, my grandparents. My grandma, you know, just picking vegetables and wasn't again, not much for venturing out, she actually never traveled. Just always just always on the home, you know, always at home. But, you know, as grandmothers are, they're always there baking or cooking. And as I got older, she was always there. Always with bibingka always there with bibingka. And I always somehow I got used to actually expecting to take home bibingka with me. So I just remember that. And my husband also loved her bibingka so he always looked forward to whenever we visited her. But yeah, just she'd never ventured. She actually never, in all my, in all my years of living in Watsonville, she never came to visit, never came to visit. And neither did my grandpa, they never came either to visit. I don't know if they were just it was they were just not into traveling or just--as my mom, what I found out from my mom is that she would get sick very easily whenever she traveled from what I gathered. But then I also, apparently I also had it but it was just, no, I luckily, I was able to get over the motion sickness. Try to figure out how I could get past it--the it, you know, it took a --in high school, you know, the, I was asked to write an essay about how, where did my name come from? Where did my--and so I had asked my dad, it's just like, where did where does Baniaga come from? You know, he goes, Oh, it's a phrase. It's a phrase, "I'm going traveling," and I was like, really? That's that's what it means? It's like, yeah, he goes Baniaga means to travel. So I was actually, you know, when I actually looked it up in a dictionary, it said, travel, traveler, foreigner. So, you know, my dad was just like, you know, the Baniaga's actually traveled from the south of Philippines to the north.

### **Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 1:02:41**

And so, And so somehow that, that became our name, we apparently we had a different name before. Um, I don't exactly know what that is. But he said that was, that's what it became to be. So I was just like, oh okay, but my dad was, was actually, liked the fact that I was really into, that I really liked traveling that I really liked getting on a plane, going to explore, and just. I mean, I had this habit of just getting in my car back in high school in college and just driving. So yeah, my dad once told me I was the true Baniaga, so I had to laugh. I had to laugh quite a bit, so about that. But he, yeah he, he never went back to the Philippines after he came here. But he was, he was, he was focused on actually saving, saving money, so that he could bring his brothers and sisters here to the United States. Um, so there was that focus. So and, and so he did attain that, you know, he worked hard to bring them here. And so that's, that's basically his legacy there is to bring the rest of his brothers and sisters here along with their families. So, but he and my mom and dad, you know, after they were here and got themselves established here. The other focus was actually also having a church in Lipay, building a church there, that was something that was really important to them. Unfortunately, when we, you know, when my mom and I had traveled to Lipay in 1995, the church there in Lipay was little, little small, little, you know, little cabin like church, and it was really run down, it was, um, it wasn't taken care of.

And my mom, my mom was really upset to see that. She, she really thought that the, that a church was needed there and that someone needed--someone should be there to manage the church. So back in, when I, later on my parents had decided that they were going to build a church there. My mom had a goddaughter, or my parents had a goddaughter there in the Philippines, and she was minister and so they had made plans with her to build this church. And to make it a place of worship and to have, you know, focus for the community there. And to be there for the families there, especially on the Baniaga's side, as well. So that was really important to know. And luckily, with my parents were able to get donations from other parts of the Baniaga family, Baniaga's who also donated which is, I, I had no idea until I saw a video of my, of donations that other relatives had made to the church that my parents had built. So I thought that was nice.

**Markus Faye Portacio 1:06:26**

And is the church like fully built now?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 1:06:29**

The church is fully built, um, it's, it's, it's being used. I'm actually, you know, thanks to Facebook, you know, I, and being able to connect with my cousins there in Lipay, they have, you know, they have quite a bit of celebrations, you know, and at the church, so I definitely get to see how it's being used. So that's kind of nice. And so I do hope to, hope to after the pandemic to go up there and, you know, take my husband there, and, and also some other relatives to be able to see what my parents had left behind for everyone to use. Yeah, that's definitely their legacy there.

**Markus Faye Portacio 1:07:21**

Is there any other stories about your parents you would like to share? I think we've gone through quite, quite a lot of growing up in Watsonville. But is there anything else you think, is very important to your family?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 1:07:35**

I think that's about it actually, I can't think of anything else. It was, like I said, it's like the the church was an important thing for my parents, the religion, being faithful. And it was always about, you know, it was always about to, in the end, for my parents, it was pretty much just like, getting to, getting the family together for Sunday dinners, or you know, or any dinner, whatever that was, that was something that was important. You know, like I said, growing up with my parents, you know, in Watsonville, when I was, you know, 80s, we hardly, it was, we hardly ever sat around the table, actually, to be honest, together. We were always busy, you know, whether it was we were working, they were working, I was working, or I was going to school, and I had, you know, my own activities. You know, because I was in the--I mean, they really emphasized that. My mom was really, had emphasized music, that was really a big thing for

her. So she had my brother and I learn how to play the piano. I was, I was in the marching band. And my brother and I were both in marching band in junior high. And then I also continued in high school, just my freshman year, but playing the clarinet and my brother played the trumpet, but there was always this emphasis on music. But also, you know, they also emphasize about, you know, doing well in school, doing well in school and getting an education because that's, that's what was important. You know, working in the fields was hard. So that they always emphasized about getting a proper education. Because my dad, he, he told me, he, he did not, yeah he only went up to the sixth grade. And so, I just remember him, you know, he said that, as we were kids, my brother and I, he was learning English along with us, you know, he, he was all new to it as well. But then, you know, he, he together with my mom, you know, with my mom teaching him how to speak Spanish and so he, he got pretty good at speaking Spanish as well. So I thought that was kind of a nice thing that they both, they both had goals together.

### **Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 1:10:12**

Yeah, and I just, I was, I just remember one thing, you know, it was because I don't speak I don't speak Ilocano fluently, and, I wish I had kept it. I, well, sometimes I hope to learn it back again. I just understand it mostly. It's rare that I speak it, but I do like with other relatives around it's, I, it's kind of nice to hear it. Because I always feel like I'm home when I hear it, right. Yeah, and so because you know, it's, Ilocano is not the dominant, you know, it's not the dominant language, right, of the Philippines, right. It's Tagalog. So, going to college I rarely, you know, I rarely, I hardly ever heard Ilocano. But but in Watsonville, that was where I would hear it the most. And then when I went to get together with my relatives now is when is, is when I hear it. So I wish I wish that I had not had lost it, in some sense like to be to be able to speak it frequently. But I hope so. I hope that in the future, then I will relearn it again. So it's, you know, when I see my great grand aunt and uncle, and, you know, like, my aunties, it's really, really nice to hear it actually. So because, like in, when I was in kindergarten in Watsonville, you know, Ilocano was my first language, right? So, I, you know, I spoke it all the time, all the time. But apparently, in grade school and kindergarten, I was behind, just because of the fact that I didn't speak much English. So I have this one report card, basically, that said, you know, Ruby is behind, you need to speak to her in English more often. And so my parents just completely did a 180 on that one. They just, they just started speaking to me in English more often. And so that, and I thought that was a shame. But as I got older, and was more fluent, my, my mom basically stopped, basically stopped speaking to me in English and started more with the Ilocano so I just wouldn't lose it. So it would be interesting because I could, I understood what she was saying, but I was, I always answered back in English. And my brother, he, he just wouldn't retain it, but be funny between the, between him and I, because he was just like, what did mom say? So I would laugh at him, I would just laugh at him. I'm just like, this is what she said. It's like, okay, so yeah. Yeah, that's, that's one of the things that I

truly miss, is that just hearing the Ilocano language more often. I'm just gonna have to travel to the north and get used to it and start speaking it.

**Markus Faye Portacio** 1:13:38

Exactly. Yeah. Baby steps back to that.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis** 1:13:42

Yeah, you're right, baby steps. Yes.

**Markus Faye Portacio** 1:13:50

I guess I actually wanted to ask again about the music. What was the type of music that your mom liked to listen to? You said music was a pretty big thing for her.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis** 1:13:58

You know, it's it's interesting because she never, she had these records, these Ilocano records and they were the little I guess 45s, you could say the little 45 records, actual records. And she played those a lot on the stereo when I was growing up, so she played those quite often and I still have them to this day. But yeah, music was she really really missed the music from back home in the Philippines. So she played that quite often if I recall correctly. But yeah, I there was, it wasn't until, yeah, with like, getting to know about more about the Philippines and I, you know, I only had, I only had known like certain pieces. And it wasn't until like going to college and joining like the Filipino student association there that, you know, we were able to, I was able to learn about some of the dances, right? Like the the tinikling was one dance that I learned how to do very well. But, you know, um, I didn't, you know, I had no idea about like, the candle dance, things, you know, things like that, I just, I had no idea. So that was one of the things of, I was glad that in college, so I learned how to do that dance. I was, I was grateful, grateful to meet other, you know, people to tell me like, you know, that I was actually I, he told me, my, the dance instructor, Ben Menor, he told me that I was a [indiscernable]. He called me two and a half generation, Filipino here in the United States and I, so I, you know, I had no idea like I, you know, I didn't, you know, I wasn't aware of all these about, you know, all these things that the, about the Filipinos migrating. Just, you know, my mom, I just remember her, you know, saying that, you know, is just a difficult time, difficult times here and there. And with, in, you know, and you know, Caucasian people being a bit racist. It was, it was, it was, she had a hard time with that, as well. And, you know, my mom said, like, you know, she would be called Monkey. And she said, it was just, some of, sometimes it can be really difficult. But, you know, she would just shy away from it, and just walk away from it. And she was never confrontational about it.

**Markus Faye Portacio** 1:17:03

But she was, she was pretty open about telling you about the racism that she experienced?

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 1:17:11**

She, she only told me, she only told me that later, later in life. She didn't, she really didn't talk about it when I was younger, you know, she tried to as much as she tried to protect, you know, very much protective of us. And so, always careful about where we went, you know, things like that. But yeah, she, she had her instances of racism, and so, again, but she, she hardly ever talked about it, but that one time she did. When she was, when she became a nurse's aide, you know, one of the people there in the nursing home was just, you know, you know blurted out that she was a monkey. And so, just blamed it on old age, pretty much. Yeah. So it's just just know, this, it's, it was, it's there. It was, it had been there. And, you know, it's, I wasn't, it wasn't until, like some instances, like, there was an instance in Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz. One time I was there, with one of my friends actually, we're just walking along on on a West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz. You know, just going for a nice walk, right? And being told to go back to China, it was just, it just actually just shocked me. I was just so surprised by that. I was just talking like, excuse me, excuse me, you know, I was pretty much like, excuse me, I am not from China. I was born and raised here. I was just like, I am not from China. I was like, I may be of Chinese descent. But I, I said I'm not from China. I was born and raised here. Um, but my girlfriend she stopped me before, she didn't want me to go being, to be confrontational about it. So that was, I thought that was interesting. But I was just actually taken aback by that. And that was around, you know, that was around 1990 at the time. So it does happen from time to time. But you know, it just catches everyone off guard. Definitely.

**Markus Faye Portacio 1:19:48**

Well, thank you. I think we're kind of coming to a close with the the interview unless you have any other memories you'd like to share with us. But otherwise, I just want to thank you for the, for speaking to us and kind of telling us your family history about your parents and your grandparents and all that.

**Ruby Baniaga Kalidonis 1:20:09**

You're welcome. My pleasure. Yeah, it's great to have this information, especially for, for history's sake, as well for the Baniagas in particular, so, but thank you.