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From Philippines to USA: My Journey as a Nurse

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It does not feel too long ago, that fate asserted itself and pushed me to put on that white cap with humility and dignity. Nursing, as a profession, has put my life in order, but not without its tremendous challenges as an immigrant nurse.

As a child in the third grade, I envisioned myself wearing the white and pristine, crisply pressed nurse's uniform because my uncle pointed it out to me when he brought me to the hospital one day. That image of the future continued to be imprinted in my subconscious, like an invisible tattoo, until I was in high school, when I found myself caring for my grandmother who had pneumonia. I attended to her needs at home until she recuperated. At this young age, I saw how vulnerable, frail and helpless a person could be when sick, especially those people with advanced age. During this time, I had also witnessed how my mother suffered from migraines. I was so affected seeing her suffer that I cried with her whenever she moaned in pain. It is my belief that these experiences helped shape my vision for myself as to what I wanted to do with my life as a grown adult: it helped me find my life's purpose. I know I have empathy and being a nurse makes sense. During those moments of my life, I knew I wanted to become a nurse not for the nice white cap and uniform but to take

the opportunity to be of service to others. Twenty-three years later, I would have had experience in medical surgical nursing, telemetry, academia and psychiatry.

But first, let me tell you the story:

I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in 1992 in the Philippines. As it was, the Philippines did not have many hospitals and most of nursing graduates would, then, end up working as sales representatives in pharmaceutical companies (while they waited for the chance to work abroad). In my case, I got distracted with life and the love story of my youth. I put my nursing dreams on hold to focus on my marriage and building a family. This did not last long, however, because, alas, my marriage did not work. Soon after, I went back to nursing and obtained my Board of Nursing Certificate. It was the year 2000 and like everything else in the world at the brink of the new millennium, I started my career as a nurse at the Philippine Medical Heart Center.

The surge of hiring abroad for nurses from the Philippines increased the number of students enrolling in



Amelita Aquino, BSN, RN, also fondly called Amy by friends and colleagues, is an RN working currently at the Senior Behavioral Health unit. As one of many Filipino nurses who migrated for work in the US, finally being able to work at UCSDH is a dream come true for her. She is a mother of three adult children who are successfully pursuing their own careers. Amy enjoys travelling, hiking, art, music and dance. Amy considers her mental health one of the more important focus of this decade in her life and pursues life activities that nurture healing, recovery and joy.

nursing schools. Even already doctors, dentists, accountants and other professionals returned to school to study nursing. This correspondingly increased the demand for nurse instructors in colleges and universities. Seizing this opportunity after a year of working bedside on the medical-surgical floor, I decided to join the academia. I taught third year level in nursing school, doing both the lecture and clinical. I was thrilled to teach and really hoped to inspire future nurses to be compassionate, knowledgeable and efficient. I also went back for my Master's Degree while teaching and working. Also at this time, I looked at opportunities to work abroad and prepared to pass the necessary exams to do so. After 5 years in academia and working for my US immigration status, I was granted a work permanent residence (aka work green card) visa in the United States of America.

Arriving in Miami, Florida to work in an assisted living facility thru an agency turned out much differently than I expected, or agreed upon. There was no actual job opened for me as stipulated in the work contract. After six weeks, I remained jobless and only survived living in this foreign country because of the help of the other Filipino recruit nurses who had arrived earlier and had actually secured jobs in the same facility.

I started applying in other hospitals thru another agency. But I was not aware at that time that being hired by a staffing agency meant I would receive half pay only and receive no health benefits. This reality made me decide to leave Florida. I was offered a job from a hospital in San Diego. However, this move created a legal mess for me. Aside from countless threatening phone calls and emails from the staffing agency in Florida, they also warned me that they would not release my work visa and deport me. I sought the help of a lawyer and after a super stressful battle of proving who broke the terms of the work contract (remember that they hired me but did not give me a job!), it was decided that I could (and did!) pay off the contract with a large sum of money: money that I did not even have yet and would take me years to recover from. Finally, my first job as an RN in the USA was being a charge nurse in a

sub-acute unit.

I learned a lot after two years of experience taking care of ventilator dependent patients. I also took a second job as a telemetry nurse. Being a single mom of three growing children and as first-generation immigrant working two full time jobs was a daily uphill battle. I would not have survived the next 10 years if it had not been for the love of my children, my friends and my fellow nurses. I am also aware that I am blessed with a resilient and faithful heart.

Currently, I am in my seventh year working as a psychiatric nurse at the Senior Behavioral Unit (SBH). Caring for the older adult population experiencing challenges related to dementia and psychiatric conditions reminded me of why I wanted to be a nurse in the first place. My patients remind me of my grandmother who needed me and my mother whose anguish I felt.

I love working at SBH. I continue to learn how to communicate with compassion and empathy. I learn from my coworkers who show patience and genuine care. I know I found my niche because I understand more now how important mental health is. Lastly, I know this is part of my destiny because I feel at home being of service to my patients, just like how I felt when I took care of grandma.

Forever child, Forever lost

*They now only live in my memories
only the desperation in my soul
brings them back
only the ache in my heart
can make me hear them
laugh
only the struggle in my brain
keeps them alive
only regret brings hope
that time marches back
only to stare at my own
life ending
I may imagine
the peace
of kissing their hands once again
only the truth
of how little time we have
Do I realize
how much love
there always has been
and how this moment
is all we've got
And this moment
had passed.*



**Poem by Ten Mendoza,
DNP, PMH-RNBC**