Full transcript of an interview with

DELLA CONLON

on 16 March 2006

by Rose Howland

for the

FILIPINO/AUSTRALIA HERITAGE SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Recording available on CD

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Yes, it is all right for me, Rose. Thank you for interviewing me, and it is an honour to tell you my background. I came from a small island which is called Almagro. I was born in a little village which is called Costa Rica, Almagro, Samar in the Philippines. And I have eight brothers and sisters. My father is called Conrado Tomamak, a supervisor, school supervisor; my mother is just a housekeeper, is Asuncion Tomamak. They came from Sogod, Cebu, my mother and my father, and they are all coming from Visaya and they settled down in Samar, so that’s why we are from Samar now, live in Samar.

Samar, I remember, that is centre?

Centre, it is a Visayan island.

And then they speak, you speak Visaya.

I speak – the language there is both: Visaya, or Cebuano and Waray.

Okay, so both, can speak both. So at the moment we are trying to record an interview with a person who I personally admire, Mrs Delia Tomanak Conlon, who is the founder of so many Filipino organisations, but we will talk about that later on in the interview.

Okay.

Employment there, and education: what did you finish?

Well, I finished my elementary school in Costa Rica, Almagro, Samar, and my high school is in Catbalogan, which is the capital of Samar, Eastern Samar, called Sacred Heart College, my secondary school.
And it is a private institution?

Yes, that is a private institution. Then I go to the University of San Carlos in Cebu, and I finished my Bachelor of Science in Education. And after that I have been teaching in – – –.

Which grade? Are you teaching the primary, or secondary?

No. First in primary school after my bachelor’s degree, so I proceeded to study to mid-year my Physical Education, also in Cebu, because I love dancing and all this physical education, so I was teaching in primary schools in Costa Rica first for about ten years, then I got married to Pascqual Rivera in Catbalogan, so I transferred to Catbalogan because we have four children, which is Clothilde is the oldest one, Pascqual and Aurito and Josephine is the youngest one.

Okay, so this is your former marriage.

Yes, former marriage.

What happened to the husband?

My husband died, that was in 1945 –

'Forty-five, okay.

– he died in 1945, and he was a really sick

It’s quite a long time when he got sick

– because he has leukaemia. And I was away doing teaching – I was very young when I got married

When you got married, okay.

– married, and we had four children, of course.

So you were a teacher, you teach primary, and what happened? How did you meet your present husband – – –?

Well, you know when I was a teacher in Almagro – I was transferred to Catbalogan, Samar, in the capital of Samar, so I was teaching about – like a teacher counsellor, I was a teacher counsellor. Then we have a seminar in Manila and after the seminar we, my friends walk down to Quiapo to go to church, and we saw this man in the bridge looking at the map, (laughs) looking at the map, and we presumed that he was
really lost. So all my friends are saying, ‘You ask him what happened.’ Of course, being all the push of my co-teachers, so I asked him, ‘Do you need help?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I do not know where to go back to my hotel.’

This is Brian Conlon you’re talking about, your husband at the moment, who got lost in Manila.

Yes.

So that went on.

We went on and we took him to his hotel and that is the beginning. He asked me to accompany him and go with him to go around in Manila, and then we keep on writing each other, and then he proposed.

That’s a nice story, a romantic story, I love stories like that. Anyway, how long are you married to Brian now?

This is the twenty-five years, so – – –.

So this would be your pearl anniversary coming soon.

Silver.

Oh, silver, sorry, not pearl. Okay. Now, what about when you arrived first in Australia, when did you arrive in Australia?

We arrived here in June 8, 1982.

Okay, in June ’82. Did you immediately look for a job here, or were you studying?

No, because of our English first, and I am not sure what really to do with four children with me.

I presume that the children were grown up then. How old were they?

Yes, when I came here I brought my children four of them Clothilde was I think sixteen years old –

That’s the youngest.

– youngest; no, that’s the oldest. Josephine is eight years old, the youngest is eight years old when we came here.

So they’re all very young. So you did not go to work immediately, so you stayed at home for some years.
We stayed at home for 15 months no, about one year only. Then I had to look for work – my children had to go to school, I let them integrate first and be comfortable in their schools, and then, that’s the time, when they were already settled, that’s the time I look for a job.

**And what job did you have?**

First, I was straight away had a job in the hospital. First it was just a cleaner because you said, whatever job, you grab it. Then, when you are inside, you are there inside working with the people, you know what to do, you know what is to do yourself if you want to climb upstairs. So I become a, what do you call this, health and safety officer.

**Okay. What hospital are we talking about?**

That is the General Repatriation Hospital.

**And you worked how many years?**

I worked there for seventeen years.

**Seventeen years. I understand that you just –**

I just retired.

– retired from your job. And now we go to the community involvement which really amazed me, because you founded and you established and you were the brains of most of these organisations: can you first tell me the first ones, the first organisation that you founded?

It was not really founded, I just first a member because I am new, when I was new, and I really first just become a member in the Filipino Association of South Australia. And I become a dancer, of course, there and –

**This is your memberships in some other community, Filipino organisations.**

– just first, the first one that I was a member.

**FILASA, you were involved in FILASA.**

In FILASA.

**You did not establish it.**

I didn’t establish that.
But which ones did you really establish – – –?

The one that I established is the Santo Niño de Filipinas, the charity organisation, that we have to give help to the needy – because my objectives of having that organisation is to help the children, the orphans, street kids in the Philippines, so I established that charity organisation and do some fund-raising and send help. The organisation committed $2,000 a year to the different orphanages in the Philippines.

That is very worthwhile. And how long ago was that, when you founded this Santo Niño di Filipnas?

I think that is in 1996.

Okay, 1996. Then do you have any other community founded organisation?

Yes, I founded the Filipino Aged Care, that is FACSA.

FACSA, ..... FACSA, Filipino Aged Care. And then the purpose, this was in 1998?

That was in 1999, I think, something like that, or 1998.

Of course it’s an aged care and what led you to establish it?

Well, because I was – it’s me, myself is getting old, and because I was working in Repatriation Hospital which is old people there I was looking at them when they are sick and said, ‘I should do something for the Filipino community.’ So that leads me to establish this organisation, that [they] can come and enjoy themselves, meet other people, make friends, just isolated Filipino elderly. So it is a way, that is their outlet. We have established the Performers’ Guild so we can sing a song and we are invited and we have dancing, so those who love dancing can do some dancing; and we have a quest night to test their ability, if they can still answer; (laughs) and we still have talent, hidden talent is still there, you know. And I took them for a cruise –

These are the older Filipinos who you take for cruises and visit –

– all the historical places, for their educational learning, especially here in Australia, because some of them had not even gone to that place. They are surprised that there is that so lovely place here.

Yes, that is very good, that’s a very good project. And how many members in this one?
Before, talking of members, I think there was about more than fifty, fifty members –

**Older Filipinos?**

Yes older Filipinos.

**This is mainly for older Filipinos –**

Yes, fifty and older.

– fifty and over, Filipino Aged Care South Australia. And an offshoot to FACSA, there is another organisation.

Yes. Because I could not stop myself going to work for the good of the community, I saw the opportunity that there was another project in the multicultural aged care for the older people. So I applied for a grant that we could have our own service that those who are isolated, frail, aged, sick and disabled can be helped. So I established that service as well. So wherever I go I establish something.

I know, I can vouch for that because I’ve been with you in most of these organisations. And really you work really hard to support most of the frail and aged Filipinos in our community. And not only the frail and aged; you also take in some of those who are lonely as well.

Especially the isolated ones. I am very happy that there are volunteers who have given their time.

That’s what ..... ..... ..... was ..... ..... ..... **How many volunteers did you have then at FACSA?**

We have now, at the moment, fifteen volunteers.

**You are now talking of the Alay Kapwa Service**

That is now – before, when I established it, it was called Alay Kapwa.

**Alay Kapwa is under Filipino Aged Care?**

No. It was under Filipino Aged Care because me, as was Chairperson of FACSA, and when I am also applied that grant, so it looks like that it was a part of FACSA. But it has private or independent management. So after my term it is also finished.

**So how long did you stay in FACSA?**

I stayed there for six years.
So you founded it and you stayed and established it and stayed with FACSA for six years –

Six years.

You founded two organisations then, Filipino Aged Care and Alay Kapwa. And after you finished with FACSA, what did you do?

Well, I really stayed with the A....., I stayed because I want to make sure that it will be progressing and it will be working properly. So it was, this project was auspice by Multicultural Aged Care. Then after that, because after three years the Multicultural Aged Care had different direction so they asked the Goodwood Community Service if they could, they wanted to auspice the Alay Kapwa. Now, the Goodwood was very happy to accept the service because they can see that we were working hard, because we were based in there, in the Goodwood Community Centre as well.

Because they have volunteers, committed volunteers.

Yes.

How many in the Goodwood Community Centre, how many volunteer? These are all mainly Filipinos?

Yes, probably Alay Kapwa just mainly for Filipinos.

No, I mean the volunteers are Filipinos there?

Filipinos, yes. And they help the elderly to do some light work at home, transport them to their appointments, shopping or whatever they want or to their social activities transport them, and help them a little bit of gardening, visit them just to say hello to them. Then every year we have four activities, social activities. We take them for field trips, we take them for a picnic and give them lunch, and so many things that we can help them to alleviate their loneliness, that is the purpose of the service.

Can I ask how many seniors or elderly clients?

We have twenty-five clients.

That’s for the – – –.

The elderly people, Filipino.

We are now embarking into HACC, a new organisation, are we?
No, that is not a new organisation. When we were transferred to Goodwood, the auspicing was transferred to Goodwood, or Goodwood Community Service, then we changed the name to Filipino Home And Community Care Service.

This is HACC now?

This is now FILHACC, we call it FILHACC, Filipino HACC.

Home And Community Service.

Home and Community Care Service.

Okay. And you service the same clients?

The same clients.

Are you getting paid for this?

No, it is not. We have one co-ordinator. We have one co-ordinator which is paid, because that is the one responsible for managing the service. The volunteers are not paid, they are only reimbursed by their petrol, that’s all. But the service is voluntary.

Inasmuch as I am looking forward, do you think there will be more who would like to go as volunteers, if they are not getting paid?

Yes, apparently there is. I was very surprised – Rose Demed, you know, she is working full-time as a nurse and she is also giving her time, two hours a week.

So the volunteers are only asked for two hours per week.

That is minimum time.

So how many of the volunteers do we have now?

Fifteen.

And there are twenty-five clients.

Yes.

In the organisation, do you know the statistics of the Filipinos, how many elderly Filipinos in Adelaide?

According to the statistics, the new survey that we had, I think we had two hundred and two elderly. But that was the survey that was in 2002, but now the 50 years old before, it’s getting older so there must be more. We are saying that we are asking
now the Goodwood that we would like to have another survey, because there are newcomers and also those who are younger before becomes older now, and those who were in that survey are gone, died. So we would like to review again the survey.

**Who does this, run by Goodwood Community Centre?**

We have to run it, the services have to run it, but the funding is coming from HACC the Community Centre will have to apply for the funding for this, because it involves money.

**Yes, there is urgent need for it?**. **Now, what happened to the Santo Niño de Filipinas now? Are you still actively involved in that one or -- --?**

Well, I just go there after how many years also for I have been there for six years also, being the founder and become the Chairperson. Then another one took over, another administration. Now I just go there and I be with them, but I’m not helping any more with the fundraising so it is up to them.

**The Santo Niño de Filipinas is still doing the objectives?**

Yes. I make sure that they will continue the objectives of the Santo Niño di Filipinas.

**And what is that objective -- --?**

To help the charity, to help the children in the Philippines orphanages or street kids. So I make sure that that will be always that, because if they will not I will be questioning them why it is not.

**Now, I’m very amazed, so amazed how you do all this community involvement, founding or establishing these organisations; at the same time you’re working full-time and you have four kids. How did -- --?**

How you manage -- --. (laughter)

**How do you manage it?**

Well, I am very thankful first to my husband, Brian, he’s very supportive. He said to me and because I have to be open to him that I really love helping the community – then he said, ‘Whatever you want to do, I am supporting you.’ So if I come home late he will not question me; in fact, he will just cook (laughs) – do the cooking if I’m not around.

**If you cannot cook he does it.**
Yes, the cooking. And if I cannot go by myself, especially at night-time, he will come with me to be with me. And in fact he works hard, he helps as well, like the Santo Niño before, during the fiestas, he is the one who really work hard in order that the fiesta, the festival, will be successful. So then my children, because they are already big enough to cope, to tell me, and I just said, they told me that ‘whatever you want in your life, we are for you, so we will just manage. If you have problem’ I said to them, ‘if you have problem just tell me.’ So they tell me if they have problem, they tell me only if they have no money. (laughter)

Going back to the kids now, as you said, they’re already old and they have their own jobs: can you tell us – I’m sure they’re all successful now and working.

I am very thankful to God that they are OK. Because you know we are cross-cultural marriages, that is a very hard thing. So I was very thankful to Brian that he treated my children as his own, so we disciplined them together and they come home early at night, especially the boys. But I told them that here in Australia we have nothing, we have no properties that I can give you if I’m gone, so what I can give you is your education. And I cannot go and study for you, it is you who will study yourself. So, to make sure that you work hard if you want to progress, so you have to work harder.

And the kids are all – can you tell us – –?

Clothilde first is studying Psychology and has finished her Psychology; then –

This is the youngest?

Clothilde the oldest, yes she is not happy being a psychologist (laughs) so she studied another course, the IT, Information Technology, and so she is now working and she got married to a Polish [man], which is an engineer, they meet in the school, here in Marion High School before, they were together I think the same time that we migrated to Australia, and they were both lonely, you know, being from Poland coming here, and Clothilde from the Philippines coming here, so they met there and they stuck together. So they got married and the husband became an engineer, and he’s working in the Motorola and a professor in the Wollongong University.

So they live there now?

Now they are living in Wollongong and they have one son, Daniel, my grandson.

And what about the other kids?
The next one is Pascqual, from Clothilde the next one is Pascqual, and he has also – he’s not good in academic, he is good in his hands, so he studied [as a] fitter and turner. So he worked first in Castalloy and he was not happy working in a factory, and then he studied cooking, he loves cooking, so he is now a chef in a revolving restaurant in Glenelg.

**Oh, so he’s working, he’s here in South Australia?**

South Australia. And he has a girlfriend, they are living together, and they’ve got a little girl. So I have another little granddaughter.

**And the next child?**

Her name is Kirsty.

**Okay, and the next?**

And Kirsty looks like Grandma.

**Like you.**

Like me. (laughs) [?]Chocolate cake?] with Grandma.

**And next to Pascqual?**

And the next one is Aurito, he is also graduated in IT. And he’s a programmer and designer, something like that. Publisher, not designer, publisher.

**Programmer and publisher.**

No; before he was working in the Immigration Department in Canberra, in the federal government. But he wants to move on and he is now working in the ATO, Australian Taxation Office, in Canberra.

**And your last child?**

And my last, Josephine? She has a little boy which is Emil, is the name. She’s married to a Swedish man, Niclas Johnsson and he’s working in Canberra – they are in Canberra as well, because Niclas is working in the Department of Education in Canberra; and Josephine is a radiographer, so she worked here in Flinders, she graduated here in South Australian University, she graduated there, and then she is
the first graduate of the South Australian University. So then she is now a senior radiographer in Canberra and she’s also a manager of the MIR imaging.

**Wrapping up about the family thing, I think you are most happy that you see all the kids all successful.**

Yes, I cannot really express my gratitude, my happiness, to God. Looking at them that they are all successful – – –.

**And you are so proud of them.**

I am very proud of them. And now that they are all working they told me that ‘we will pension you’. (laughs) So every birthday – not all the time, because they have their own family as well, they are just establishing their own family but every birthday, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Christmas I am happy they will say, ‘No more presents for you, all these material things, because you will just give it back to us. So you will be going somewhere all the time.’

**Ah! So they pay for the trips.**

So it’s very nice. And Brian had also two children, Jane is the girl – she is a very nice girl; she is the one who is reminding us that, ‘Now you have to do this, you have to do that thing,’ because she is the one who is nearer to us, being a girl as well – and one son in Sydney, he is also a very successful businessman doing electronics things. Both of us are very thankful to our children.

**Because the children are all successful in a way. And they are living their own life now.**

They are living their own life.

**Jane is married, you said.**

Yes, but she is divorced. They had two children. I think that is the boy and girl.

You have another question?

**Yes, yes. Your vision for the future, we already wrap up with the family and you know that you’re successful, and I’m so proud, as I said earlier, because I knew you a long time ago and I’ve known so many things that you’ve done and established, and you are still the same, you’ve never changed. Until now, since you**

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1 MIR – Medical Imaging Referral
arrived, you’ve worked with the community and till now you’re still working. So what is your vision for the future, what are you going to do?

I think my vision is to help elderly people.

You have established one more organisation at the moment, isn’t it? We haven’t talked about that, this — —.

Oh yes, I forgot about that. We have another organisation I established – again, doing another organisation which is called the Filipino–Australian Heritage Society. I think, when I heard about it, I think it takes away my breath, it is really something new and very unique that we can get all these histories, the elderly people, achievers, organisations individuals history and keep the record in the archive so that we can really have something for the future of our children. So the children, if they want to research something out about their family, then they’ll have somewhere to go, and that is my purpose on this, my objectives on this Heritage Society. And I am thankful to the State Library, especially to June Edwards, and Sue Anderson, that they are really helping us on establishing this and supporting us, lending us all the different equipment that we can use, because at the moment we have nothing.

And this Filipino–Australian Heritage Society, every Filipino can avail of the Society’s objective, isn’t it?

Yes.

So one can put in their story

Anybody who wants to avail

– stories.

– stories, they can write their stories; if you want to be interviewed we can help.

What stories is this, is this their own families?

Their own life stories.

Okay, life stories.

Or their family stories. Especially the older people, because once they are gone we lost that record. We cannot really get back unless their children will know – somebody will learn and know about the background of their parents.
For instance, if someone asks, ‘Who is the founder of this?’ and nobody knows who the founder is. For instance, you founded the Alay Kapwa, that’s your brainchild. If nobody knew about that one, then no-one can answer the question. So that’s why we have all these documents and all the – particularly our interview at the moment and this is a very good purpose, to insert in the archive – – –. Going back to – I think this will be my last question, then – what is your vision, what’s next? Do you have any agenda?

At the moment I have no agenda yet, but who knows [if] there is another one to come? And in fact I was really targeting the Parish in our church, because I am very involved in our church, here in St Bernadette Parish, so I was –

This is the Catholic Church.

Yes the Catholic Church. I was really targeting that if I could somehow to introduce that if what to do with the elderly, because the parishioners are more, most are elderly people. So what can I do with them? That is my next target, my brain is working so hard what to do. (laughs)

You mean their stories, collecting their stories?

No, no; it’s just like to give them activities that they can enjoy.

Ah, so it’s an offshoot of the aged care project.

Yes.

Targeting the St Bernadette Catholic Parish.

Because at the moment, I forgot to tell you that I am also a volunteer in COTA, the Council On The Ageing. I am the so-called Club Liaison Volunteer. I work with different clubs – you know, Australian clubs, Filipino clubs – so I go there and say, ‘What can I do, what can I help to you?’ So like now I’m working with the SAFILSA, that is South Australian Filipino Seniors’ Association, so I help them to – you know, how to increase their membership, how to apply [for] grants, what are their activities, then also a cross-cultural exchange that we invite Australian clubs to the Filipino clubs and integrate there and make friends. Then the Australian will invite them back to go to their clubs and play bowls and sing a song, whatever their activities in the club – or play cards or play bingo – so that is a good thing.

So this is like a social club.

It’s a social club.
So interchange culture with clubs.

Inter-cultural exchange. So another thing that I’ve involved in COTA is I am a peer educator – you know what is peer educator? Peer educator is I give information sessions to the different clubs that are asking help – like because I give information session about the quality/use of medicine. Now there is another program, it is called ‘Maturity Blues’: it’s about depression.

Oh, okay – that’s a new program?

A new program in COTA.

I think that’s why you are doing this, loneliness is under that ‘Maturity Blues’.

Yes. So I go to clubs and tell them that depression is an illness – being isolated can trigger depression, all those things that are part – it’s all for elderly because I can see that I have many things to offer for the elderly to help them. (laughs)

Can I ask, Del, if you don’t mind, to ask how old are you at the moment?

Me? I am proud of my age. I am sixty-five. This coming August I am sixty-five. So I am an elderly. So I told the people in our training that I belong to ‘Maturity Blues’.

But you are not there because you are constantly with other people. You are not really blue, in a sense, because you are always with people, you are always happy, you are always going to socials.

That’s right, that is the secret of becoming younger.

Yes, you look very young, for sixty-five you look very young and you — —.

Just be with people, be active and social, for good health. According to the, I have read in the Reader’s Digest that to be with people, it makes you live longer. So that is how I am, I am looking forward to a hundred years old.

You are always constantly on the lookout for new things to help the elderly.

Help the elderly. Well, I think I will stop working when I cannot walk any more. Even if I cannot walk, I can still tell them that this is what you are going to do.

So in summary, Del, what can you tell the others who are going to listen to this interview?
I would like to say to the other people that be there. Work with the people, be happy, if you have something to offer, like you have talent to offer, to help the community, help them. They need your help. So I think that is my advice.

**And also are you constantly asking for volunteers, calling for volunteers? How do you recruit volunteers?**

We just announce to the public that we need volunteers if you can spare time. It’s only – not every day that is needed; maybe once a month, maybe once a week, it depends on the needs of the client. So that is why only few people like to volunteer not everybody because the interpretation of the people is that you are there every day as a volunteer. No, it’s not. So you just service if the client is near to you, we might ask you that please can you do the service today if there is no volunteer available. So it’s simple as that. So it’s up to the people, really: if you want, really if it is in their heart to help people, so they have to say, ‘Yes, I can give this time to help other people.’ That is what God said, ‘The more you give, the more you receive.’

**On that note I would like to say thank you, Delia Conlon, for this very informative interview. And I might be able to ask you again for another interview on the second portion, or another part of your life. In the meantime, ladies and gentlemen, this is Rose Howland interviewing Delia Conlon. Thank you and until next time — —.**

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**END OF INTERVIEW.**