

“Carolina’s Story”  
January 22, 2012  
by Rev. Nancy Landauer

This morning I would like to invite all of you to listen to the story told by Carolina. Carolina is an elderly woman living in an assisted living center in SF. Carolina is bright and lively and has some interesting points to make about life in the United States. Carolina immigrated to the US in the 1960’s with her husband and children from the Philippines. I am going to tell Carolina’s story in the first person and use her own words. Perhaps her story will make you think about the important stories that have shaped your life.

I am quite old now, I live here at Alma Via, and it’s what they call an assisted living center. I feel lucky to be here. I have had a long and full life. I am the only one here from the Philippines. I think I look at things differently because I grew up in such a poor country.

It is very interesting when you come from a very poor third world country. You feel the vast difference between the ways we celebrate, for example. Take Christmas, the love and emotion is still there because of the birth of the savior, but still there is a big difference because of the poverty. There’s a big difference. Here there is abundance, such a vast difference. In the Philippines when grace comes, it is a wonderful thing. We take the grace of God for granted over here. I always instill in my children that we should be very grateful for what we have. Sometimes poverty brings you together close in common need. One truly needs the sister or brother or neighbor. Because of poverty we are a very close-knit family. Opulence and abundance is here in the states but sometimes the people here don’t know it.

Children grow up and move away. Sometimes whole families move to other countries. It’s just the way things happen. The important thing to me is that as we move and change we can make new family. My children and grandchildren are young and busy. They have their own lives and that is as it should be. I feel like I have made a new family here at Alma Via. Here we are in tune with each other. We understand the limitations of age, our different needs, our sicknesses, our closeness to God. We are closer to God here in this home. We have more time to reflect, to pray, and more time to spend with each other. I try to explain this new family of mine to my children and grandchildren. I’m not sure they understand.

This is an ecumenical community here at Alma Via. Yes, we love each other, but we respect each others’ right to be different. We all have one God. We accept that and we feel that.

Now I myself am a very devout Catholic. I had 12 children. My life was uneventful in the Philippines, if you can call having 12 babies uneventful. But it was full of poverty and hardship. When we came to this country both my husband and I had to find work, fast. I applied for a job at a Catholic organization. I prayed so hard that I

would get that job; I needed it so badly to help feed my children. However, they gave the job to another woman. I went back to the office and I said” I congratulate the woman who got the job, but I have to ask why she got the job instead of me. The head of the agency said, oh we gave the job to the other woman because she had 3 children and you only have two. “Two, I said, Two? Why I have twelve children. They had misunderstood. They thought I had written a 1 and a 2. They didn’t think I could possibly mean 12.

But really the days I delivered my children were the best days of my life. No holiday could surpass those days. I had 9 boys and 3 girls. It was something I prayed for. Actually I don’t think the number is important. Look at Mary the mother of Jesus. She had one son and he saved the world.

We always get together on my children’s birthdays. We love to eat. I have 14 grandchildren and I still pray for more. For them of course, not for me. I am very fortunate that I have brothers and sisters here in this country as well. I am one of eight children.

Of course, my family is not all Catholic. I have a Jewish daughter-in-law and I go to synagogue with her. One of my sons is a protestant minister. When I tell my son I have been to synagogue, he always tells me, “You are no longer a good Catholic; I am going to tell the Pope”. I say I don’t care; we are all one.

I truly believe we are all one. We learn so much from each other. I like to listen to the stories of my friends here at Alma Via. Each one is so different and so interesting. I have always been like that. I always wanted my children to bring their friends home. We always had an abundance of cheap food. I cooked a lot and I always made extra. I used to bring food to the homeless shelter every day. It just became a part of my life. Every day I would have a big soup pot on the stove or a big dish of pasta. I remember one little boy said to my son, “I think your mother likes me, She always feeds me and treats me so nice.” My son said, “Oh no, she treats everybody like that.”

One thing stays in my mind. When I came to this county I didn’t realize the feeling people had for foreigners. I didn’t realize I would have to face so much racial prejudice. I had a son that went to St. Ignatius in SF. I taught in another school in SF. One of the teachers at my school was an Ivy League graduate and she never considered me an equal. She always looked down on me. I had many things to think about and I was busy, I never paid any attention to her put downs. One day this same teacher came to me and said, "Did you know your son Chris is in the same class as my son Ted at St. Ignatius?" Yes, I said I knew that. She said our boys had a discussion about Nixon. When your son spoke everybody listened. They all think very highly of your son. From that moment on that teacher became my friend because her son thought highly of my son. Isn’t that funny?

To me the most interesting thing at Alma Via is how we talk to each other and tell stories. We gain insights from each other. It’s not just the telling of stories, you see. It is

how the stories are perceived and heard. Just by listening, I have learned a lot. It is not just the stories, but the stories tell what and who we are. As I listen to the stories, I think that the overriding theme is love. Love will overcome all hardships. When you go into the dining room at Alma Via you hear the ringing sounds of laughter. Underneath for all of us is the awareness that this will all pass. We each approach aging differently, but I think we all realize that we need to enjoy everything while we are here.

In the stories she chose to tell about her life, Carolina smoothes over the rough edges. At the end of her life, it is interesting to see what she chooses to highlight about her life. She seems to skip over almost lightly the difficulty of making that transition from one country to another. Most first generation immigrants find life very difficult. The task of learning a new language, new culture and earning a living is always very difficult. Many immigrants feel that they're successful if their own children become successful. They speak of loneliness, the loss of meaning when new languages are used and new cultures are embraced. Carolina chooses not to talk about the difficulties nor does she tell us about her successes. Carolina went to college and became a teacher. She also got her masters degree in teaching and taught for many years in the SF School District. This is quite a feat for a first generation immigrant woman with 12 children, yet she skips over it. Her children are successful and loving. Her difficulties and her successes are skimmed over. Instead I noticed her most important story was a story about racial prejudice. In our storytelling group Carolina, told the racial injustice she experienced from another school teacher several times. Because I have rarely experienced racial prejudice, Carolina's story touched me deeply. I felt that she encountered hardship and stress with great courage and love, yet it was the experience of prejudice that hurt her most deeply.

She framed her story, however, at the beginning and at the end with the importance of God's grace and God's love. I felt like she was giving us a window into her world. For Carolina, experiencing disdain from others because of her racial and cultural background was unbearably painful. It was an unexpected additional trial that she faced in the United States. I think that in her own way she was shaping her story to tell us that God's grace is powerful and saving. Her story of how she overcame the bias of her colleague in teaching stood as a model or metaphor story. I believe she saw the Christ Spirit in action through the children. Through the children's innocence, Carolina and her colleague were able to dissolve the bias and the bitterness and recognize the spirit of Christ in each other.

Carolina remains active at Alma Via, even as she acknowledges that her time on earth is coming to a close. The love that conquered prejudice, will also overcome death.