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R.50 Southern Mix: Asian and Asian American Voices in the South

Interview R-0957
Anna-Rhesa Versola
18 April 2017

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ABSTRACT—Anna-Rhesa Versola

Interviewer: Katy Clune

Interviewee: Anna-Rhesa Versola Callum

Date: April 18, 2017

Location: Pittsboro, NC

Length: 1:17:05

Anna-Rhesa Versola begins by discussing her expectations for the Southern Mix project and its personal significance as an Asian American. She was born in Manila, Phillipines in 1965 and her father led the family to the United States for his medical training, eventually settling in Raleigh, North Carolina. She discusses the migration of her extended family to various regions of the United States and the general migration of Filipinos, especially doctors and nurses. She describes moving away from a mixed migrant community in Raleigh to Fuquay, North Carolina, where public school and a "black-white" mentality complicated her racial identity. Her parents decided to assimilate the children to America quickly and limit expression of Filipino culture. Discusses Filipino food, which was the primary connection to her heritage. Anna-Rhesa's paternal family members were able to emigrate to the United States despite their poor background by taking advantage of her grandfather's American military benefits. She discusses how her parents met, as well as the history of some family names. Then she describes experiences with prejudice and stereotyping, and learning to react to these. Remarking on the development of the local Asian community, she laments the relatively slow progress of diversity in some areas of North Carolina. During the 2016 election, her daughters for the first time experienced fear on account of their race. As she learns about her own cultural identity, she believes an identity crisis is occurring in America and sees an opportunity for change. She discusses enduring cancer treatments and fear of the KKK being near as a child. She finishes with her parents' reactions to marrying a non-Filipino.

TRANSCRIPT—Anna-Rhesa Versola

Interviewer: Katy Clune

Interviewee: Anna-Rhesa Versola

Date: April 18, 2017

Location: Pittsboro, NC

Length: 1:17:05

[START OF RECORDING]

Katy Clune: This is Katy Clune interviewing [Anna-] Rhesa Versola at her home in Pittsboro, North Carolina, on April 18, 2017 for the Southern Mix oral history project. Thanks so much for being an early volunteer for a sample story on the website, and I think the enthusiasm that you and Ngoc both show and these interviews will just help convince people of the need and importance of this projects.

Rhesa Versola: I am so excited to do this project. It's been on my mind for years, and to finally have a chance to make it happen, that in and of itself is a gift I can pass on to my kinds and my grandkids and the next generation of Asians and Asian-Americans.

KC: That's great, and we need that on the video tomorrow with Malinda, which will be more of a fundraising pitch.

RV: I feel so strongly that we don't have enough of the voices of Asians and Asian-Americans as part of American history. I certainly haven't had enough of that in school because the only time I remember even talking about any kind of Asians was during the civics class about World War II and the Japanese internment camps and the bombings at Pearl Harbor. I remember one kid, this was in 8th grade, the first year of public school, and I was sitting in my history class and we talked about Pearl Harbor and the kid behind me leaned over, I could feel him close to

my shoulder, and he said, “Why did you do it?” And I thought [laughs], “I’m not even Japanese! Why are you asking me this question?”

KC: I grew up overseas a fair bit because my Dad is a diplomat, and it’s incredible how people will just assume that you’re the ambassador for your whole country. For me, I was in Australia during the Bush Administration and Australians would attack me because of my accent, and blame me for Bush, and Iraq. But then—it’s not even your nationality. It’s just so ridiculous.

RV: Yes, and every day, every day I would come home from school, saying, “Gosh.” It was such a weight, such a burden, to have to explain, almost at every turn, “No, I am not Chinese, I am not Japanese, I am not Korean.” “You’re Hawaiian, you’ve got to be Hawaiian.” I’d say, “That’s closer, I have a lot of relatives in HI, but I’m from the Philippines. No one would know what that was. Growing up here, in the [19]70s, there weren’t a lot, there were a handful of us. I knew all the families, we all knew each other in the [19]70s in Raleigh.

KC: Filipino families?

RV: Yes, yes. Different restaurants and Asian stores and the doctors. My Dad was a physician in Fuquay and the reason we even came to North Carolina was—let me back up.

KC: I was going to get you to. Do you want to start with when and where you were born, and then maybe back up further—

RV: Sure, sure. My name is Anna-Rhesa Versola. I was born in Manilla, Philippines, April 14, 1965. My father was a medical student whose best friend decided he wanted to go to America so he made him also take the test and apply for residency in the U.S. So they both got in, Dad and his best friend, Uncle Sammy, ended up with training in Brooklyn in 1969.

KC: Wow. Tell me your Dad’s name?

RV: Manuel Bolante Versola. And he's the youngest of three. He grew up without a father. He says he grew up as a street urchin in the villages of northern Luzon. He tells stories reluctantly about what it was like to witness some of the things that happened in WWII in his village and how he saw it on fire and putting his hands and fingers in the bullet holes and the walls. Hiding from the Japanese soldiers. There were a lot of stories that I was able to hear from my grandmother, his mom, and how she raised the family on her own, but let me get back to New York. He was in Brooklyn, so my Mom and my brother and I were getting ready to join him in 1969 and it was in August and we had a huge earthquake. You can look up, it was one of the biggest earthquakes of the time.

KC: So he left for Brooklyn already—

RV: Ahead of us.

[AUDIO BREAK.]

KC: So how old were you when Manuel came to Brooklyn.

RV: I was three. Oh, I'm sorry, not 1969, it was August 1968, I have pictures too. We followed. So after we survived the earthquake, Mom and my brother and I followed my dad, and it was Mom's first plane ride. We landed in Tokyo, Japan, and there was enough of a layover, Mom said that she was convinced by a local there in the airport to take advantage of the timing that there was some Japanese tea ceremony to commemorate some major celebration there and so the Empress was going to have tea. Mom never does anything on her own, but for some reason, she took us and put us in a cab and we all went to this tea ceremony and then came back, got on a plane to go back to New York. She never does anything like that. [Laughs.]

KC: She felt emboldened. How old was your brother at this time?

RV: Two. We're 11 months apart. So we get to New York, we're in Brooklyn, I have memories from Brooklyn, but we were only there for about a year. Dad's training brought him down to Portsmouth, Virginia, and that's where my sister, Judy, was born. We lived in this old Victorian home across the street from this elderly couple. I called her Granny, and they were the first grandparents to me. They would borrow us from across the street.

KC: Were they white?

RV: Yeah. I remember the first snowfall was there in Portsmouth, VA, for us. I remember getting all bundled up, I'll show you a picture where I look like stuffed sausage. [Laughs.] And then we moved to Raleigh, NC. So Dad has his residency in psychiatry at Dorothea Dix Hospital.

KC: Do you remember when you moved to Raleigh?

RV: I think it was 1970. I was still four years old because I celebrated my fifth birthday at Dorothea Dix. We lived in staff housing on the Dorothea Dix campus. 912 Tate Drive. The house is still there, I've brought my kids to take a look at it and they couldn't believe that that's where we grew up.

KC: Because it was a small house?

RV: Yeah, you know, public housing. It's a one-level brick home. But I have such great, idyllic memories of Dorothea Dix. Mainly because, have you ever been there?

KC: No.

RV: You have to go. It's rolling hills, grass, and trees, there's a little stream that runs across. I remember we would take large cardboard boxes and flatten them and set them at the top of the hill. It seemed like such a big hill at the time. And take a running start and jump on the cardboard boxes and slide down the grassy slopes.

KC: Like sledding.

RV: Grass sledding.

[11:00]

KC: So was it a lot of the other staff and residents' families?

RV: Yes, and that was interesting too, because it was a mixed neighborhood. Even at that time in the early [19]70s there was still a struggle to staff the hospital for the mental health services. So they would rely on foreign medical graduates to provide, just like today. It really has a, I think mental health services have really gone by the wayside and there is just not nearly enough done to help that community. So we had next door was the Lara [phonetic] family, and they were from Chile. My parents are still good friends with them. We played with their kids. On the other side of their house were the Caballeros [ph] and they were from Cuba and they had five kids, and down the street at the entrance, the gatehouse, there was a little stone cottage and they were from India, Dr. Ghate, and his daughter is now a doctor at Duke. There were a lot of people. On the other side of us was your standard Caucasian, white American, family, they had bleach blonde hair and blue eyes and we'd camp out in the back yard with them, hide and seek, kick the can, all that kind of stuff. The trees were amazing. That was one reason we picked to build on this lot, where we live now, was because I wanted my kids to have a beautiful setting to grow up, to run outside and play. But it was unusual, you know, today I think about, when we talk to my nieces and nephews about how crazy it was for my mom to say, "Go out and play," and you wouldn't come home until sundown. And you just knew to avoid anyone walking around campus who was dressed in white, because those were the patients, just walking around. I remember going to the playground and they'd be smoking on the bench—

KC: I thought you were going to say those were the doctors who were busy!

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RV: No, these were the patients. Some of them were criminally insane, but I'm assuming they didn't have the criminally insane walking around. I remember Dad being upset every once in a while because Mom would invite someone in for coffee and he would just get, "You don't want those people inside the house!"

KC: Did your mom work, or did she raise you?

RV: She raised us. I didn't go to kindergarten because she didn't know how to drive. We were at Sacred Heart Cathedral in downtown Raleigh, and that wasn't that far of a drive from Dorothea Dix. I went there for first through fourth grade. Mom learned how to drive in the K-Mart parking lot and in the Dorothea Dix parking lot. She still has scars from when she thought she was hitting the brake—

KC: Oh no.

RV: And she ended up slamming the station wagon into the tree. The tree's gone now, I checked on the last tour of the Dorothea Dix campus.

KC: What about, did your dad know English before coming to Brooklyn?

RV: Oh yeah. The legacy of the Americans in the Philippines is an American education. So English was taught in the schools there and the education system in the Philippines is very much Americanized. So my parents did speak English. Of course, their English is a whole lot better now. My in-laws still say they have an accent, but to my ear I don't hear as much of it. My parents thought that they would go back to the Philippines. That was the plan, but then Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. I think that was in 1972? I'm not sure. We couldn't go back to the Philippines. We knew of other Filipinos, there were a couple of other families in Raleigh who did go back for one reason or another, and other people we knew who went back, but they had trouble getting back. So my parents didn't want to take a chance. So we've actually never been

to the Philippines. The other families have gone to visit and they've taken their kids, but my parents said, no, they were not going to ever go back.

KC: Is that something you'd like to do?

RV: I would love to do that. In fact I've tried to do that several times, but life happens.

KC: But they wouldn't want to go with you.

RV: No. They said, "Why would they? All our nuclear family are here."

KC: How did your grandparents get here?

[17:00]

RV: My grandmother arrived here in 1975. At that time—you have to sponsor other family members. My aunt was already here, she was part of the first wave of immigrants from the 1965 Immigration Act. So she and my uncle arrived here well ahead of us.

KC: Where did they settle?

RV: In New York, Staten Island. First it was Governor's Island because my uncle was in part of the Coast Guard and that's where the Coast Guard station was. They were in New York and in New Jersey for a lot of years, and then they thought they would move down to North Carolina to be near the base, but then they decided they needed to go to another state closer to more Filipinos outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. So they're very involved with the Catholic church community there. My aunt was a nurse, she is retired now. She was one of the stereotypical Filipino nurses because that was the major export in the [19]60s and [19]70s. Doctors and nurses, the brain drain of the Philippines.

KC: I don't know anything about that. Is there still—

RV: There is still a lot of recruitment happening.

KC: Is there a generation gap?

RV: Now there is more of a variety of positions coming out of the Philippines. There is still a significant, excuse me my voice is going away.

[Interview pauses as RV gets a drink.]

KC: You were talking about the brain drain out of the Philippines in the [19]60s and [19]70s.

RV: I do remember as a kid, one of my best friends, her mom and dad would (20:24) and the other Filipino family, they would go to the Philippines on mission trips. I don't know what it was but she recruited all these nurses to come back to the US and I know that my aunt also said that there were sometimes entire floors on her hospital, they were all Filipino nurses. It was a stereotype. If you were a Filipino woman in the US in the [19]60s, [19]70s, [19]80s, you were either a military bride, or mail order bride, or a nurse or a doctor, and if you were a woman they would assume you were a nurse. So that was something that was interesting growing up. My youngest sister, who was born in Rex hospital in Raleigh, said she would never be a nurse because it was such a stereotype. But she is one now at Duke Regional. [Laughs.]

KC: Talk to me about the Filipino community in Raleigh and what it was like. You were at the Catholic school up to fourth grade?

RV: Fourth grade.

KC: Did you go into public school then?

RV: Fifth, sixth, seventh grade was at the Episcopal school in Raleigh, just right there by North Hills Mall. North Hills Mall was the big mall at the time because they were still building Crabtree Valley Mall. The Filipino families that I knew also went to St. Timothy's. Even though we were all Catholic, we went to the Episcopal school. There were maybe half a dozen families and I know probably half of those families were all related to the one family [laughs]. There

were the Nungs [ph], they were the Chinese Filipino, the Dilyans [ph], and then us. We lived in Raleigh and then moved to Fuquay. Whenever there was a big party we'd have to drive a good way into North Raleigh to get there. Everybody knew everybody. All the kids would all gather together. There was always somebody in the yard either doing nunchucks or talking about the tinikling dance with the bamboo poles. You have a person at either end of the bamboo, with a bamboo pole in each hand, and you would pound it into the ground, and then slap it together [mimics beat]. One-two-slap, one-two-slap. You would have one or two people dancing in between the opening and closing of the bamboo poles. There was some traditional dress. I have some dolls, I can show you what the traditional dress looks like.

KC: Were these family, or community parties, one of the only venues at that time to express cultural heritage like that?

RV: Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely. It was the only way.

KC: What about religious life, would you join—

RV: Churches, Catholic church.

KC: And it was majority white, or did you—

RV: Yes. Although I do remember at Sacred Heart Cathedral in downtown Raleigh it was also very mixed. I remember having African-American friends and they were fascinated with my hair as much as I was fascinated by their hair [laughs]. And white friends, you were just friends. Nobody really paid attention to that until I got to public school.

KC: When was that?

[24:54]

RV: Eighth grade. I was 13. I had my first pair of Levis. Thirteen is not a great age no matter black or white, but being the only "other" in town, that made it particularly bad. I do

remember in the first semester there in eighth grade in the school yard having a group of black girls pulling on one arm and a group of white girls pulling on the other arm, saying that I had to choose. Was I black, or was I white? Because they couldn't—that's all they knew.

KC: That's incredible. What a visualization of the changing South. You're stuck in the middle.

RV: Yeah, black, white, or other. Another time a teacher came in because their stats were wrong, their numbers didn't add up. They were one kid off. They realized when they walked into my class, Ms. Spivey's class in Fuquay-Varina at Fuquay Middle School, and they said, "Oh, that's way. Because she's in here." I was the one student that they were trying to figure out, "Why were we one off?"

KC: Because they had the whole student body, and then X white and X black.

RV: Yeah. My middle sister, she went to Wake Chapel, the private school there in Fuquay, because Mom and Dad didn't want to put her in, and I don't remember now the reason why. My youngest sister was also in day care at the time. They didn't have day care like they have now. My brother and I were in the middle school. Everybody in town knew us. When we moved to Dorothea Dix to Fuquay, that was also another cultural shift.

KC: What was the community like in Fuquay?

RV: Very different than it is now. There was only one Hardee's in town at the time. You could walk from middle school to my dad's medical practice on Main Street, and I'd drop off my books and head uptown and take a seat at the pharmacy. At the time they had those old style pharmacies where you can get a cherry Coke or a cherry Sprite and hang out, get a grilled cheese sandwich or something. It was great, everybody knew who you were because you looked

different than everybody else in town. You were either black or white, and we were the only other in town.

KC: Did you develop a shorthand for dealing with questions? You mentioned earlier, "I'm not Chinese, I'm not Japanese." What was your, how did you learn to deal with that kind of curiosity?

RV: I'm not sure it was ever shorthand. Sometimes I would let them guess, just to see what, and other times they would insist on guessing. Hardly anyone ever did. When I was really little, they thought I was Cherokee. When the migrations of field workers started to come through the South in the late [19]70s, more people thought that I might be Hispanic. So you go from the Indian population, to the Hispanic population, so everyone was guessing all along. There were times that we would be in church, and I could feel something in my hair, and it was the person—people would come and touch my hair in the grocery store, going shopping, standing in line, waiting to pay for something, people would just come and touch my hair. [29:19]

KC: How did that make you feel as a kid? You moved to the U.S. at three, so in a way, it's all you remembered.

RV: At the time you don't realize that you're being objectified, even when you hear them say, "She looks like such a doll, look at her eyes." People would touch my eyes. It was just odd, why would you do that. All I could see, unless I was at a Filipino party, which was resembling more of a luau, they put a whole pig they would put in a coal pit in the backyard, and cover it with foil. For the majority of the time, all I saw were black and white. My own culture wasn't reflected back to me. My friends in Raleigh, because they lived closer with family together, they saw more Filipinos than I did in Fuquay. Every day I was reminded that I looked different from

everybody else. Sometimes I was able to make light of it. Other times, it was just tiring, because I had to keep explaining.

KC: Did your parents acknowledge that moving to Fuquay made your connection to the Filipino community smaller? How did they instill your cultural identity into you, if at all?

RV: It was interesting. They made a conscious decision not to continue speaking to us in Tagalog or Ilocano. Ilocano was the local dialect where we were from, the same area that Ferdinand Marcus was from. But we didn't speak anything but English at home. The only times I even heard my parents speak Tagalog or Ilocano was when we were other relatives or friends from the Filipino community in Raleigh. I always knew when Mom and Dad had been talking to relatives on the phone because their accent became so much thicker when they spoke English again. That was something that they already started to take away from us. Because if we were going to stay in the U.S.—that we were stuck in America—they wanted us to assimilate as quickly as possible. So we got the awful shag haircuts of the time, we wore the matching pantsuits at this time. Terrible, looking back at the pictures, I think, "Why did you do that to us?" Trying to quickly assimilate us into the American culture.

KC: Because as soon as martial law was laid down, they knew this was it.

RV: Yes, we were cut off. The food was the only other connection to our culture. Our dress changed, our language changed. We continued to go to Catholic church most of the time, but because we lived in Fuquay when I was a teenager we also joined the Methodist church.

KC: Because there wasn't a local Catholic—

RV: If we went to Catholic church, we'd have to go to Sacred Heart or to Our Lady of Lourdes, which is off of Six Forks on Anderson Drive. So it was an effort to maintain our culture.

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KC: Tell me about the food aspect.

RV: I love pancit. Pancit is a mix of rice noodles, egg noodles, and stir fried vegetables, and—making pancit is like, you know how everyone has a different recipe for lasagna, or spaghetti? Pancit is like that.

KC: Is it like comfort food, too?

RV: It is, it is a complete mix of ingredients but you can still appreciate all the individual ingredients. That's my favorite food. Then there is lumpia, a type of egg roll (the Americans call it egg roll). I do remember that in eighth and ninth grade as part of fundraisers, Dad made this little tiki bamboo hut booth front and we would make and cook egg rolls to sell at those little school fairs. That was how we shared being Filipino because we were the only Asians in town. We would always sell out and help raise money for the school that way. And adobo, adobo is a marinated meat, either chicken or pork usually.

[35:20]

KC: Would your mom cook Filipino a lot, or more for special occasions?

RV: I remember when I was really little, when we were still at Dorothea Dix, we would have Filipino food a lot more. As my siblings started to get older, they did not want anything to do with Filipino food. My youngest sister even refused to eat rice (laughs). She said she did not want to be Filipino, and we had rice at every meal.

KC: Is this the same sister that said she didn't want to be a nurse?

RV: [Laughs]. Yes! That's hysterical.

KC: She had some identity issues.

RV: She did! She did not want to be Filipino, and I said, "Too late!" I do remember when I was really little having rice with every meal, and for breakfast we had rice with fish and

tomatoes. You wouldn't eat it with utensils, you would have a plate with a little bit of rice, a little bit of fish, and a little bit of tomatoes and you would just pull and eat them with your fingers and mix them there.

KC: Did you ever have a sleepover with an American friend and have that be the breakfast?

RV: Oh no. [Laughs.] No. They'd be like "What?" Also Mom didn't know how to cook until she married Dad, she had to learn how to cook. My Mom and Dad lived very different Filipino lives.

KC: What do you mean by that?

RV: As I said earlier, my Dad described himself as a street urchin. He was totally unsupervised, just one of the village kids running around.

KC: So how did he get into medical school? What was the transition?

RV: Because his father was killed in the war, so the military benefits. He was a Filipino scout, so he was fighting for the American side, and he received military benefits because his father was part of the American army.

KC: And he was the one where Senator John Edwards retrieved the medals?

RV: Correct. For years, my [grand]mother had wondered about whether or not she was getting the correct compensation amount. For years, she had thought that she was getting less than what she was due. I don't know why that was, I couldn't understand the full story behind that, but I told her that I would write a letter to confirm that this was the correct thing. She had gotten one piece of paper that he was at one rank, and then another piece of paper that he was at another rank, and that was different compensation levels. We got it all straightened out and she

was receiving the correct amount, but part of those benefits was that my grandmother had education benefits that she could pass on to my dad, and my aunt and uncle.

KC: And your aunt was one of the first after the 1965 Immigration—

RV: Yeah. I call her Aunty Mama because I kept hearing my cousin call her Mama, and since I knew she was my aunt I thought that Mama was her name, so I'd call her aunty Mama and I still call her that. She went to nursing school in the Philippines. My uncle didn't take advantage of the education benefits. He was the oldest one, and I think he's the one who had the hardest time with the war and losing his dad. So he didn't end up taking advantage of the education benefits. But my grandmother used the benefits to help the entire family. My uncle had eight kids, and she helped put them through school. My oldest cousin, his eldest daughter is a nurse in Chicago. All the other kids benefited because my grandmother used those military benefits to help pass on something to everyone in the family. And she worked a lot of different jobs just to piece everything together.

[40:37]

KC: Yeah. Your grandfather has had quite a legacy on your family, then.

RV: Yes. And you do think about that. What if that didn't happen? What would our lives have been like? What if martial law would never have been declared and we ended up going back to the Philippines? Every time we put together a care package for my cousins with Hershey bars and Levis and other American products, I thought about that. It was very ingrained, it was a profound impact on me not to take for granted being in America. My parents said that I was the most patriotic kid they'd ever met because I'd wear the [bi]centennial shirt, 1776-1976, I had shirts from that. They said they got sick of me singing "America the Beautiful" and the national anthem. One thing, I don't have a great singing voice, but those were the songs I kept singing at

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the time. [Laughs.] So it was something I knew. My mom would even say, "Finish everything on your plate. Your cousins are starving in the Philippines." I'm like, "What?"

KC: Where did your parents meet?

RV: In the Philippines. They knew of each other growing up, because everybody in the village area—but my mom was adopted. She is very light skinned and has hazel green eyes. I think she knows who her biological parents are, but she's never talked about them. And her adoptive mom—usually in the Philippines if somebody has a kid they aren't able to raise, usually it goes to another family member, and that was my assumption. But Mom never talks about it, so I never know what the circumstance was. But her adoptive mother actually worked in the Marcus administration. We never really talked about that either. My mom grew up as an only child, and went to boarding schools. That's why I said—Dad was a street urchin, mom went to boarding schools. She had the maids, the housekeepers, drivers, all that and Dad did not. He had the hut with bamboo utensils. I guess Mom was crossing campus and they met on campus. Dad's seven years older than Mom and at that time, you could graduate at 16. So you were on campus at 16. They eloped, and apparently my mom's mom wasn't too happy about it. They were distant cousins, but since Mom was adopted, nobody really—during a school holiday they both ran off and got married and then in December of the same year they had a church wedding. Mom was already pregnant with me, and that's why there are no pictures [laughs]. But they made it official.

KC: What is your mom's name?

RV: Her full name before she had it legally shortened is Milagros Madamba [ph]. She didn't have a middle name. Usually in the Philippines you take on your mother's maiden name as a middle name. So you can figure out your line, your lineage that way.

KC: This is a nice opportunity for me to ask about your last name, because you told me that story before the tape.

RV: Part of our family tree has "Verzola," with a "z," but in the Philippines it was pronounced "Versola," like it was an "s." So somewhere along the line, I was told someone in the military heard it as an "s" and wrote my grandfather's name as "Versola." So we have cousins with a "z" and cousins with an "s." The same thing with other relatives who have either an "f" and a "p," or a "b" and a "v," or an "s" or a "z." Because in the Philippines the pronunciation of "Philippines" would be "Pilippines," so you're "Pilipino." So sometimes you will see a spelling with a hard "p." So the "f"s and "p"s get kind of mixed up, and the "v"s and the "b"s. Like I have cousins who are "Versamin," and you have to figure out when you are doing any genealogy work, "What spelling did they use?"

KC: Why did you decide to keep your maiden name?

[47:00]

RV: It was the name that I grew up with, so why not keep it? It was very much part of my identity, so I wanted to keep it. That's why it was so hurtful when I had kids and people would automatically assume I was the babysitter or, good grief, even the housekeeper. Not that anything is wrong with that, it's just that to see the baby in the carriage or in the stroller and they would automatically assume that I was not the mother, that was very, very hurtful.

KC: When did you have your first kid?

RV: 1998.

KC: Wow, that's late to be wrestling with those kind of reactions.

RV: Oh yes. My youngest, she was born in 2002. I did not officially change my name to Callum until after my youngest was born, so the early 2000s.

KC: You have two daughters?

RV: Yes.

KC: And their last name?

RV: Callum. But Leah's middle name is Versola, carrying on that tradition. Names are important. At least to me they are. Anna-Rhesa is one of those two-name names, so when I changed my name I went ahead and put a hyphen in it in order to keep it as a two-name name. Like Mary-Lou or Betty-Jo.

KC: Very southern!

RV: I'm Anna-Rhesa, and some people have pointed out to me that Anna means grace and Rhesa means affection, so grace and affection. My brother is Manuel Bolante Versola Junior, but in the Philippines if you're a Junior, your name will become Jun-Jun. That tradition is reflected in Hawaii, when Filipinos populated Hawaii. When you go to Hawaii there are a lot of double names as nicknames, or like, Wayne-boy. Different kind of nickname. When we became citizens my brother changed his name to "Jun" because we'd always referred to him being Jun-Jun. Now he is Jun. So if you run into a Filipino who is named Jun, you pretty much can guess that they are a Junior.

[50:00]

RV: My middle sister is Judy Mariela, so her American name is Judy, her more Spanish/Filipino name is Mariela, and then my youngest sister is Laurie-Jean. So you can see the progression of the Southern impact.

KC: Do you have any memories from high school that you'd like to share? Where did you do your high school?

RV: Ninth grade was at Fuquay High and they said they didn't have courses that they could—they sent me to Enloe, and I was part of the first graduating class of Enloe Magnet students. Again, that was an incredible mix of kids. The African-American, the Asian-Americans, the Indian-Americans. I remember there was a kid whose family was Pakistani, another who was from India—she had the longest name in the world. And then Filipino kids, it was me and another girl I grew up with. It was just a nice mix of kids there, and the whole intention of the magnet program was to help better integrate inner-city schools. That was in Raleigh. But we still lived in Fuquay, so it was a long commute to get there. When I was in Fuquay, again, still the same, "Are you black or white?" At Enloe I remember, I was reminded of this cafeteria story, someone thought—they couldn't tell us alike, my friend Cheryl and I were standing in the lunch line and they thought were twins. We looked nothing alike. Not close to looking anything alike. But because we were both Asian, they just assumed.

In fact, that assumption happened even just this past weekend. I was standing at a check-in desk, at the hotel, we decided to go to the beach for the Easter holiday. There was an Asian woman at the front desk, and her white American husband just left with their mixed kid. She was at the front desk and I went to stand behind her, and another white American woman comes to stand behind me. When a second front desk person shows up, "Hi, can I help the next person?" I start to step forward and she [the white woman] steps in front of me, and says, "Oh, I thought you were with her." I said, "No, different Asian." And she said, "Well you would know, not me."

KC: Really?

RV: Yes! That's like saying, "You all look alike." I remember it was such a pain to date in high school or college because people would just assume certain things. Guys would assume

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certain things of Asian women, and even girls would assume certain things. “Oh, you ought to meet so-and-so on the sixth floor. He’s Korean.” [Laughs.]

KC: Instant connection.

RV: Yeah. Or guys would say, “Oh, I’ve always wanted to date one of your kind.” It’s those kinds of things. In high school I do remember another time getting cornered by a group of guys up at the lockers, down one hallway. I didn’t say anything. There were three guys that were standing there. When I just kept glaring at them, one guy said, “Ah man, let’s just leave her alone, she probably knows judo.” And I said, “Not personally.” [Laughs.] And managed to slip through the gap.

KC: It seems you were able to develop some humor with wrestling with that.

RV: You have to. I mean why are you going to be angry about it, or resentful.

KC: Do your daughters face any—

RV: Yes, I thought it was done. By the time I had my own kids I thought it would be done. It’s another century. When we moved here to Chatham County it was fewer than 1% Asians in the county. Now we’ve doubled it to 2%.

KC: Asian-Americans are the quickest growing population in North Carolina, even before Hispanics.

RV: Yes. I think that’s mostly the Indian Asians.

KC: That makes sense.

RV: You’ll see also that in the Asian community the Indian Asians are a lot more visible than what you would typically think of “traditional Asians,” the East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Koreans). They tend to disappear almost. And the Vietnamese population. You see them, but then you don’t see them. People assume that if you’re of a traditional East Asian

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descent then you're probably with a restaurant, which is another terrible assumption. Unless you're a really great chef. There's only one Filipino restaurant in the whole area, and that's in Angier, I think. There used to be one run by my friend's family in Raleigh, but it's closed, it's been years.

KC: How do you teach your daughters about their background?

RV: Talking about all that, our experiences, and sharing stories, and making sure they know my grandmother's stories and my dad—to have him tell them stories.

KC: Do your parents live close by?

RV: They're in Raleigh. My brother is in Raleigh, my youngest sister is in Durham, and my middle sister is in Maryland. My closest cousin, physically and emotionally, is also in North Carolina. She is out in Wilmington. We just saw her last weekend. We're still really close to my aunts and uncles. My kids get exposure through relatives and especially through food.

KC: Is there a Filipino Association now that the community is bigger?

RV: Yes, there's been one for years. I was on the board for a number of years, but the girls were much younger at the time. Any time that you're with family, that's when I try to bring stories forward, so that they know. But they're confronted with their own different look. Especially when they were younger. "Are you Chinese?" I remember my daughter came home just a couple of months ago and she said someone asked what she was eating for lunch. "Is that dog?" "What?!" So mean. So ignorant.

KC: Also, that's what the first Asians who even came to this state in the early [19]70s were wrestling with. That's what, 50 years ago, almost?

RV: Yeah. I was hoping it would change. It has, in Cary, there's a lot, a lot of Asians in Cary. When my daughters go dance at the Cary Ballet they've got a lot of mixed environments.

But then we live and they go to school in Chatham County, and that is not a very mixed environment. They felt it most acutely the day after the election. There was a convoy of pick-up trucks, with Confederate flags, American flags, and Trump flags.

[59:40]

KC: Did they go down Franklin Street, too?

RV: I don't know.

KC: That's scary.

RV: It was. They cried that morning, they were afraid to go to school. That morning my husband drove them to school and they saw the convoy of pickup trucks and screaming white kids, victorious feeling. Kids feeling scared at school if you were not a white southern male. That was the most acute feeling of fear and what it meant to be different. (1:00:29) You can't change the way you look. (I mean you could, it would take a lot of money.) But it was something that they felt really for the first time what it was like to grow up as an "other."

KC: What did you tell them?

RV: To stand up for themselves. If someone says something, then you do something about it. I remember as a kid, my parents always told me, "Don't rock the boat. Blend in." I'm like, "How can I blend in? I'm the one sticking out." I was not going to back down. If anyone ever said anything I would stand up for myself. When they threw rocks at us when I was a kid, I would chase them off. When someone tried to push my brother around, I would try and defend him. This is why this project is especially important to me, because we are part of the fabric of America.

KC: Even the way your whole family came here. Your grandfather was fighting for America.

RV: Right, yes! So why are you challenging my (not you personally)—why would someone challenge our values if we are defending are what we think are American values? Just because I don't look white doesn't mean I'm not American. I remember as a kid we would play with Barbies and GI Joes. You don't feel good when you think the ideal American beauty is Barbie. And I know that wasn't just for me, as a Filipino kid who had to shop in the husky section of the boy's department [Laughs.] I could never get my thighs through a regular pair of jeans. My mom! She said, "You remember that?" I said, "Yes, I remember that!"

KC: How could you not?

RV: I said, "Why did you do that?" And she said, "You wouldn't fit in all the others!" I wasn't a skinny white girl. That was also not part of the stereotypical Asian. Growing up, being Filipino in the Filipino-American community. If you didn't speak the language, and if you didn't look, also—Filipinos can be ruthless about what you look like. "If you lost twenty pounds, maybe you could get a boyfriend." [Laughs.] "But here, eat! Your plate is empty. Eat!" You were made to feel an other in your own community. I wasn't Filipino enough.

In middle school, I was not part of what they called the "Oreo." Because Avalita and Cheryl, the delicate Asian stereotypes, then the tall blue-eyed blonde was in the middle. That was the "Oreo pack" in middle school. I was other because I was not an Asian, delicate stereotype. We were all conscious the whole time of what it meant to be Asian, even. To look a certain way.

KC: Do you find yourself in your adult life still having to teach people about the Philippines?

RV: I have to teach myself about the Philippines. We've never been to the Philippines. I'm always wanting to learn. This was several years ago, I tried to even take Tagalog lessons because I wanted to know how to speak the language. It was really hard to learn those things! If

I'm around relatives who are speaking in the language, and I was around relatives a couple of weeks ago, I can kind of hear and remember what they are talking about. The Americanized Filipinos, they drop in so many English words that you can pretty much grasp what anyone is saying. I think it's funny, now that we have more and more mixed couples there's going to be such a blending of our cultures. We're going to have another identity crisis in America because there's going to be more and more blending of cultures. I don't know if that's going to be a good thing—

[1:06:35]

KC: I think it's happening already, with the extreme, like the Confederate flag convoy. In some way, they are reacting.

RV: Yes, but I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. I think that it's an opportunity for us as a country and as a culture to evolve into a new cultural identity. If we can continue to embrace the differences, then we end up undergoing another metamorphosis that might be better than where we were before. There's a quote that I really love, and I've got several different versions of it around the house. "Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly." It's that kind of change that makes you a better person. Those challenges, those problems. They are what make you a better person. I've tried very hard to model for the girls that when something is hard, don't run away. Face it. Use it as an opportunity. Most people don't want to go through that.

KC: Well, they're also really young still.

RV: Well, we had to do that with cancer. That's a whole other thing. I have a cousin who is a lot more exposed to the Filipino community out in California. She passed away a year ago

this month, and no one knew she had had cancer. No one knew she'd been sick, until it was too late.

KC: Jeez, I'm sorry.

RV: I was going through my treatments at the same time, but I chose to share it, and she did a very Filipino/Asian thing and she didn't want people to know. I really feel that that was part of her struggle, was not letting people know that she had a weakness, and that was a very cultural thing. I can understand that, but as a kid growing up here in Tobacco Road, my parents telling me not to rock the boat, I knew that that was not how I could survive and thrive here in the South. Knowing that the Grand Dragon of the KKK was three miles across the tobacco fields behind our house—

KC: In Fuquay?

RV: Yes. I remember having nightmares. We had a brush fire in our yard and I would have nightmares from that fire, thinking it was the KKK coming to get us.

KC: Do you have any sense of how your parents negotiated the "race in America" question? (1:10:48) Black and white? And black having this legacy that only this country has?

RV: Mom chose to keep her exposure to a minimum. She stayed in the house quite a bit, and when she did go out she would always be so surprised, like, "Why would someone think this, or treat me this way?" She came to pick me up from a sleepover, and she got lost, and she went to go knock on a door and the guy showed up with a shotgun pointed at her. She's like, "I can't believe people live like this." Hers was always indignation. I shouldn't say always, but in certain cases. My dad was, "Oh, people are always going to be, it's part of human nature to discern differences so they can figure out what's safe and what's not."

KC: Tribe mentality.

RV: So he approached it more from his clinical perspective. He was a lot more aware of the racial divide coming into the professional environment and the clinical environment. Even the physical environment of Dorothea Dix, the rooms were physically smaller for black patients than they were for white patients. The bathrooms were different. He was much more aware of the relationships that were around him. Authority, and who really did the work. Dad was always aware of greeting people, no matter what they did for a living, he greeted them as people. As a human. Not trying to see them for what they are on the outside but for who they were on the inside. I think that was a good thing for me to see growing up. That was a terrific way to model. I'm trying to do that with my own daughters.

KC: How did your parents react to you marrying a non-Filipino? Was it an issue, or not an issue?

RV: I already told them, there's no way, there were very few Filipino guys in the area for me to go out with. That was not going to happen. That was pretty much a given. Eddie was not accepted right away. We dated for six years. For some of that time Dad said, "If you insist on continuing to see him, then I don't want to know about it." So I didn't tell him. Finally, after so many years, at my grandmother's birthday party he asked my Dad to go take a walk around the house. They talked about it, and then my Dad came in and Dad announced that we were engaged. And I'm like, "He hasn't asked me yet!" Again, that was a very Filipino thing, it was a family event. When you marry a Filipino you don't just marry that person, you marry the entire family. Our wedding was very much a reflection of the two different cultures. We intentionally had our wedding program explain all the Catholic-Filipino traditions. Eddie even wore the barong, the Filipino shirt. It's woven pineapple fiber. My grandmother came back from the Philippines with one for each male in our family so everyone could wear the traditional wedding barong. I'll show

you pictures. His mom did not want him to wear that at the altar, so he wore a tuxedo at the altar, and wore the barong at the reception.

KC: Compromise.

RV: His Southern Baptist family was on one side of the church, and then my mob of a crowd of family was on the other side. Our wedding was the first time that he saw his parents dance, and aunt and uncle dance and drink wine. Southern Baptist weddings are very dry. It was different for them. Now, everything's fine and I adore my in-laws. I know that we have a great relationship. I remember my mother-in-law saying there was a woman in Kinston (they lived there at the time). She saw my engagement picture and she asked my mother-in-law, "What do you think of your son marrying a black girl?" My mother-in-law had to explain, "She's not black." My picture was in a black and white newspaper, so I didn't look white. She had to explain I was not black. And so what? What if I were? What's the big deal? That was then, this is now.

KC: I'm going to stop us there because I want to make sure that we have time to look at photos.

RV: Okay.

KC: Thank you, Rhesa!

[END OF RECORDING]

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