

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Jenah Maravilla

Interviewer: Mei Leebron

Date/Time of Interview: March 28, 2020 at 10 AM

Transcribed by: Mei Leebron, Tian-Tian He

Edited by: Helen Pu

Audio Track Time: 1:00:05

Background: Jenah Maravilla was born in Manila, Philippines in 1992. She moved to Eagle Pass, TX with her parents and younger brother when she was just two years old. After living in San Antonio, Austin, and Houston throughout her childhood, she attended Texas A&M for pre-nursing and Alvin Community College to earn an Associate's Degree in Nursing. She worked for 1.5 years as an ICU nurse at East Houston Regional Med Center, where she finished her Bachelor's online at Texas Tech Health Sciences Center - Gayle Greve Hunt School of nursing. But after the disruption of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Maravilla decided to quit nursing and pursue her passions for writing and Filipino community organizing. With fellow writer and activist Christy Poisot, she launched the Houston chapter of UniPro (Pilipino American Unity for Progress), a nonprofit that provides education and mentorship for young Filipinos. The pair also published the book *Filipinos in Houston* in 2018. Currently, Maravilla is the secretary of UniPro, works as a freelance writer and editor, and is involved in several other Filipino American organizations.

Setting: Jenah Maravilla was interviewed through Zoom by Mei Leebron on March 28, 2020 at 10 AM. In addition to her life history, Maravilla speaks about living through the COVID-19 pandemic and finding her place as a Filipino-American and a writer.

Key:

JM: Jenah Maravilla

ML: Mei Leebron

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off, pause

Italics: emphasis

[Brackets]: Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

(?): unclear or inaudible word/phrase

Interview Transcript:

ML: My name is Mei Leebron and I'm here with the Houston Asian American Archive interviewing Jenah Maravilla. Hello. Good morning.

JM: Hello.

ML: So, I guess we'll start off with where and when were you born and what is your earliest memory?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

JM: Oh, that's interesting. Okay, so I was born June 25, 1992 in Manila, Philippines. I was the first of my cousins to be born in a hospital actually. I think the only in my mom's side of the family. And the rest were born like, at home with my grandmother.

My earliest memory is actually the very first apartment my family had lived in, which was in the city and I distinctly remember it being dark and wooden and I was still like, a baby baby. Like, I don't even know how old I was in this memory. But when I have described that apartment to my parents, they were really confused why remember it. [laughs] And I would think that's my earliest memory. They said that that apartment was *haunted*. So maybe that's why I remember it. [laughs] Because what had happened would be like, I would have so like, I would have random fevers. And they wouldn't know why. And the minute they stepped out, it like, would disappear. Like, I wouldn't have the fever anymore. And then like, there was—there would be moments where things would be moved to like a fan or like, yeah, it would be like in my room and stuff and like, it's customary to have nannies and like, my nanny was like, “No, we gotta, gotta get out oh here.” So my family did eventually leave that place. But that might be why my little like, infant brain remembers that. Not to be scary, the first question but [laughs].

ML: So you said you have cousins. But do you have any siblings that you grew up with?

JM: Yeah, I have a little brother, he—well, I guess he's not so little anymore because he's five years younger than me. So, that makes him twenty-two I think. [laughs] And, yeah, like, he is a... he was the first one in our family to say “I love you.” [ML: Oh.] Because like in, you know, in Asian culture, it's not really like, a thing. Like, it's all acts of service or things like that, which, you know, I accepted and I understood, and then when my brother came along, I don't know. I think it was preschool or something when he started saying that and wanting us to say it back and so that already shows you the kind of like, tenderness he had already growing up and then carries it today. He is a huge personality. So sometimes I do, I guess feel pushed to pursue my own passion because he did. And he never like, faltered in that, it's to the point where he actually went viral and got onto Ellen. So I do want him to get an interview as well for the archives. [laughs]

ML: That's super cool. What's your brother's name, by the way?

JM: His name is Jevh Maravilla. J-E-V-H.

ML: And what was he on Ellen for?

JM: He was the one who if you remember a while back, like, think 2018 he put a poster up in McDonald's with his friend and it was like—so all the posters in McDonald's they noticed didn't have any Asians on them. So, they created their *own* poster and it looked exactly like the ones in the McDonald's. Like, the corporate stock photos, and they had it in there for two months and no one took it down. He tweeted about it, and he has like a behind the prank video and everything and yeah.

ML: That's--that's really cool.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

JM: Yeah. [laughs]

ML: So, what was your childhood like? Like, did you go to a preschool or school?

JM: Yeah, like so I came to America when I was two. And my parents enrolled me in Pre-K when I was about three or four. I don't remember honestly. But it was like an Early Learning Center and we lived in a small border town called Eagle Pass here in Texas. And like, the most of the demographic in Eagle Pass was Spanish like, they were Mexican. And so, our last names fit in and I don't like, look super Asian or anything so they just accepted me as their own but I still spoke some of the dialect. So, actually in preschool in kindergarten—well preschool only. I—they kept not understanding when I needed to go to the bathroom.

ML: Oh no.

JM: Yeah, because I kept using my native tongue which is Tagalog and my dad would have to come like maybe twice a week to bring me extra clothes and stuff because like, I would you know, wet myself or something because they just didn't understand language wise what was going on. We visit the place sometimes 'cause we still have family friends there. And it was interesting growing up in that area because it was such a, a secluded spot. The closest town was like maybe three hours away, and that was San Antonio. So like, we were just there. And the reason we were there was that my mom's a nurse. So she was hired by the hospital there. And the family that family I grew up with, which were like, family friends, are other Filipina nurses who were taken in there and they all met their husbands who are also nurses like, in that area, and it was a very strong community bond. There was about I would say like thirty family strong that started off there. And then once, you know, those parents had experience on their resumes and their contracts ended with that hospital, they moved to various parts of the United States. So, most of us are still—are actually in Houston as well. So, yeah.

ML: So, you grew up around people who spoke Spanish. Did you [**JM:** I did.] also speak Spanish?

JM: I think I like, picked it up briefly but in second grade we moved to Austin. So, that was predominantly white back then. And growing up there from second to seventh grade, that's when I like, [sighs] experienced a lot of microaggressions. [**ML:** Yeah.] And I didn't know the term for that then but it just was uncomfortable. I had the lunch box moment where I brought my chicken adobo there, and they would be like, "What's that, it looks gross" and things—but I had a reverse lunchbox moment. This one little girl, you know, one of those girls that like, howls in recess or whatever and thinks they're a wolf. Anyway, they [laughs] they came up to me and like, was like, you know, "I don't ever eat food that has bones in it." And I'm like—and then one day they brought like, fish sticks and like, they had me try it and I it was just—it did not feel good in my soul to eat a fish stick. I was like, "this is just not how it's supposed to be." So I had a reverse lunchbox moment. So I guess that kind of [laughs] helped.

But I'm glad I never had like, a like, I felt like I've always had a strong sense of who I was and where I came from, because my family also tried their best to go back to the Philippines during the summer. And it was interesting to, you know, try to reconcile two different identities in one lifestyle. So as the oldest, I

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

tried my best to, you know, do good in school. And like, you know, pretty much gain their approval in that way. Whereas I don't think they pressured my brother that much, mostly 'cause he is hard headed as well. But I kind of just used grades and achievements as like, a source of identity because I didn't really know my, my Filipino-ness that well, aside from like, vacations which are not, you know, that's not an accurate representation of their day-to-day life. And I actually didn't realize I was romanticizing the homeland until like, quite recently when I was writing about it. And when I spent a Christmas there, and I was trying to, to, to get back into creative writing, and I couldn't tap into that, because I was trying too hard to romanticize a thing that I don't really know about if that makes sense. So, it was interesting.

So from seventh grade to all through high school, I was here in Houston. I was in Pearland, actually. And I graduated from Dawson High School. And I was the—one of the first class like, I was a student of the first class that graduated there. So, we didn't have like, upperclassmen and that made us like, really create the culture there. And with that, that's where I made friends with like, more Asian people, but they were mostly East Asian. So they introduced me to like, you know, their, their lifestyle boba, things like that, and I, I felt like I belonged. But there was like, something different, like whenever one of my Chinese friends came over and they saw me eating with my hands, they looked at me like I was disgusting. And I was like, “Oh, this is just how we eat like, in the Philippines.” Like [laughs] it's not like, you know, you don't eat chicken nuggets with your hands like [laughs] tacos, things like that. So, I didn't take offense to it, but it did like, like have a little ding in my head that “Oh, like, you know, there are things that are different between the the Asian cultures that, you know, some people don't understand some people don't, you know, really respect maybe. Things like that.”

And so, in college, I really sought out a community that was Filipino and that's when I joined the Philippine Student Association at Texas A&M. So I went there to—with the intention of being a pre-nursing degree. But I also started rebelling against the notion of becoming a nurse. And with that, like, I actually didn't focus on my studies. I didn't like, take it too seriously. But I did make like, lifelong friends, which, you know, as much as you know, my parents hated me being in that organization like, they're the same people now that help me in my community organizing, and so they can't really fault me for what has happened. I got my act together once I sort of—I was supposed to start applying to nursing schools two years in and I was procrastinating and my parents were pushing me and were confused because I never verbally like, I would complain about it all but I wouldn't like, straight up tell them, “I don't want to be a nurse.” So I had to, you know, woman up and [chuckles] actually take accountability for my own actions and for the money that I kind of wasted. Even though I was on like, partial scholarship because I had a good academic standing in high school that like, I just needed to go for a nursing program and my parents didn't really—they don't understand how college in America works. So even applying for college, and all of that was just on my own, and I just copied what my friends did. And they were also first gen or 1.5 gen students, so we kind of all just were doing what everyone else was doing. And I now like, realize that maybe I should have done community college or--things like that.

But anyway, that's not to say like, I procrastinated so much that a semester had passed by and nursing school for like, bachelor programs that go straight through to bachelor is usually yearly. So they don't, they don't do per semester like, drop-ins. And so I had to do community college, actually. So I took a step from other people's eyes backwards into Alvin Community College. And so that was like, winter of—I

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

actually don't remember 2012, I guess 2013 that or that area. And I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into it. I still failed one semester, and that was a huge hit to my ego. So I went forward with renewed vigor. I graduated, but I had a lot of anger in me. Mostly because I did—still didn't have that talk with my parents. It was to the point where I—I handed my diploma back to my mom saying that this was hers and not mine. And so like, that was the most hurtful thing I've ever done to my mom and I regret it *so* much. But I guess it just was a symptom of what I had been feeling and the pressure that I had on me. Like, it almost felt like I needed to become exactly what my mom was or better. And she was raising a kid and had a second kid and her husband was still looking for jobs because my dad was a dentist in the Philippines. And he came here to America and was intimidated by the dental exam being in all English and he's great with tactile and like, practicality and the application of it but it was literally just the written exam that scared him to not pursue that and so he did like, dental assistant for a bit and he's always had a passion for cooking so he's catered out of our house since—ever since like, regardless of where we've lived, he's sought the community out the Filipino community out and asked if they've needed you know, party trays and stuff like that. So now, like, he's had a restaurant for since 20? 2003? 2006? 2006. Yeah. [laughs] So like, it's—it's just been a lot and a really wild ride for like, *all* of us as we went through this.

So I, I finished my associate's degree and I went straight into ICU nursing and ICU, Intensive Care Unit. And I was a nurse for about a year and a half. And I was *finally* getting the hang of it. Like, they never hired new gradu—new grads. But with me, it was like between. It was in between their beta testing for program where they did hire new grads and train them in a classroom before putting them on the floor, and then applying it. So like, the beta test and then actually having one and I was hired here. So they had to train me on the floor for like, about six months. And that learning curve was *steep*. It was—I did my best every day and I finally understood what that meant, because it *really* humbled me and it—and now I know that doing your best every day doesn't look the same every day. And that was like, the biggest breakthrough I've had and because it humbled me and made me need my mom again like, as much as I hurt her like, she was there and-and willing to share the same stories that I I've never heard before because like she, I guess she wanted to shelter us from how hard it was for her as an immigrant to be a nurse in the same demanding position that I was in. So she was a critical care nurse for a while, like while we were in Austin. And when it was predominantly white, and we're in Austin, she had a couple, like a lot of microaggressions happened to her in the workplace. Whereas like she was given a team leader position, and the nurses would undermine her or would like, make fun of her accent or wouldn't know what she's saying. Even though she-she's a brilliant nurse, and it just made it just really humbled me because I'm in this work—same workplace that she was in. And I'm excelling because I am *more* American than her. So that was—that was a beautiful thing that like, my mother and I repaired our relationship with. But I just wasn't feeling fulfilled. It just—I was being drained every day. And even though I was good at it, and I was actually complimented on it by a lot of my co-workers and stuff, it just wasn't, it just wasn't for me. And I kept—it was as if I kept trying to have the same drive as a mother of two. And like, I don't have to have responsibility over other people. It's just over me.

So when Harvey hit, our hospital got flooded, and it-it was called East Houston Regional Medical Center. And the coworkers I had there were phenomenal. They were, you know, very dedicated women. And we were night shift nurses. And we were displaced. I mean, like, for a bit, they had no idea what to do with us. And then they just had us apply to any of the sister hospitals that they have. And so our team was split.

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

And it was interesting because the first night that I worked at a different hospital, like, it had very different filing like, a system, and there was no orientation for that. And these nurses, I looked around me like some of them were from my team, like I applied to that area because I knew that they would be there. And I looked at them and I knew that they had families. The, you know, we're married, things like that. And so, I was living at home with my parents still saving money. And I already paid off my student loans by then. And I just thought to myself, you know, "I don't have to suffer through this." Like, like, it felt like I was back to day one of being a nurse, and I did not want to do that again. At least not while I don't have to. And so I quit that day. They use the rest of my p—like, what? It's called PT, right? They used the rest of my sick leave to fill in the—the two weeks I had left and yeah, I just said bye to everyone. And my mom supported me all the way but she didn't know that I was already set on leaving nursing, not just that job.

And with that, Christy Poisot, who has also been interviewed by y'all, she reached out to me knowing that I've always liked to write in high school. I actually—I don't know why I went into physics, I hate math. But I was in physics. I dropped out—it was an elective. I was like, "Why did I elect myself into physics?" And I went into newspaper and my other elective was lit journal like and that didn't click to me that this is what I should have done in college. [laughs] 'Cause I was like, so focused on what my parents wanted for me. And anyway, like, since, I guess, since my—oh, so throughout me working as a nurse I also finished my bachelor's degree with summa cum laude, and it was all online. And you know, my co-workers were just like, "How do you—how do you like, work and be in school?" and they knew I was doing community work as well. And that was the launch of—it was midway in my nursing career. We launched UniPro, which is Pilipino American National—or Pilipino American Unity for Progress. And it's a 501c3 nonprofit that here in our Texas chapter, there's multiple chapters in—in the nation, we focus on working with FSA, Filipino Student Associations and you know, talk, identity politics, civic engagement, and educate them on pretty much history because there is no source of that except for like, self studying to learn these things that we do as a community and as a—as a people here in America. Anyway. So that's how I met Christy. And she reached out to me asking if I could help her with the book, *Filipinos in Houston*. And so that was my foray back into writing. And it was a good step toward my ultimate goal, which is to creatively write in, like, and have it be sustainable for the lifestyle that I want. So it's, it was a good fusion of the community work that I had been doing and the writing that I want to get into. And it's been a beautiful journey.

ML: Who's your favorite writer?

JM: My favorite writer is Haruki Murakami. He is a Japanese writer who—his books are translated into English and they're part of this genre that I've never heard of, it's called fantastical realism. And it's beautiful. It's pretty much kind of like how Alice in Wonderland is where it's, it's like a regular person in a regular life gets pushed into something that's a little out of the ordinary. I guess Alice in Wonderland is very out of the ordinary, but for fantastical realism, they keep realism.

ML: So you talked about being a nurse. And I was just wondering what you thought of like, the current COVID-19 situation and like, that—

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

JM: [sighs] Oh my gosh, so as a nurse, and especially since like, I worked with a lot of immigrant nurses as well, like, I could see how a lot of those nurses are only you know, it's-it's their passion, but it's also their means of surviving. And so they don't see the system in a bigger sense in a big picture way. They just see themselves working day in and day out and needing to and having to and, and what they do as a small, small part of societal health, right. But when I was working as a nurse, I saw all of how like, privatized and monetized everything is and it's just so—I think it's, it's... it's gotten to the point where numbers mean more than people. And that's, you know, it's coming to a head with this crisis and it's so obvious and so I just, you know, the heroism that comes in everyday acts is so apparent in health care, and yet there's little to no reward. With the current crisis, I feel like, like honestly it could have been prevented the biggest like, prevented to a degree. Like, obviously it's gonna get here but just in terms of just all the protective gear that's running out and, and all of the overworked and underpaid staff and most of these people aren't going to be, you know, highlighted or put into a memorial or anything like that and they're in the front lines of an invisible war. Like, we can't see what this fire is like, and there's just not enough resources. I don't personally have like, a healthcare plan or anything to, to solve that problem. But I think the best--the best thing to do is also humanize those that are behind the mask, right? Because a lot of people tend to, when I was a nurse tend to look at us as a glorified house maid or you know, just someone a waitress slash, you know, things that are not considered a respectable like, position to be in. And that has got to stop and there should be more respect for these, these occupations.

ML: So, I know like the virus has changed a lot of aspects in people's lives. So I know right now in Harris County, there's an order an-an order where we all have to like, stay inside until April third or fourth. So I don't know if you're in Harris County, but how has the virus in general affected your life?

JM: So I am in Harris County actually [**ML:** Okay.] and I miss eating out. But [laughs] but in terms of like, so right now, I'm a freelance editor and writer. And I'm more so focused on the editing aspect because I feel as though that's a service that is very much needed. I actually, when the announcement had occurred, and when all of this had started going down, I had to grieve for a bit because I was trying to pursue editing more aggressively. And my niche is I want to edit for grad students in Asian American or Filipino studies. And I do have a couple of clients in that. But like a lot of other grad students like, they might have had jobs that were, you know, in the service industry on the side or they worked for their school and now their school is shut down for a bit or so their income has been cut pretty much, and they've been displaced so. And then, in April, there were conferences, academic conferences that I was about to go to. And obviously, they're not going to happen. And I had to really pivot what it was that was my audience. But a couple of grad students still reached out to me because some of them are full time parents, full time workers, and they don't have time to edit their, their final project, their final essay, their final research paper, and things like that. So I'm thankful that I do have a service based occupation because it also means that, you know, what I used to think, which was, “oh my gosh, I'm taking away this money from people who like they don't know what's going to happen tomorrow” is now like, “okay, I'm giving them like, X amount of hours off of this computer screen because *I'm* the one doing it.” So I had to pivot my way of thinking with that as well.

ML: So what's your favorite thing about writing?

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

JM: My favorite thing about writing is the fact that we only have what, twenty-eight letters in the alphabet? How many is that? Now I feel stupid right now. [**ML:** Twenty something.] [**JM** and **ML** laugh] [Note from **JM:** There are 26 letters in the Alphabet] Yeah, in the alphabet, and you can rearrange it to like, X amount of words. Like, that's so crazy to me, that like these building blocks really do create worlds. And the best example growing up was Harry Potter, of course. [**ML:** Mhm.] [laughs] Yeah.

ML: So speaking of Harry Potter, like do you enjoy certain books, movies, magazines? Or do you have any hobbies or anything like that?

JM: So I'm a big movie buff, and I just, I look at it as a way of like the script, because I am a writer. And I know that my weakness is dialogue and scripts are all dialogue. So it like, boggles my mind about how people like can, can just write like that and in that mindset, and that kind of, is the reason why I watch so many movies and TV shows. I—it's weird because I have like, a big genre like, big expansive genres that I dive into. But one of the things that I guess people are most surprised about is I like murder shows. [laughs] Like, and it's, it's to the point where like, you know, I would be cleaning and it's in the background. I think it's also that like, those FBI and those shows not necessarily, huh?

ML: Criminal Minds?

JM: Well, no actually. So it's interesting because it's not it's not like the dra-dramatic sized ones. [**ML:** Okay.] It's like the actual like, documentary. [**ML:** Oh, the document—okay.] Yeah. And like, I think it's 'cause it's partly monotonous. So like, I can do something and still have it on but then my boyfriend would come in and be like, “What are you watching?” [laughs] Like those mutilated on the screen, and I'm like, sweeping. I'm like, “What?” [laughs].

ML: So, how did you and your boyfriend meet?

JM: Oh, that is a fun story. I don't know if I want this in the archives. [**JM** and **ML** laugh] But no, I'll just—I'll put a little bit of context. I was single for seven years because I was really focused on finishing my nursing degree, finally. It took five years all in all, and it wasn't—I guess that's not too big of a gap, but it felt like it because all of my friends graduated their degrees [sighs] before me. And so I was single for seven years and I just thought like, “Okay, so now I'm finally diving into community work and hopefully I meet someone with the same like mindedness in in this stuff” and, and I was just fooling myself I just [laughs] 'cause like, what *actually* happened was like, we just, we met in a club, and [laughs] he's the complete opposite of me. But it's, we have the same morals and values and so like it works that way. And because he's not community oriented, it's like, I get a break from having to talk about it non-stop. I used to live with two roommates who were also in community work and so, like our casual conversation randomly becomes a meeting, like, and that gets tiring. And so it's, it's taken a while for me to get used to because I thought like, Oh gosh, we don't have like anything in common. But yeah, we're, we're good.

ML: So what does he do?

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

JM: He is a sports massage therapist. [**ML:** Oh, that's so cool!] Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's really great. It's his passion. And he's so—he's always so excited to get something new to work with because he gets a lot of tools in his arsenal to do his work. And he's worked on like pro-athletes, bodybuilders and things like that. And it's so funny because these people would be like, *huge* compared to him. He's not even a small person. But they would be like seven feet tall and barely fit on his massage table and they have to like scoot around and everything. Yeah, I'm like, "Oh my gosh," he's like, "You're the size of this guy's thigh" and I'm like uhh! [laughs]

ML: So you—you've mentioned like, morals and values. [**JM:** Yeah.] So how would you say that the morals and values you grew up with have changed like, have you brought those same values like, into your own life or have they changed or?

JM: This is a great question because like, you know, I was trying to rebel against my parents and then sometimes I realized I am them like, [laughs]

ML: Aren't we all.

JM: Right? Like, I see myself, you know, when I grew up and I was so mad at them for just taking forever to say goodbye, [**ML:** Mhm.] at like parties and get together and I do the same thing with my friends. We're in the parking lot for another hour. And I'm like, "oh gosh." But anyway, so I think growing up, I really, really appreciated family. Family was a big, big thing, not even in the term, like, as I had been saying they would be family, friends, but I would be raised with them and they would pretty much be my aunts and uncles. And I think finding, finding that family in the diaspora is, is *huge*. And I went into college hoping for that and found that in there, as well as in the community work that I do. Like I could see these people in my lives for a really long—my life, my whole life for a really long time.

And that's one of the things *kapua*, *kapua* is a Filipino value, and it means I see myself in you. So it's more than empathy. It's-it's just, it's something that makes everyone feel inclusive. And I think my parents have always had that, but they didn't realize that that's what it's called. Or they didn't, you know, put a word to it. But it's whenever they seek others that are, you know, in need and will help them in any way that they can. We've housed families in Austin and here in Houston too, who just came to America and needed a help like, setting their lives up. And I think that that's, that's really shown me to what I'm supposed to do and really like, even subconsciously because I've never talked about that. Push me toward a community-building like lifestyle that I have now. And I like to expand *kapua* 'cause like, my parents see it in terms of one Filipino to another. But because I grew up in America, like there's just so many other types of people around me that I can't not expand that definition to others that I know and see and it actually is part of our mission and vision as UniPro. And it's become my personal mission as well to extend *kapua* and to be you know, radically vulnerable and things like that. So that's a couple of them. Another one is, is hard work. Like, I know that my boyfriend works hard. And so and I know that I have the capability of working hard. I say--I phrase it that way because it doesn't feel like I work as hard as I did as a nurse. [laughs] [**ML:** Mhm.] But I definitely do the best that I can and I give, I give my all in terms of like, so the way that I edit in my—the way that I edit is not technical edit-editing, which is just like diction and syntax and all that. It's conceptual. So I help string together big concepts. And that's why

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

I like working with humanities students, because there's a lot of like, random crumpled up post-it-notes that they have and don't know what to do with. And I can help them tie it together to something cohesive and something that makes sense and, and I as a third party, because I've never been to those grad schools or programs and stuff like that can make it so it sounds also more accessible and less academic, academic than, you know, other research papers *have* to sound if that makes sense. So, yeah, hard work, kapua and family.

ML: So speaking of family, in your online article, “I Took a Step Back From Being a Nurse”—

JM: You read it?

ML: Yes.

[all laugh]

ML: You said that your mother was diagnosed with cancer. How did that affect you and your family?

JM: So what was interesting about that is like that was when I was a nurse and I was still living at home, but I was nightshift and my mom's day shift, so I didn't really get to see her actually in the same house. And when I found out it had to be—it was like maybe a week after she actually found out because I was working so many consecutive days. And so yeah, she told me a week after. So she act—she at that point already accepted the diagnosis. It was at stage zero, thankfully. But it definitely—that was a jolt in me because I knew that she's a pretty healthy person like in terms of what she eats, like she obviously gets a lot of, you know, physical work through nursing. And like, yeah, she drank a lot of water, you know, everything everyone says you should be doing. Except for the fact that I knew that she was always stressed, constantly stressed. And maybe if she had anxiety and she doesn't realize it. You know, immigrant parents don't really talk about mental health. So that might have been one of the things that she's neglected. Not realizing how important that is, but I personally felt like the stress manifested itself into that. And it was part of the reason why I decided to really go forward with what *I* want to do and, and try to fulfill myself in that way. Because there's only so much what ifs or, like, who could I have become? Yeah.

ML: So can you recall the biggest challenge you faced in your career, whether that be in nursing or writing, and how did you overcome it? And what does it mean to the person you are today?

JM: These are such great questions. Uh so, with nursing my biggest challenge was honestly, trying to let go of proving myself to my parents, and proving myself to myself. [laughs] Um, and I was getting to that point. And I was also—I could feel myself also become complacent. Like oh, I finally have a rhythm, I can do what I want on the side and still you know, pursue nursing. Um but I also got more—closer to my faith. And I saw the hurricane as a sign for me to just really like you know, let go of what I thought my life would be. And so every day since then has been something that I've never planned, and I don't even have a plan for the next couple years. It's crazy 'cause I used to, that used to be my life was like okay, so by this time I'm gonna be a nurse. By this time I'm gonna do this. By—and it just, you know, life doesn't

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

happen that way. It's wild. Like people say that and I hate that I say that now. [laughs] But like, it's uh, now it's a tangible thing to say so it's really... weird.

Um, with uh writing, for me the biggest challenge is finding my muse again. Uh I knew in high school—I realized this in looking back at what I've written. My characters are mostly white. And um, it's interesting because now with all the community work I do and all the things that I've learned, I of course want to have representation in what I've written and what I write. And um, at the same time I don't want to make it so that it's like, forced, it feels forced. Like I have to outright say that they're Filipino. Versus like, you know, little... subtle hints that they are, and like there's no other way around it. Um, 'cause you know when they write white characters, you don't have to say "alabaster skin" or... [laughs] you know, like that.

Um, but it was really trying to find that muse again, and uh with that I was pursuing some writing workshops that have now been canceled. Um, but at least I can use the tools of the workshops that I did go to and really tap back into that. And I could feel—I could feel myself get better and better, little by little. Um, so the little steps that I've taken are like the, the book. So *Filipinos in Houston* really helped in terms of like, just writing. Just writing this, you know, citation, whatever. And then so it wasn't far from my APA that I'm used to. And then I started doing those articles for myself, and those are based on reality. So that helped me just write and get everything out there in my own like self. And then poetry has recently become something that I use as a medium. Because it's still based in real life, but it's also a lot more creative. And it's free-flowing, and it doesn't have to be long. Um, and eventually I do want to write like fictional books.

ML: Um, so how would you choose to identify yourself? Or do you even identify yourself, would you say that you're American, Asian-American, Filipino, Filipino-American, and why does it matter to you, or why doesn't it matter to you?

JM: So I consider myself Filipino-American. Uh, I know that there have—there are definitely groups out there that prefer Filipinx, kind of like Latinx. Um, but you know I'm just used to saying I'm Filipino, even if it's gendered. It's just, yeah, it's just how it is. And I say Filipino-American because I know that I was born there, and I do have roots there, and I have visited. And um, you know like especially now that there are very divisive political views, that I feel like I need to stand firm in my identity as Filipino. But then also I regard myself as American because yeah, I came here when I was two and that's a--that's not you know, long enough to form an ego, let alone like an id. [laughs] So it was—or a superego. But yeah. So I am very American in what I consume and wear and move in space, and I need to also realize the privilege in that.

ML: What does it mean to you to be Filipino-American?

JM: Oh man. It's like--it's a constant push and pull of, of morals and values, and how to carry out a lifestyle. Um and learning that you know, there's no one way to be that. It's whoever I want to be. It's just holding those two—two sorts of worldviews accountable. Like, because realizing the privilege that I'm American, but also realizing you know how they've exploited the Philippines. Like, and learning about

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

that holistically and trying my best to um, I guess galvanize other people into uh, I guess—I don't know, going through an awakening as well. [laughs]

ML: Who would you say has been the biggest influence on your life?

JM: Ooh. I mean like, the easy answer is my mom. [laughs] My mom has been my biggest influence because growing up, we've always been compared to each other, that like, I'm just like her and things like that. And I took—and I still take a lot of pride in that. Because my mother is—she is a firecracker in her own right and she has gone through so much and still loves so much and still cares so much. And, and I think that that's so phenomenal. Um, but very close second place is Christy, actually, because she, she believed in us as a team in UniPro. She's president of uh, Filipino American National Historical Society and uh, now she stepped down from the role. But anyway, and she really supported us when we were trying to get to know the rest of the Houston Fil-Am community, um and see where our niche was in this whole big picture. And she's done so much to bring me and some people in our team to different conferences, and open our eyes to things that we haven't learned throughout our schooling. And uh, without her and her belief in us, I don't think I would--would've ardently pursued writing.

ML: So you talked a lot about being involved in the community. So besides UniPro, how are you involved in the community?

JM: So I'm also in FANHS, Filipino-American National Historical Society. So what happens is I try to feed what I've learned from FANHS um into how we teach the Filipino Student Association. I'm also part of the Filipinx Artists in Houston—Artists of Houston. And um, like with that, it's really to show that we have creative people, people who, you know, despite it being a stigma, that they don't pursue you know something in healthcare, something in engineering. That they're—they're doing the thing, and it's important too. Um especially now since everyone's like inside, what is everyone doing? They're reading books, they're watching movies, like that's art. And um, it's important, it's important to do that. I'm also—UniPro is also under OCA, which is Organization of Chinese Americans. And with that we've definitely worked with the pan-Asian community, and it's been really great to see what our similarities are and what our differences are and how we can use those as strengths. Um, and really you know try to pursue a more equal Asian-American community.

ML: What would you say your proudest accomplishment is?

JM: Ooh, I actually haven't thought of that. I think my proudest accomplishment is actually um, something that that I do in UniPro, which I have for the past two years programmed their mentorship. And so the first year was a beta test and you only had about four students. But it um, it grew to eight last summer, and I was able to synthesize a lesson plan that went for like once a week for about three months in the summer, two months in the summer. And um, using the resources that I've gotten by being in the community and you know hosting workshops and all that. Yeah, I've—I've programmed that like pretty much from the bottom up, and uh it's been very eye-opening for the students that I work with. So I'm really excited about their own journeys and where they go from there.

**Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

ML: What are your hopes for the future, just in general?

JM: Wow. Um, I want to be a bestselling author. [laughs] I want to have—like for America, I want it to be a little more socialist, if not—if anything, just because there are so many people in um poverty, for no reason. Like they're working as hard as they can. Um, I want for my family to just uh, be safe, because I do have a cousin in Italy right now, and I have like the rest of my actual family's in the Philippines. So that's at the brink of martial law right now. Um, and it's—it's weird because all they're doing is sending me TikToks, so. [laughs] I don't know, I don't know how to feel about that. Like, do you guys know what's happening outside? Um [laughs] but anyway, yeah just to be safe, be able to visit them and everything pretty soon. My grandfather on my mother's side is supposed to turn a hundred this year. [**ML:** Wow.] Yeah. So we're really excited for that but we—you know, there's so much uncertainty. I hope in the future that you know...I guess more people um can understand their priv—their intersectioned privileges. Um, 'cause it's you know, whenever it's a Filipino-American guy they don't realize that also being a male is privilege, right. So it's like things like that where you know, they need to get a little shaken up, so that way they understand how to help someone else that's doing like worse, or needs help. I don't know, that's like, as I said, I don't really think of the future so much. [laughs]

ML: Um, speaking of the future again. [laughs] What legacy would you want to pass on to future generations?

JM: So, even with like me editing, and uh, me writing, and even the book that's already been out. I want the legacy to be that our stories are heard, by us. And told, and uh, you know, we've been here. We are here, and we'll do great things.

ML: How do you envision the future of Asian-Americans and young people in our community, especially with the contributions of yours and many others?

JM: Oh man, like I—I imagine that they'll be, you know, inspired because it's a lot more accessible to find what we've done now, than what we have been doing in the past. And um, I hope that Asian-American kids don't have to dig so far to find themselves in history.

ML: And then my final question is, if future generations were to listen to this interview, or just anybody in general, do you have any wisdom you would like to pass on?

JM: Ooh, um. [laughs] So I guess for me, any wisdom I'd like to pass on... Just don't be afraid to be yourself, and uh, that really means in terms of like everything you do and everything you say, you should really believe in what you know you're putting forward.

ML: So that was my final question, do you have anything else you would like to add, or?

JM: Uh, not necessarily, I wasn't prepared to uh, to ask anything myself, or to uh add anything other than that. But I do want to say thank you, 'cause this—this work is needed.

**Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

ML: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. [both laugh] I know it's a little weird with the, the setup as of right now, with the whole situation going on outside.

JM: I think it's actually a great time to do so. Because people are sitting at home reflecting, finally. [laughs] And taking a breather, and because it's on here, like it's already recorded, you don't have to spend another day trying to record me, or like get a voice clip versus a video clip. Things like that. So I think it's a blessing in disguise, um, in its own right. I do hope to bring things soon to the library, but I know that that you know, isn't the best time right now. Um, this weekend I'll be visiting my family so the uh, they kind of have insisted 'cause both of them are pretty much, my parents are front-liners. 'Cause my dad owns a restaurant and is working in the community a lot, and then my mom is in healthcare. So they're just like, if we have it we have it, you just come over! 'Cause [laughs] we miss you, and things like that. So I'll be telling them more about this process soon, so they can also get interviewed and also you know have their stories on here.

ML: Alright, well thank you so much for your time today.

JM: Thank you, have a good one!

ML: You too.

JM: Bye.

ML: Bye.

[Interview Ends]