The Price Of Being A Trans-Atlantic Hero: Struggles of a Migrant Mother

Erica C. Davies

CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds

Part of the South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstones by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
In September 2001, Glory Velasquez forced herself out of bed to prepare a plate of fried fish, eggs, and rice for her 5 year old son, Bryan, while 2 year old Jerome slept peacefully in his room.

“Kainan na, anak,” she said to her son in Tagalog, or “let’s eat” in English, with a quick nod and a smile as she pushed the plate toward him, urging him to eat. Velasquez always made eggs and rice for breakfast – it was affordable, easy to prepare, and filling.

Her warm smile and bright brown eyes betrayed no signs of the burgeoning sadness she had been feeling for the past 24 hours. When her sister, Grace, had mentioned a job opportunity two weeks ago, Velasquez knew that going to the United States to work was the right decision. Grace, who had been working in Manhattan as a babysitter for four years, had told her about a Jewish family in Long Island who was in need of a live-in nanny.

Since it was a live-in job, rent wouldn’t be an issue and it would be easier for Velasquez to save money to send back to her family in the Philippines. Velasquez had made the decision to go to the United States one day in August 2001, after she and her husband Rogelio Malaman could not put together the remaining 1,000 pesos, or $20, for Bryan's private school tuition. Velasquez and Malaman ran a buy-and-sell business, the equivalent of a layaway system for household goods, where payments cost as little as $15 a week, and they earned barely $100 a week.

As she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, her heart sank. Velasquez was torn: she thought it was selfish for her to want to leave, but she felt it would be more be selfish and financially impossible if she stayed. After several sleepless nights contemplating her decision with Malaman, she bought a one-way ticket to New York City on September 4, 2001.

Soon, her mother-in-law, Bernadette, arrived to pick up Jerome and take Bryan to school. Velasquez hugged her son tightly and planted kisses on his face before she waved good-bye. As she watched them board the public bus and disappear into the distance, Malaman appeared with a small hand-carry suitcase packed with only five shirts, five pairs of pants and a jacket.

“Tayo na,” he told her, “let's go”. The two of them walked onto the dirt road and waited for several minutes until a green and white coach bus pulled up to take them from their home in Bulacan to the airport in Manila.

During the three hour ride to Manila, Velazquez and Malaman rehashed the details of their agreement: he and her mother-in-law would watch the children and take care of the house, she would work in New York and send $400 home each month to pay for household expenses and her sons' private school education. Private school was more expensive than public school, but the price paid for things public school students lacked: better teachers (some of whom were American professors), more extracurricular and language programs, academic tutors, and at the high school level, courses specifically for college preparation.

Velasquez would also save for Bryan and Jerome's sponsorship to the United States. She planned to enter the U.S. on a work visa, then eventually receive sponsorship from her employer to receive her
green card. Once she received permanent resident status, she’d be able to sponsor her children to live with her.

After Malaman dropped her off, she used her 3210 Nokia phone to text updates on her travel status.

“Are you in the airplane yet?” “Yes, we've just boarded” or “Nope, still in the airport”, and so it went for over an entire day. She spent every minute of the 26-hour trip crying, thinking of her sons and how much she would miss them. “Are you okay?” flight attendants would ask before resting their hand lightly on her shoulder. The attendants would give her a sympathetic look before she nodded and continued crying once they were out of earshot.

When she arrived at her sister's Bronx apartment the next evening, she immediately dialed home. Bryan's voice greeted her on the other end.

“Where are you mommy?” he asked her in their native visaya, a dialect of tagalog.

“You know, I'm just doing the business for a little bit,” Glory said, her voice breaking. “I'm just leaving for a minute, but I'll talk to you on the phone.” She wanted to explain her abrupt departure, why it was the best way to improve their future, but the children were too young to understand. Someday they would. She could hear Bryan and Jerome crying and pleading for her to come home as she struggled to find words. It would be seven years before she saw them again, eight before they lived in the same home.

“Soon, I just need a little bit of money. I need to save money for your school,” she said, holding back tears. “I'll be back, I promise.”

* * *

As of May 2014, there are 2.3 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. About 6,092 workers leave the Philippines daily in search of job opportunities. For nearly 8 percent of them, the United States is their final destination.

They leave home to work in hopes of earning higher salaries to support their families, who remain in the Philippines. Remittances are more than just money for their recipients: it is the difference between a sustainable life and destitution.

The Philippines' culture of migration has made it one of the world's top resources for labor. Though immigration sharply increased during Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship, Filipinos began to migrate for work during the early 20th century when Filipino workers were hired to fill jobs in the agricultural sector in Hawaii as farmers. During World War II, the U.S. recruited Filipino soldiers to fight in the U.S. Army, and medical professionals like nurses migrated to the use throughout the duration of the war and long after. Systematic migration didn't begin until the 1960s, when the U.S. government recruited Filipinos for engineering and service jobs.

Migration spiked during the mid-1970s as a result of stagnant domestic job growth, particularly for skilled and educated laborers. Former dictator Ferdinand Marcos believed that exporting labor to economically prosperous countries such as the United States and Saudi Arabia would cushion high
unemployment because of favorable exchange rates for international wages. As a result, Filipinos fled the country in droves. By 1980, deployment of overseas workers increased by 75%, and from 1975 to 1985, OFWs increased nearly tenfold.

Although parents often think it is in their children’s best interest to work abroad and send money back home to support their families, the children left behind often suffer from abandonment issues, depression, and problems with parental authority. The distance often fractures the bond between migrant mothers and their children, and causes deep-rooted guilt within the parent over their decision to leave their child behind.

The day Velasquez flew to the United States, a woman seated next to her on the flight turned to her and gave her a hug. Velasquez looked bewildered.

“I know what you're going through,” the woman said. “I left my children last year to work in New York City in Bulacan with my sister, I'm just visiting. I miss them everyday.”

Velasquez wiped her tears and introduced herself. The woman's name was Lynn. She was from Guimba, a town four miles from where Velasquez lived. For the rest of the plane ride, the two women shared details about their children and their reasons for leaving, bonding over the painful, but necessary evil of leaving their loved ones behind. Velasquez was relieved to know that the huge wave of guilt that had overcome her was an unfortunate, but common effect; Lynn told her that she was depressed for the first five months after she left her two daughters and son in Guimba.

Once they landed at John F. Kennedy airport, the two exchanged phone numbers before parting ways. To this day, Lynn and Velasquez are still in contact.

*   *   *

On Christmas Eve 2001, Velasquez got a Christmas card from Bryan and Jerome. Though she had just received a $400 holiday bonus from her boss, the card was the real gift. She opened the envelope and unfolded a piece of red construction paper. White crayon letters spelled out “Maligayang pasko mama”, or “Merry Christmas mama”. A pink heart was posted at the bottom; inside were Bryan's and Jerome's names scribbled in the middle. I have to call them and say thank you, she thought to herself. It's already ten o'clock over there so let me call them to say Merry Christmas.

Velasquez had bought a phone card earlier in the day. She picked up her phone and called her husband. They made small talk and Velasquez told him she wasn't able to eat or sleep sometimes because of her homesickness.

Bryan constantly pleaded with her to come home. He refused to eat breakfast because it reminded him of her. Jerome wasn't getting any sleep because he cried so often.

“Jerome cried at least once a day,” he said. “It would usually be in the morning when he wakes up, or right before he goes to sleep.”

Bryan began to distance himself from Malaman, who worked from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. six days a week. He felt like his father wasn't there to comfort him when he needed him since he was always at work.
Whenever Malaman would come home from work, he was too tired to play with his sons or watch a movie. Bernadette was the one who would take them to the park, read to them before bed, and help Bryan with his homework. Even though Bryan spoke to his mother every week, words couldn't comfort him when wanted is a hug from her.

Velasquez wanted to go home so badly, but she didn't have the money. She left only $150 for herself after sending the rest of her stipend, how could she afford to send herself home? Now it was her turn to cry.

“Don't worry, we'll get through this,” Malaman said to her. “We love you.”

Velasquez told him she missed and loved them all before she hung up. As the snow fell quietly outside her window, she buried her face in a pillow as she cried alone in her basement apartment.

* * *

Although parental migration is sometimes a necessary sacrifice to improve children's quality of life, the repercussions can be damaging and have lasting effects. A UNICEF study found that Filipino children between the ages of 13 to 16 years old suffered from low self-esteem and insecurity because their parents left them.

Children left behind are more likely to reproach migrant mothers for leaving than migrant fathers; resentment stems from the absence of their nurturer. As a response to this resentment, migrant mothers often try to over-compensate for their physical absence through material goods.

Philip Kasinitz, a sociology professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center, says the most important advantage to parental migration is an improvement in material well-being.

“The biggest advantage is that it brings money to the family,” he said. “From places where that's a real issue, it brings resources like food, shelter, and also things like toys and electronics which are usually considered luxury goods in the home country.”

Although some mothers use material things to make up for an emotional connection, it can sometimes make children reliant on material goods instead of being appreciative of them. A 2009 study done by Psychology professor Andrea Rossi noted that migrant Filipino mothers sometimes sent money instead of actual gifts because they no longer knew their children's tastes after being apart for so long.

“[Migrant work] starts out with a small time frame, but usually extends to longer periods than planned,” he said. “If you leave at 3 or 4 and come back at 7 or 8, [the child is] a totally different person.”

Kasintz says, “authority is a frequent problem” when children are reunited with their parents. Children feel that the absence diminishes parental authority, which leads to defiance towards the parent's return.

“There's concern about who's the real parent,” he said. “The kid wonders who this person is and why they have the right to tell them what to do. Parents are sometimes are intimidated to tell them what to
do now that they're older.”

Children who remain with other family members develop stronger bonds with those who care for them. These children consider their grandparents and aunts as their emotional support and surrogate parents.

Jerome says that his grandmother made his mother's absence easier to deal with. When their father was working, she would always read to him and Bryan, or cook favorite dishes that their mother used to make “to make it seem like she never left”. Both boys missed their grandmother, Bernadette – they were used to being around her daily. Whenever either of them would cry, Bernadette would be the one to wipe their tears and cuddle them to sleep. If they needed homework help, she would sit with them until late at night to make sure it was completed. She was the one who took them shopping and to their basketball games on weekends.

Although Bryan and Jerome were happy to be reunited with their mom, Jerome said it was like a cycle of starting over by leaving their grandmother.

“We went from seeing her every day, to speaking on the phone every two weeks or so,” he said. “She was like my second mom. I felt like I was leaving my grandmother behind and I didn't want to because I know how that feels.”

* * *

Sponsorship is a multi-step process for Filipinos who want to give their children a better quality of life. The primary reason for sponsorship is education, which is held in high regard. In addition to education, many Filipinos sponsor their children for job opportunities in hopes of preventing the cycle of employment migration. OFWs often choose to stay in their countries of employment because the economic benefits greatly outweigh those of the Philippines, although after retirement, some choose to go back home if they feel financially stable enough.

The process begins with a letter of invitation from a sponsor abroad, which is required by the Philippine Bureau of Immigration to ensure that the sponsoree is not involved in human trafficking. It is also a requirement by the U.S. Bureau of Immigration before applying for a green card. Once workers obtain a green card, they can then pay the $240 fee needed to apply for their child's sponsorship. The application fee is exclusive in the nearly $2-4,000 cost for a legal attorney during the entire process. If they are married to a U.S. citizen, their spouse is also allowed to do the same.

Margie Ferrer immigrated to the United States in 2000, eight months after her son, Tristan, was born. She left him with her mother in Batangas until she found a job as a nanny for a family on the Upper East Side when he was 3, and brought him back to New York City. The family she worked for sponsored both her and her husband's citizenship to the United States.

Margie worked ten-hour days, seven days a week to support her family. Her husband worked nights as a nurse at Metropolitan Hospital. With both parents working she was forced to leave Tristan with his paternal grandmother, Edith, who was sponsored by her own boss to come to the United States when she worked as a nanny in December 1985.

“When a parent goes to work, it's always arduous. The child cries when they leave, but I really didn't
mind,” Tristan said.

When he was little, Tristan missed his mother: he only saw her at sunrise before she left for work. Sometimes if Margie arrived home early enough, she would tuck him into bed. He explained to his mom when he was 8 that he disliked the amount of time they spent apart; she agreed with him. She told him she hated missing out on recitals and other important events, but if she didn’t work as often as she did, they wouldn’t be able to afford their apartment. From then on, he understood that the sacrifice she made was out of necessity, not desire.

Edith kept Tristan busy with a revolving list of after-school activities, and when he arrived home, by singing folk songs with Edith and learning how to play guitar. Tristan credits his grandmother for his love of music and independence.

“Whenever my mom was at work, she played the chords on the piano and I strummed the guitar,” he said. “She really helped me get to where I am today, especially music-wise.”

At times, Margie would bring Tristan to work when Edith and Michael weren’t able to watch him at her boss Karen’s request. As a working mother, she empathized with Margie’s childcare situation. Over the years, Karen became less of an employer and more of a second family. Tristan and his parents were invited over for holiday dinners, and the three of them sometimes spent summers at Karen’s Southampton home while Margie worked during the days. When Margie and Michael were in need of furniture for their new apartment, Karen offered them a brand new set.

To this day, the two families are still close. Tristan, who is beginning to look at colleges, points to a pile of college brochures Karen brought him three weeks ago. SUNY Purchase, John Jay College, and Bard College sit atop the stack of twenty.

“Since my mom's working, Karen's going to bring me to Bard for my visit next fall,” he said with a huge smile. “She knows I like music, and she's dying to take me there. It's going to be awesome.”

*   *   *

A mix of humid air and diesel exhaust welcomed Velasquez when she walked through the automatic double doors of Ninoy Aquino airport in November 2009. She looked for Rogelio, Bryan and Jerome in the sea of people waiting for arrivals. After she scanned the crowd for a minute, she spotted Bryan and Jerome's toothy smiles. Her heart skipped a beat before she ran to her sons and enveloped them in a tight bear hug for the first time in seven months.

“Nanay!” Jerome exclaimed, or “mother” in Tagalog. He buried his face in her stomach and squeezed her tightly. Bryan wrapped his arms around his brother and his mother, silent as tears rolled down his cheeks. He was too overcome with emotion to speak.

Velasquez's eyes welled up with tears. This time, she cried happy tears: it would be the final time she and her sons would be apart.

Her second husband, Carmelo, applied for Bryan and Jerome’s sponsorship after they got married in August 2008. One night, he sat down and told her he wanted to sponsor Bryan and Jerome.
Carmelo was aware of Velasquez’s tenuous situation with her ex-husband, but he knew how much she wanted to be with her sons. She now had a one-year-old daughter that needed to be with her brothers.

“Don't worry, I'll take of everything,” he said. “Every penny will come from my pocket.”

He contacted an immigration lawyer in downtown Manhattan to set up a meeting to start the sponsorship process. Over the next nine weeks, he filled out the necessary paperwork and paid $5,000 for Bryan and Jerome’s sponsorship. The lawyer advised Velasquez and Carmelo that their application could be processed as quickly as six months, so Velasquez booked a flight to Manila for April, six months after they started the application process. To her disappointment, she wasn't able to – the waiting period that followed their application wasn't over due to custody issues with Rogelio.

At the end of her two-week visit, Velasquez felt a mix of relief and nervousness. She was happy to finally have her sons with her at all times, but before they were cleared, the children had to complete exit and entry interviews with Philippine and U.S. Customs officials. Bryan and Jerome passed the Philippine exit interview, and the three of them were headed to the U.S. The New York interview was now the only barrier between their new lives in New York City and their old ones in the Philippines.

When they arrived in New York, the boys were ushered toward a stainless steel gray door that read “U.S. Customs”. Velasquez tried to follow, but a woman quickly stepped in her path and told her that she would have to wait outside. She wasn't sure what the officials were going to ask her sons, and she was worried that one wrong move would set them back at square one.

“It made me scared,” she said. “I don't want them to go back if they don't pass.”

She spent two hours pacing in the waiting area, fretting over the interview. Are they asking about our family situation? What if they don't give a good enough answer? Will they be sent them home if they answer incorrectly? Velasquez thought to herself. Soon enough, the boys were escorted out of the room by the female customs agent who had stopped her earlier. A wave of relief came over Velasquez as Bryan and Jerome walked toward her.

“They did great, ma'am,” the agent said. She smiled at the boys. “Welcome to America, I hope you'll like it here.”

Velasquez thanked her and the three of them headed toward the airport exit. Carmelo was waiting for them outside in front of a silver Toyota Camry. He enveloped Bryan and Jerome in a hug. Although Carmelo had spoken to them several times before over the phone and through Skype, it was the first time the three of them met them in person.

“I was nervous to meet them. It's one thing to bond over the phone, but I wondered if we'd get along in person,” he said. “They just spent the last 8 years with their father, and here I am trying to take them out of that comfort zone. I didn't want them to think I was trying to replace him.”

Bryan never felt any apprehension towards Carmelo – in fact, he felt the exact opposite. Bryan respected and loved Carmelo because of the sacrifices he made to reunite him and his brother with their mom.
“He worked overnight shifts three times a week for almost five months to get us here. He missed my little sister's first steps and first words because he was working to get me and Jerome here,” he said. “He didn't have to do any of that stuff. It showed how much he not only loved my mom, but me and my brother, too.”

Once the four of them had left the airport, they drove back to the Bronx to drop off the boys' suitcases, then headed straight for Times Square. Velasquez knew that they had just endured a 24+ hour trip, but she was eager to show Bryan and Jerome the city she now called home. The first stop was Toys R Us to ride the giant ferris wheel.

“They were tired, but I didn't want to waste a minute,” she said. “Eight years we were apart, can you imagine that? Giving them time was the best present I could give them. Money was a burden for so many years. When Bryan and Jerome came home with me, it was the last thing on my mind.”

That day, they took photos, bought a playstation, ate ice cream, and went to a family restaurant to eat for the first time. Velasquez was unable to do any of these things when she lived in the Philippines because she couldn't afford it. She was happy to take her kids out and not have to worry about money.

At night, she stood by the door of their room and watched Bryan and Jerome sleep. Velasquez shook her head and silently cried. How could she allow eight years to pass since she last tucked them in bed? Despite the fact that her sons understood her choice, an inescapable guilt will always haunt her.

“I still cry whenever I think about the day I left,” she said. “I know that my sons have forgiven me, but I don't think I can ever forgive myself.”