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Interview with Cindy Domingo

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By Callista Bevans



Cindy Domingo began working for social justice as a college student. She helped lead solidarity movements on the University of Washington campus against the dictatorship of the Marcos family in the Philippines. Cindy is a NAPAWF founding sister and has been active in many social justice organizations in and around Seattle. In the past few years her interests have led her to Cuba. She has co-chaired the U.S. Women & Cuba Collaboration and has led many delegations of U.S. women to Cuba. She is currently Legislative Aide to King County Councilmember Larry Gossett.

NAPAWF: How did you first begin to get involved in Asian & Pacific Islander (API) issues?

CD: In 1974 I took my first trip to the Philippines and at the time the Philippines was under Marshall Law under the presidency of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. I was astounded by the level of intimidation and military presence throughout the Philippines. So for me it began a greater awareness of what was going on internationally and especially in the Philippines. When I came back they were forming the Seattle chapter of Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP), a radical Filipino organization that organized in the U.S. around anti-discrimination issues for U.S. based Filipinos, but also was working in the United States for the cutoff of U.S. support for the dictatorship.

NAPAWF: How did your work branch out from Filipino issues to the broader progressive movement?

CD: Well the KDP also worked with other organizations on the programs that they had—we worked with other solidarity groups here in the United States. During that period of time the U.S. was supporting dictatorships around the world, and there were also liberation struggles around Vietnam and in Africa. So we got to work with other communities. Also, in terms of student issues, I was also very active on the UW [University of Washington] campus with the struggle to get Asian American history courses and Asian American language courses. So we [the KDP] worked with a fairly broad Pan-Asian, international community on all of the issues we focused on, and then we also supported their issues. Along the way I worked very closely in Seattle and also in the San Francisco area with the Korean, Latin-American, and African-American communities around those issues.

NAPAWF: What were some of the most valuable lessons you learned from your early work in the progressive movement?

CD: I think there are really two valuable lessons. One is that women do matter, even though a lot of the time women are behind the scenes in the work that goes on in the progressive movement

and in society. There is a saying that women hold up half the sky; well I think women hold up more than half the sky! Without women and women's leadership this movement would be nowhere. Women are a crucial and essential part of moving our issues and struggles ahead and organizing our communities around them.

The second issue is that people often underestimate the power that we have. My brother was murdered in 1981 by the Marcos dictatorship here in Seattle, Washington. We were all in our 20s, and we faced powerful forces that opposed our work—including the U.S. government, the Marcos dictatorship, various intelligence agencies, all the way down to gangsters in our community. But a small group of young people who were committed and had good organizing skills were able to overcome this and were able to achieve certain victories. We can never underestimate the power people have when they have commitment and organizing skills. We can do almost anything.

NAPAWF: Why did you feel it was important to attend the U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995?

CD: Well you know at the time, in 1995, I was at a period in my life where I was kind of burned out. I had gone through a ten year struggle around my brother's case, I had put off my professional life, and I just had two children. I was beginning to question my commitment to the movement. A good friend of mine, Jan Cate, really encouraged me and other women who were in the Seattle area to go to Beijing. She said it would really open our eyes. She had been to previous U.N conferences on women. We organized a delegation of women to go from the King County area. That whole conference changed my life, and I am so glad I went there. I was amazed at the organizing women were doing all over the world, and the circumstances in which they did their work, the life and death issues that they faced, and how long some women had been struggling for successes in the women's rights arena. Since then I have made a commitment and have focused a lot of my work on moving a women's rights agenda both here in the United States and internationally.

NAPAWF: When did you begin to use a human rights framework for your work? Why do you think a human rights approach is valuable?

CD: It was really at that Beijing Conference that I began to look at the human rights framework for my work. The theme of that conference was "Women's Rights are Human Rights." So it naturally made the link that unless you use the human rights framework all of our struggles were going to be in silos. A human rights framework really created the umbrella and the intersections you need to connect all our movements, whether it is the labor movement, the women's movement, the anti-discrimination movement or the people of color movement. Those are all encompassed in a human rights framework.

NAPAWF: Why do you think there is still a lot of resistance or misunderstanding of what human rights means in the United States?

CD: Our movements are very separate from each other because of the particularities of U.S. society. The powers that be would like it if our movements were not intersected and not

connected because people are separate. The power that we all can have if we work together is diminished. We have been taught that we all need to do is fight for our own piece of the pie and that piece is very small. We never look at the entire pie and see that the entire pie should be all of ours. So it's been a struggle to get people to use the human rights framework. That is why we have people who are against free housing, free food, access to quality healthcare, because it's all about an individual's rights and not a societal right, which a human rights framework provides.

NAPAWF: How do you propose groups like NAPAWF and other groups in the progressive movement incorporate human rights into their work and also encourage more human rights in America?

CD: Well that's the million-dollar question! I think obviously education is needed. But I also think people need to travel abroad, and not in the sense of a vacation. But they need to go and see in terms of educational experiences and even to work in different countries the conditions people face around the world. A lot of times, and even in NAPAWF, we are so comfortable in our lives, so its easy to advocate for certain things, but we are not willing to give up our own privilege so that other people can have their human rights. I mean, people in other places sacrifice so that we can have our privilege in this country. And until people here in this country understand that I think it's going to be very difficult for people to understand why it is so important that we approach our work from a human rights prospective.

NAPAWF: How did you begin your current work with women's issues and Cuba?

CD: I've always wanted to go to Cuba and had not been able to. In 1999 I got a phone call from the same friend who encouraged me to go to China. She wanted to know if I knew anyone who wanted a scholarship to go to Cuba, and I said, "well I do." So I went with this national women's delegation sponsored by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Because it's a socialist country we were hosted by the Federation for Cuban Women who represent probably 80% of women in Cuba 14 and older. They took us around the different parts of Cuba and talked about the advances of the women's rights agenda in Cuba. That experience crystallized for me that everything I had been working for all my life could actually come to fruition. While Cuba is still a poor and developing country, they have been able to, at some level, ensure that all people have housing, food, healthcare and free education, even though they don't have as much as we do in this country. From there I wanted every woman I knew to go to Cuba and experience and be educated in that way. That's how I began to do delegations to Cuba for a few years until our government would not renew our travel license to Cuba.

NAPAWF: What do you think are some of the strengths or weaknesses that are facing the progressive API movement today?

CD: I think that there is a lot of exciting organizing going on in the API community. When I went to the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta last year I saw a number of API community leaders, individuals in the labor movement, the housing movement, and in the youth movement. I was inspired by some of those individuals. That is a strength. Leaders are coming out of communities and are intersecting with the broader progressive movement.

I think a weakness is that, back in the 60's and 70's there were a fair number of radical API movements and organizations in our communities. There has been a significant break in that history for different reasons. Just in general there is a lack of continuity in our history of various progressive movements. So we need to have more continuity with the more radical elements in our history. We also need to build more intergenerational work and exchange between the generation that came before and those that are coming after. We need to figure out how we can build multi-generational leadership. From my perspective, because I come out of a more radical wing of the API movement, I'm hoping we can develop a more radical analysis of our immigration analysis; we need to go and work around a more radical perspective in terms of our communities.

NAPAWF: So how can we encourage more young women to join the movement and how can we take a more multi-generational approach?

I've always been so glad that I grew up in the generation that I did because I was part of organized movement and organizations that really helped me develop as a leader. I had the experience of working with some more experienced leaders, and especially ones that came from the Philippines and had a more radical tradition with them. So I was very fortunate that way.

NAPAWF: Is there anything else you want to add in this interview?

CD: I have always been glad to be part of NAPAWF. I've met a lot of inspiring young women there. I think it speaks to the power of NAPAWF to be able to harness the energy and leadership of young women. I hope other organizations, especially in the women's movement, would look at NAPAWF and how we have been able to do that. I think a lot of women's organizations in the United State need to develop the next generation of young women as leaders.