

ABOUT THE MEMOIR CLASS

*The Association of MIT Retirees memoir class has been going strong since 2011. This class of dedicated writers is led by **Nita Regnier**, Association advisory committee member and former instructor in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies in the Writing Center. The writers have produced fine work and we are pleased to share their stories with you. Our sixth featured work is by **Maria Clara Valenzuela**.*

INTRODUCTION

I migrated to the United States from the Philippines on September 5, 1962; I have since lived in Cambridge, MA.

The Philippines was acquired by the United States from Spain in 1898 after the Spanish-American War. My grandparents' generation spoke Spanish; during my time however, the school conducted classes in English. So I had no problem communicating in English upon my arrival in the United States.

I took a job at the Tech Coop in 1965 as a sales clerk in the Photography Department. I worked there for nine years and became acquainted with MIT professors and employees. Sue Lester and Evelyn Perez were frequent customers leaving their film to be developed. They were the ones who encouraged me to apply for a job at MIT. When I was ready to make a move, I went to the MIT Personnel Office to look for a job. What a surprise, Evelyn Perez appeared and was delighted to see me! I had no idea she was an MIT Personnel Officer. She interviewed me and sent me that afternoon for another interview at the Industrial Liaison Program (ILP). I had a good interview and over the weekend, I got an offer to work as a clerk at the Publications Section.

I was good on the job and it didn't take long for me to get promoted. First to secretary, then administrative secretary, and eventually, I became Administrative Staff and Conference

Coordinator, a position I held until I took the early incentive retirement in 1996. For further self-advancement, I decided to take an English course while I was a secretary and enrolled at the Katharine Gibbs Secretarial School and attended the evening class. Although I spoke English, I didn't feel I had sufficient knowledge of the grammar and pronunciation of the English language. The curriculum included writing essays. I got excellent grades and developed an interest in writing; I felt comfortable writing business letters to our clients. Professor Samuel A. Goldblith was the Director of the Industrial Liaison Program and he was appointed the same year and month that I started working there and commended my work.

Working for MIT was a blessing. It gave me the confidence and self-assurance that I have the intelligence to work at this great institution with high standards. It was such a pleasure working with people with great minds. It was intellectually stimulating to work in such an environment and to learn new things. I was excited to meet Professors Paul Samuelson and Charles Kindleberger. We used their economics textbooks at the University of the Philippines and I never imagined I would meet them personally at MIT.

Some years later, Eric Johnson became the Director of the Industrial Liaison Program. He was one of the senior ILP Officers when I was hired. He arranged with the Dale Carnegie School to conduct a class for the ILP staff interested in taking it. We learned the technique of how to remember the names of people we met, how to write a speech, how to talk to people, all useful for ILP Officers since they deal with member companies. We also received advice on how to get promoted.

Our first assignment was to write about the most embarrassing experience we had. The class was divided into groups to discuss our assignment. After reading our essays, we were told to vote on who had written the best piece. What a great surprise — I won the prize from our group, a Dale Carnegie pen! An employee at the bottom

of the totem pole beat the high ranking staff with more experience in writing.

Since then, I have had the urge to write. I gradually got over my stage fright speaking in front of a group. I had thought of writing about my grandfather who was one of the major players in the Spanish-Filipino uprising. He told me stories about his involvement with the revolution and he earned a place in Philippine history. I never had an opportunity to write about my grandfather; however, learning how to write a memoir was always in the back of my mind.

At last, opportunity knocked on my door. The MIT Retirees Association announced plans to form a memoir class. I immediately signed up for the class. It was like the luck of the Irish — Nita Regnier became our mentor. She is a good teacher and a great writer. She has patience and enjoys teaching our class. She guides me through my struggle writing my autobiography. I have a long way to go to finish my life story and I hope I can accomplish my goal. When I am done, hopefully, my children and grandchildren will have something to remember me by.

My interests are traveling around the world, taking pictures of my travels, and making them into DVDs, calendars, and books. I enjoy listening to classical and pop music. I used to play classical music on the piano when I had the time. I do some needlecraft, knitting, crochet, and quilting.

— *Maria Clara Valenzuela*

My Birthplace, My Childhood, The Philippines

Where should I begin about my childhood in the Philippines? This is a bit tough to figure out. Perhaps the most logical first step is to describe my birthplace. Do I begin with the present time and flashback to the past? I think it's simpler to start with my background.

My parents, Arturo Valenzuela and Gerarda Cortez Estrada, had twelve children: seven girls and five boys. I am the seventh child sandwiched between two older and two younger brothers. I was born after my sister Gloria, the sixth in the family, died at the age of two of kidney disease. In those days, there was no medical technology to cure serious illnesses.

My grandfather ("Lolo" in Tagalog) Pio Valenzuela was a doctor and delivered all of us — cousins of the first generation. Most women in the olden days delivered their babies with the aid of a midwife but we were lucky to have a doctor in the family. Most deliveries occurred in the house instead of the hospital.



Valenzuela City, formerly Polo, where I grew up. The city is named after my grandfather Pio Valenzuela.

The Philippines is an archipelago, composed of three big main Islands: Luzon, Visayan, and Mindanao. Manila is the capital of the Philippines and is part of the Luzon Island where the national language called Tagalog is spoken. The Islands have provinces, each one with its own dialect, customs, and traditions.

We lived in Polo, the first town of the Province of Bulacan, driving north from Manila. The town fiesta is celebrated every year honoring the patron Saint San Diego. In the neighboring town is Obando where fiestas are celebrated for three consecutive days. The first day is the Feast of San Pascual de Baylon; the second day Santa Clara; and the third Nuestra Senora de Salambao. People all over the Philippines as well as tourists attend these festivals to witness the celebration.

The most popular feast is the Feast of Santa Clara who is the patron saint of childless women. Women dance in the streets singing praises to Santa Clara, asking for a child. In the church yard, a ferris wheel spins and plenty of street vendors sell all kinds of crafts, food like rice cakes, tropical fruit, and pet birds and crickets in handcrafted wooden cages. The yard was always crowded with spectators.

My mother was a very religious woman and she went to church every day at our parish. During the big fiesta in Obando when she was expecting me, she went there to attend Mass. She was known to give birth within two hours of her labor. On the Feast of Santa Clara, her labor started

(perhaps while in church) and soon after, she gave birth at home to a baby girl. This was on May 18, 1938, and she named the baby Maria Clara. Yes, that's me named after Santa Clara. It is a common tradition to name the newly born baby after the saint whose feast falls on the same date. If it's a girl, Maria is almost always added to the principal name because of the great devotion to the Virgin Mary, the Philippines being 98-percent Catholic. The child is given a nickname; I was given the nickname Clara and Clarita. My mother and an older sister called me Clarita, the diminutive of Clara. I grew up with the sound of Clara, Clarita, or Maria Clara, but never Maria.

Growing up during the war was frightening. The soldiers confiscated our furniture and arrested people who owned radios or anything that could be used for communication. There were checkpoints everywhere. Food was scarce. The Philippine currency had been devalued and people's savings quickly disappeared. Everyone suffered, the rich and the poor. I can't imagine my parents' hardship, having to feed nine children during that time.

Toward the end of the war the fighting became more intense. There were heavy bombings and my father knew we were in great danger. My parents gathered us together and we walked to the other side of our town which was occupied by the Americans. We had to wade across the river; even at low tide the water was deep and muddy and my father carried me. He was about 5'7" tall and the water was up to his neck. His feet sank into the mud with every step. Although the river was usually controlled, we got across without incident. We were given temporary housing by friends who also hosted many other families.

A few days after we arrived, we saw smoke from the other side of the town. Someone told us it was our house burning. Wind spread the fire from our house through the short street. Most of the people living on this street were our relatives.

At the end of the war, we lived in what was left of the foundation of our house. We slept there at night and cooked our meals outside. Everyone helped with the chores but since we were not living in a real house we didn't have much to do. Clothing and cloth were rationed, so our clothes were often made of scrap nylon from the parachutes used by the American military when they landed. There was no electricity; we relied on sunlight during the day and went to bed early at night.

I don't have a concept of time or year when I was growing up. One thing I will always remember is that every year during the Obando Fiesta, my mother took me to church on my birthday. She treated me by buying presents from the street vendors, in particular beautiful carved wooden shoes. She always celebrated her children's birthdays by preparing special meals, her tradition every year no matter what. When I migrated to the United States, she had a little something at our house to celebrate my birthday even though I was not there.

What was it like growing up in a big family? The house was always full, never boring. There were petty fights among siblings, especially the boys who sometimes got out of hand. One thing for sure, my parents loved and cared for us equally and unconditionally. My father had to work hard to earn a living to support us all with our needs and education. We all went to college and I got my degree in Business Administration at the University of the Philippines.



Full house Jose, Antonio, Maria Clara, Francisco, Arturo, Jr., Rosario with my mother Gerarda, and my father Arturo, Sr.

My parents loved music. My mother played the violin during her youth when she lived in Kalibo, Aklan; my father played the piccolo. My father had a bone disease in one of his legs when he was a young man. Every doctor that Lolo Pio consulted wanted his leg amputated. Lolo Pio refused to accept this recommendation. Being a doctor, he had resources and looked for other physicians. He found a Swiss doctor who suggested grafting the bone with sheep's bone. Thankfully, the procedure was successful. My father didn't lose his leg but he walked with a slight limp because his leg was a bit shortened due to surgery. During his incapacitation, he took guitar lessons to pass the time. It took him many months to recover, maybe close to a year.

My interest in music must be in my genes. My mother wanted all the girls to take music lessons and she hired a private piano tutor. Of the six girls in the family, only my older sister Patty and I were interested in playing the piano. Patty did not pursue further lessons, but I remained committed and took lessons for many years. I started taking the lessons probably when I was nine, and quit upon finishing high school. I enrolled at the University of the Philippines which was reputed to have high standards as it was difficult to gain admission. I was lucky to get in without taking the entrance exam because I did very well during my senior year in high school. I didn't think I would have time to practice piano while in college; besides, I was going to live in the dorm. I regretted my decision because, while I was staying at the dorm, there were students enrolled at the Conservatory of Music majoring in piano who practiced the exercise pieces that I had taken. I found out they were at grade 12 level. I had no idea I was advanced in piano. My last piano teacher Ching Granada had prepared me for the Conservatory of Music should I choose to be a musician.

Looking back at the history of my piano lessons, I would like to describe the experience I had during the process of learning. My first piano teacher was Josie Rivera, a distant relative. She lived within walking distance of our house. She taught me how to read the notes and play them on the keyboard. I wish I had a teacher who had taught me the theoretical part of music so that I would know how to write and teach music. I would have liked to learn how to compose. When I was taking piano lessons under Josie's tutorship, I had no piano and can't remember how I practiced my lessons. After a year, Josie decided to give a piano recital at her home in honor of our parents. She gave me a piece to learn and memorize for the recital. The piece was Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers." The big moment finally arrived.

I had never played in front of an audience so I was very nervous. When my turn came, my fingers froze and I played the piece erratically. I had terrible stage fright. I was sweaty and my fingers couldn't find the right keys no matter how much I tried. I gave up playing, humiliated, and horrified. If Tchaikovsky had heard my recital, he probably would have turned over in his grave. It was the most embarrassing experience and I still avoid playing the simplified version of "Waltz of the Flowers." It's like having a phobia.

I was determined to play the piano so I continued the lessons in spite of my disastrous recital. I wanted my own piano. Often, I ran my

fingers on the wall or table pretending it was a piano. My father most likely noticed my gestures and one day out of the blue he told me to go with my mother to buy a piano. My mother and I immediately dashed off to Manila before my father could change his mind! We went to each music store and I found one that I liked, a spinet with nice wood and design, but the most important thing was the sound of the percussion. My mother hired a piano tuner; I was so proud of myself when the tuner told me it was an excellent piano with brass percussion and had a vibrant sound. I had chosen my own piano at an early age based on its sound, and apparently I hit the jackpot!

— *Maria Clara Valenzuela*



My young family with my grandparents (center) Marciana and Pio, and Aunt Alice (standing, second from left).

The mission of the **Association of MIT Retirees** is to provide opportunities for members to engage with the Institute and to develop programs and events that will be of both interest and fun. We strive to be an active component in the MIT family by keeping our members in touch with each other and the Institute.

Nancy Alusow and Joe Collins are chairs of the Association. The organization is supported by Traci Swartz and Anthony Farrell of the Community Services Office.

Your suggestions for activities are welcome.

Association of MIT Retirees
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Rm E38-234
Cambridge, MA 02139-4307
Tel: 617-253-7910
Email: retirees.assoc@mit.edu
Web: web.mit.edu/retireesassoc