

Thelma Buckholdt, 4/29/01

Interviewed by Karen Brewster

Thelma was born in the town of Claveria, in the Cagayan region of the Phillipines on August 1, 1934. Her mother was a school teacher, a politician and a business woman. who ran a trading post and also served as a banker of sorts, loaning people money. Her father was a pilot. In her early years, she learned a lot from her grandmother her told Thelma and her siblings lots of stories. Thelma's grandmother had learned english and knew about Western things from her father who was a school teacher. She never attended school because it was during the days of Spanish control and girls were not allowed to go to school. She describes her growing up as full of challenges and encouragement, and that she knew she was expected to accomplish something.

She came to the United States in 1951, and attended Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles until 1956. She had an uncle in Nevada, who was her mentor and sponsor, so she went to Las Vegas after she graduated. She married her husband, Jon, in 1957, who had been a student and in the Navy at Lake Meade. She worked as a teacher, and he was with the Public Health Service, Center for Disease Control.

She came to Alaska in 1965, when the CDC sent her husband to Anchorage to work on eradicating measles in the state. They stayed because they liked it.

Thelma became active in Anchorage's filipino community and organizations. In 1972, she became the first woman president of the Filipino Community of Anchorage, Inc. She held the position until 1975. She organized Filipino Leadership Conferences in Juneau and Anchorage in 1980 and 1981. And in 1981 she started the Asian Alaskan Cultural Center in Anchorage. They put on demonstrations, dance performances, go to the schools, and generally promote better understanding of Asian cultures amongst Alaskan.

In 1975, Thelma ran for and won the State House of Representatives seat for her Spenard District in Anchorage. Her work with politics began in 1970/71 when she was asked to coordinate McGovern's campaign in Alaska. Then, in 1972 she attended the Democratic National Convention (There was an emphasis on the delegation reflecting the population of the party, not just having men there, but women and minorities, too.) She was involved with an ad hoc organizing committee of young democrats. They decided it was time to reform the State Legislature, so many of them began to run for office. This is what inspired Thelma to run for public office.

She was in the State House of Representatives until 1982. She feels that she made a difference. That she got some legislation passed that was some forward thinking for its time. For instance, no smoking in public places, legislation that helped disabled people, clean air and clear water bills, getting money for parks and for the University. She was on the Finance Committee, and developed the Public Works and Natural Resources

Departments budgets. Also during her time, the Permanent Fund was being set up and they repealed the State Income Tax. She voted for the environment, for education, and for people's programs, which didn't always make her popular with her party or her fellow legislators. But, as she says, she refused to play the political games. Thelma mentions how the legislature was different then, the majority caucus had a lot of democrats in it, there still weren't many women legislators, and she feels the legislature was insensitive towards minorities. She talks about how it wasn't always easy being in the legislature, being a minority, being a woman, and being philosophically different than many of the other people. She also talks about commuting on the weekends to be with her husband and children who continued to live in Anchorage.

Thelma's other major accomplishments include her work with the Filipino community. Recently, she has taken great pride in indigenous cultures of the Filipines and has started an indigenous dance group. She researched and wrote a book about the history of Filipinos in Alaska. She is constantly thinking of history and cultural projects to do with the Filipino community.

In 1991, Thelma graduated from the DC School of Law in Washington, DC. She uses her law degree to do pro bono work, assisted her husband with their consulting business called Advocacy Planning Associates, and currently works in the Governor's Equal Employment Opportunity office in Anchorage.

Finally, Thelma talked about her mother and grandmother as mentors, and that even as a child she organized projects. She believes there is a lack of interest in public service amongst the Asian American community. It seems that working and making money is more important. She is proud to have served her community and continues to work on issues, mostly social and cultural, and find ways to promote Filipino culture.