

Source: The Filipino American Experience in New Mexico, FANHS RG, 2014.

Dr. Adélar (Dely) Novino Alcántara: Demographer, Professor, Historian, and Community Leader

By Tessie J. Ordoña Greenfield

In 1903, the *Pensionado* (government scholars) Act 854 was passed by the Philippine Commission, authorizing the United States territorial government in the Philippines to sponsor promising Filipino students to study in the U.S. Most of these students were men who were usually children of wealthy Filipinos.¹ Decades later, these government and other educational scholarships paved the way for women and other deserving Filipinos of varying economic status and special fields of expertise. In the case of Dely Novino Alcántara, who already held a Masters degree in Demography from the University of the Philippines, an East-West Center scholarship program allowed her to come to the U.S. to complete a Ph.D. in Sociology and Demography from the University of Hawaii. As it turned out, fate directed her not only to demography but also to her future when she met her husband, Dr. Ted Jojola, a Native American from Isleta, New Mexico.

Dely began as the Senior Demographer at the University of New Mexico (UNM) Bureau of Business and Economic Research in Albuquerque. She is now the Director of the Geospatial and Population Studies (GPS) Program at UNM which she established in 2011. Demography is a statistical science of population, migration, and distribution that covers birth, fertility, health, mortality and death. It is a field that may not be as popular as Engineering or Computer Sciences but it is equally significant. Dely serves as the liaison between the state and the Census Bureau. Her statistical analysis is used at local and state levels in many applications that include budgets, the allocation of resources, and grant writing. “Population estimates are the denominator for calculating what percentages are qualified for things like Medicare or for requesting a new school,” Dely explains. “It is used for a lot of money-related issues. New Mexico would lose money in terms of programs if it were not done correctly. From that standpoint, I have to be careful. Budgets, planning, infrastructure, litigation, even water planning are all based from supporting documents arising from these statistics.”

In addition to being a demographer, Dely also serves as Research Professor at the UNM School of Architecture and Planning, Community and Regional Planning Program where she teaches Quantitative Analysis for Planners at a graduate level. “The course is very research-based,” says Dely. “They must first have a research question. Students will then develop a research project from its inception to report. They learn to formulate questions, collect data, process, present, and report them.”

A demographer and a professor at senior levels, Dely’s life outside of work covers such a wide-ranging spectrum of interests that one wonders how even “24 hours/7 days a week” are

¹ Borja-Mamaril, C. and Lim, T. (2000). *Filipino Americans: Pioneer to the Present*. Portland, OR: Filipino American National Historical Society Oregon Chapter. p. 118.

enough for her. At one point, she was serving simultaneously as the president of three organizations: The Filipino-American Foundation of New Mexico (FAFNM), the Bataan-Corregidor Memorial Foundation of New Mexico (BCNF), and the Asian American Association of New Mexico as well as acting as co-president of The Heritage Council.

The unification and visibility of Filipinos and Asians, human rights, and the preservation of culture and diversity as interests of hers intersect to such a degree that writing her biography in a sequential order becomes challenging. Among numerous awards she has received are the Frank J. Miranda Most Prestigious Human Rights Award in 2001 and The Governor's Award for Outstanding New Mexico Women by the Commission on the Status of Women in 2004. She has delivered major projects and continues to add to what is already a worthy legacy. Yet, with each accolade, Dely seldom talks about her personal life.

Dely was born in 1949 to Marcela Novino and Alejandro Alcántara, a World War II intelligence officer, in Moncada, Tarlac, Philippines where she was also raised. The eldest of six children and growing up with grandparents and a spinster aunt, Dely has always been more at ease with adults than with children.

During that time in the Philippines, if a child could reach her hand over the top of her head and touch her opposite ear (a strange but true "custom yardstick"), the child was deemed "big" enough to go to school regardless of age. Passing that qualification and having also begun reading at an early age, five-year-old Dely dutifully marched to school. Compared to her classmates, she was considered intellectually advanced and was allowed to skip a grade in elementary school. By 15, she graduated from high school and was, according to Dely, "clueless about the world." Having been groomed by her parents to be a doctor, she enrolled in pre-Med courses at the University of the Philippines in Manila. While in her junior year, however, an incident made her reconsider her plans. "When I was in Moncada, I brought a neighbor to the doctor because her face was swelling up and her breathing was blocked," recalls Dely. "The doctor discovered that a seed had grown inside her nose. In the process of removing the seed, blood gushed out of her face. When I saw that—I passed out!"

Afterwards, while she still didn't know what degree to pursue, she was absolutely sure it wasn't in the medical field. Without telling her parents, Dely shifted her major to Philosophy, not because she was interested in Aristotle or Socrates, but simply because it was the program with the least number of students. Much to the astonishment of her parents, she graduated with a degree in Philosophy. What could a Philosophy major offer in the real world?

A family friend then asked Dely if she would be interested in teaching at Dr. Nicanor Reyes Memorial College, a regional college owned by the Far Eastern University. Dely was determined to do the job, in spite of being a Philosophy major with no teaching experience. To ease her entrance into a world for which she was not trained, the school offered her a unique position that divided her teaching between high school and college levels. At only 19 years old, Dely began teaching Ethics to college students older than her in the Commerce and Education Department. At the high school level, she taught English Literature and Composition to freshmen and Spanish to seniors. "Teaching was a humbling experience for me. I was finding my way while trying to deal with behavioral issues like students disrupting the class. One of my students was a repeater when he was a freshman. I realized that he just needed attention so I assigned him to be a class monitor. This transformed him to become a good student. I found

out later he was called Number 17 at home because he was the 17th of 22 children from the same mother!”

Still unsure of her career path and growing uncomfortable teaching the older college students, Dely asked to be released from her teaching contract. She went to Manila to pursue a Masters degree “of some sort” and decided to pay for her own education since her parents were still paying for her other siblings’ college education.

She landed a job as a legal secretary to a lawyer who was also a UP graduate. “I did the job but I could not remember details,” says Dely. “I knew then that secretarial work was not for me but I needed the job and the benefits were good: free housing and a bonus every three months.”

Then Fate intervened again. Her boss frequently traveled to the United States where his family had moved and, in his absence, his law partner began giving her a hard time. She informed her boss of the problem and decided another career detour was due.

Dely answered a classified ad seeking a research assistant at the UP Population Institute. There were 200 applicants a day. Tests were administered and Dely made it into the first group of applicants with the highest scores. This led to an interview with Dr. John Lang, the head of the family planning program. Dr. Lang was a tall Anglo graduate of the University of Chicago whose intimidating presence, impatience, and sometimes hard-to-understand accent drove some staff to quiver or quit. After he interviewed Dely, he immediately offered her the job. Surprised, she cautioned him that she might not have enough mathematical background for the job. Dr. Lang assured her she could do the job so she accepted. Later, she discovered that she got the job because she passed several litmus tests: She didn’t cry or break down during the interview and she asked questions when she did not understand, a rare quality among Filipinos who would rather keep quiet than ask for clarification. She had found a job that was the right fit.

“Research suited my personality better,” says Dely. “I liked the flexibility of the work hours. I could just close the door and think.”

She had set her career in motion. While working, she also took courses related to statistics to lend more depth to her job. Later, she applied for and won a Southeast Asian Treaty Organization scholarship for a Masters in Demography at the University of the Philippines. Dely completed the program in one-and-a-half years.

After working for the UP Population Institute for four years and earning her MA, Dely’s academic pursuit gained her another scholarship for a PhD in Sociology with a certificate in Population Studies at the East West Center, University of Hawaii. The University of Hawaii had the best population program with the best package: Housing, books, research and stipend were funded. Here, she met Theodore (Ted) Jojola, a candidate in the doctorate program in Political Science and also an East-West Center grantee.

Ted did his dissertation research on cultural survival among tribal communities in the Cordillera and lived in the Philippines for two years. Dely and Ted were married in her hometown before Ted returned to Hawaii.

Before Ted even completed his doctorate degree, he became the interim Director of the Native American Studies Program at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 1980. In 1981, Dely gave birth to their son, Manoa, all the while continuing her own PhD work at the East West Center. After she earned her doctorate in 1983, she joined her husband during his visiting

academic appointment at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). By now, the couple was maintaining three residences in Albuquerque, Los Angeles, and Hawaii. With Manoa growing, the decision to live together under one roof became inevitable. California did not appeal much to Ted so when he was offered a joint appointment as Assistant Professor in the Community and Regional Planning Program as well as Director of Native American Studies at UNM, he grabbed it. He also submitted Dely's application to the university and, gradually, things started to fall in place. When a demographer's job became open, Ted, Dely, and Manoa were at last all living under one roof.

Her new job duties were not limited to statistics but included grant writing to fund different research projects and lobbying for money at the state level for her projects as well as for Ted's. Dely would come to utilize all these skills to benefit the many organizations she would later found or join as a member, including various associations for Filipino-Americans (Fil-Ams) and Asians, the Bataan Veterans, and youth projects.

After moving to Albuquerque, Dely participated in Fil-Am parties and events but her major involvement in Fil-Am activities truly surfaced in 1998. That year, she learned many of her friends from different states were involved in preparing for The Centennial Celebration of the Philippine Independence from Spain (1898). Dr. Jean Hall, a Filipina professor in Silver City, New Mexico, encouraged Dely to host an activity in Albuquerque. The Filipino American Association of New Mexico (FAANM, now FAFNM) was not ready in tackling such a monumental project; it had no funds and not enough manpower.

"I thought, 'the 100th Anniversary does not come very often,'" remembers Dely. "I would kick myself if I passed this up. Once I decided to tackle this, I wrote a grant from the State Endowment for Humanities and was awarded \$5000. I was able to get funds from individuals and groups that raised another \$5000 so we could plan a lunch or a dinner and pay honorariums to the speakers. I took eight weeks off from work. Jean and I set the momentum and before we knew it--we had convened an impressive list of historians, veterans, and Filipinos in an academic symposium attended by 300 to 400 people held on July 4th, 1998 in Albuquerque." Among those attending were Dr. Fred Cordova, founder of FANHS; Dr. Robert Heimrich, a historian and Marine veteran with expertise on the 200th and 515th Artilleries; members of the Bataan Veterans; Dr. Natividad Macaranas Brown (1924-2010; author of 3 books on her Filipino experiences) and Filipino-Americans from different walks of life. The event really served as just a "warm-up" to Dely's impact on the Filipino community that has continued today. "After that event," says Dely, "I thought we could rally Filipino Americans to become involved in something like history which is a neutral field."

In 1998, Dely and David Galbiso, together with Ted and seven members from the Fil-Am community, wrote the charter that led to the formation of the Rio Grande chapter of FANHS (Filipino American National Historical Society). During her presidency (1998 to 2000), she galvanized Fil-Ams into action focusing on their heritage and history. Finding only a black hole when it came to information about the Philippines and New Mexico, she initiated her own research that led from one bit of information to another. One link was between Filipinos in New Mexico during the early Spanish colonial era and the Manila Galleon trade. "The Manila Acapulco Galleon trademarked the link between the Philippines and New Mexico when the Spaniards used Manila as the connecting point of trade between Asia and North America," says Dely. "Because of the galleon trade that lasted more than 200 years, Filipinos and Mexicans

share some of the same plants, animals, words, and customs.” That interest culminated in the exhibit *Nao de China: The Manila Trade 1565–1816*, held in 2008-2009 at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

There are other points of interest as well. “The 1910 Census showed ten Filipinos in New Mexico were foreign-born. It was not clear whether they were born in New Mexico or another part of the U.S. Also, I learned from David Galbiso about the Filipino migrant workers. So, David, Ted, and I went to Bluewater where most of the Filipino agricultural workers like the Galbisos, Balidos, Orsinos, and the de Sallas started. Bluewater was the carrot capital of the world and where the early workers were Filipinos, Japanese, Spanish, and Native Americans. Only a few of the descendants like Mary Ann Montoya of San Rafael, New Mexico, remained in Grants County. Most have moved out, following the crops.”

Being married to a Native American with his own passion in cultural preservation, Dely also discovered how much the Native Americans have contributed to the Philippines. “There were traces of Apache Indians who served during the Spanish colonization in the 1900s. When the Philippines became a United States territory, Apache and Navajo Indians were sent to the Philippines to teach.”

Dely decided to apply for a grant to the City of Albuquerque Urban Enhancement Trust Fund (UETF) to pursue starting a program of oral history. Funded by the grant, the Oral History Workshop was held and resulting storyboards and brochures on the Philippine-New Mexico Connection were published. The Oral History lecture series where Fil-Ams relate their stories is now held two to three times a year. These projects resulted in this compendium of oral histories—an effort that might have never materialized without Dely’s driving force.

Dely also introduced the Pamana Heritage Awards to give impetus to Fil-Ams’ contribution to society and its positive image. The Awards Night brought out dignitaries such as Philippine Consul General Edwin Bael; Dr. Dorothy Cordova, FANHS Executive Director/Founder; Hellen Barber, Philippine Deputy Consul General; and Loida Nicolas Lewis, CEO, National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NAFFAA).

At the national level, Dely has served as one of the members of the FANHS Board of Trustees. She and Emilie Underwood were instrumental in hosting the 2003 FANHS National Trustees’ meeting and the 2012 FANHS National Conference in Albuquerque. After serving as president of FANHS RG, Dely became the president of FAFNM. During her term (2002-2004), she again applied for a grant to the City of Albuquerque UETF. This time, part of the grant was to bring to Albuquerque a Kulintang Master named Danongan Kalanduyan to perform and hold a Kulintang Workshop. As a result of the workshop, a new performing group came into being, the Kulintang Ensemble of Albuquerque. The grant also included the Cultural Dancers, Rondalla and the Fil-Am Puppet Groups.

Dely, Emilie, and numerous volunteers also brought the NAFFAA Regional Conference to Albuquerque in 2005. Attended by Filipinos and Asians, the conference tackled issues such as immigration, entrepreneurship, and domestic violence. This conference also included youth (young children and teenagers) which was a first in NAFFAA history. Dely successfully brought together different organizations and businesses to co-sponsor the event, including the Cultural Services of the City of Albuquerque that sponsored the formal reception at the Old Town Plaza.

In 2006, FAFNM alongside other organizations hosted a free Immigration and Naturalization Workshop that was open to the public. Representatives from the Filipino

Counsel General of Los Angeles staffed these workshops. Filipinos from neighboring states came to attend these workshops and to have important immigration documents processed.

At the helm of the Asian American Association of New Mexico, an organization with membership from ten Asian countries, Dely received a grant in 2003 from Stop Tobacco on My People (STOMP) New Mexico to fund anti-tobacco activities for Asian youth. Using puppetry, video production, T-shirts, computer animation, and symposia, STOMP continues to convey anti-tobacco messages. The City of Albuquerque and STOMP have also co-sponsored the annual Festival of Asian Cultures held in May, the Asian Pacific Heritage Month.

Perhaps the accomplishment Dely values the most was the establishment of the New Mexico Asian Family Center (NMAFC) in 2006. Housed in a building owned by Dely and Ted, they donate the space for its activities and offices. The organization grew from a few volunteers to more than a dozen paid staff and counselors. It is a pro-active, non-profit organization that focuses on providing local services for clients of domestic violence, gambling addiction and child abuse. They also have staff that is available for language interpretation, especially for police incidents and the judicial court system. In 2011, NMAFC was recognized nationally by First Lady Michelle Obama's Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at the White House. The chair of this initiative visited NMAFC in 2012.

Another effort that holds a special place in Dely's heart is the Bataan-Corregidor Memorial Foundation of New Mexico (BCMF of NM). It grew out of a tragic connection between WWII Filipino and American soldiers. Her father, Alejandro Alcántara, was a survivor of the Bataan Death March. After moving to New Mexico, she soon learned that over 1800 men from the New Mexico National Guard were federalized as the 200th and 515th Coast Artillery just prior to the onset of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Stationed in Clark Field, Luzon Philippines, they were literally the "first to fire" just hours after the sneak-attack. They were surrendered on April 9th, 1942. "When I became the president of BCMF of NM in 2000-2001, I asked the veterans what they wanted me to accomplish. They said they wanted to have the Bataan Memorial that had been promised to them since 1943. Bataan Park (located at Lomas and Carlisle in Albuquerque) was in danger of being turned into a sandbox. If we didn't act fast, we could totally lose the park that had been meant to honor the veterans.

"I went to Coleen French of the city's Parks and Recreation Department and explained that the veterans of the Bataan-Corregidor were dying. The memorial was a way of honoring them and putting closure to a difficult period in history. After a 10-minute talk, Coleen assured me to consider it done."

In spite of the reassurance, there was a caveat: More than \$50,000 was needed to complete the project. Understanding levels of power, Dely gathered the veterans and together they went to Santa Fe several times a week for months. The group lobbied for funds and worked to convince state senators to award them funds from the capital outlay money. They were awarded \$75,000.

"The hardest job in this project," recalls Dely "was first getting the accurate list of the 1800 veterans and then narrowing the list down to the names of those who had been trained in Fort Bliss before being sent to the Philippines. The payroll list was not accurate because it included veterans who had come from San Francisco and joined the 200th and 515th Artilleries. We knew that, without this list, there would be no Bataan Memorial. Luckily, we were blessed

to have Bernadette Gallegos, the Foundation secretary, who had access to Internet military records and we completed the record in due time.”

On April 7, 2002, a year after Dely’s meeting with the City’s Parks and Recreation Department, twelve granite columns bearing the names of 1800 veterans became a reality when the \$300,000 memorial was inaugurated.

“When the granite columns were finally erected, the veterans were in tears. They could not believe it would ever happen. They started talking about their painful episodes during the Death March, a painful past they did not openly share before. I couldn’t believe it but we had done it,” Dely admits. “It was a way of honoring the veterans and my father and perhaps providing them closure to this difficult time in their lives.”

In 2000, Dely and Ted’s family was struck by personal tragedy. Their only child, Manoa Alcántara Jojola—a talented 18-year-old musician and at the apex of his life—was killed in an auto accident by a driver fleeing a police high-speed pursuit. The tragic death of a child can cripple parents emotionally but there can be a constructive way of dealing with grief. For Dely and Ted, this terrible episode led them to establish a foundation in their son’s name. “Manoa used to talk about his plans to go to New York for two years and get work on Broadway and then come back to start a school for children for creative expressions. To honor him, Ted and I established The Manoa Endowment for Cultural Diversity at Manoa’s high school, the Albuquerque Academy.” This endowment supports a library collection of Jazz materials, school activities that promote diversity and creative expression, and a summer student apprentice Theater Program called *The Manoa Project* run by the Tricklock Theater Group. Each summer, students from around the city can participate in this apprenticeship program that is completely free of charge. At the end of the session, they participate in staging an original student-produced play. There is also a Manoa Youth Award, a biennial Pamana Award for an outstanding young Filipino-American in New Mexico. As a final tribute to their son, Dely and Ted introduced and lobbied the New Mexico State Legislature for the passage of a police high-speed bill. Three years after Manoa’s untimely death, The Uniform Safe-Pursuit Act was signed into legislation, thereby protecting both police officers and the public from such incidents.

A Filipina who has always been proud of her heritage, Dely is a professor, historian, a tireless activist, and a resourceful champion of the underprivileged and disenfranchised. In spite of personal loss, her influence has brought more visibility than ever before to Filipinos and Asians, our war veterans, and the youth of our communities.

With her life, the young lady who once earned that degree in Philosophy teaches us that there is no issue too big to tackle.◆

NOTE: Photos, which took a lot of memory, are not included in this article which is downloaded on the website.