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## Filipina activist Buell writes family history to understand herself

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When Evangeline "Vangie" Canonizado Buell welcomes you into her Berkeley home, she asks two questions: Would you like something to eat? To drink?

She won't take no for an answer. It's an endearing combination of determination and compassion that has governed the life of this community activist.

From her tireless work for UC Berkeley's International House (where she "retired" as the events coordinator in 1992) and the Filipino American National Historical Society (for which she helped co-found its East Bay chapter), to writing books about the Filipino American experience, this 74-year-old dynamo of Filipino and African descent is bent on one thing: recording history.

"Writing our history and knowing our culture is knowing ourselves," Buell says early Sunday morning over slices of sweet, nutty bread and strong black coffee. We're chatting in her dining room/office. Papers overflow the table, and photos of her family and civil rights leaders such as Rosa Parks, Paul Robeson and Pete Velasco of the Delano grape strike line the walls of her home.

Buell is a living historical gem herself: She's the granddaughter of a Buffalo Soldier -- the nickname given by American Indians in the 19th century to black American soldiers. Even rarer: Her grandfather Ernest Stokes was one of the 6,000 Buffalo Soldiers sent to the Philippines to fight during the Spanish-American War during the 1890s. And he was one of the few who stayed, married a Filipina (Buell's grandmother) and had children.

In her memoir "Twenty-Five Chickens and a Pig for a Bride: Growing Up in a Filipino Immigrant Family" (T'Boli Publishing, 2006), Buell recounts her grandfather's experience, and her own, as one of the few Filipinos growing up in West Oakland during the 1930s and '40s.

She remembers seeing "No Filipinos or dogs allowed" signs posted at restaurants and having to wear a button that said "I am a loyal Filipino" during World War II, because even though she didn't look Japanese, she was still Asian -- and vulnerable to harassment.

"When I was walking in San Francisco with Bill (her husband) down the street to go to the Opera, and, you know, it was a crowded street, a white man came up to me and called me all kinds of names and said, 'You shouldn't even be here,' " Buell says.

"That was only a year ago," she adds.

But it doesn't surprise her.

In fact, her family's struggle to overcome racism began long before World War II. It was the reason her Grandpa Stokes, who grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn., signed up for the Army in the first place.

"He was escaping from the prejudice (in the United States), the discrimination. He felt that going to a foreign land would be better."

Turns out it didn't matter where he went.

"He was sent out by the Caucasian soldiers into the front line to take the bullets from the opposite side," she continues. "It was only their cunning and their street-wise defiance that they were able to not get shot."

When Spain lost, it ceded the Philippines to the United States. The Philippine-American War ensued, and Stokes was ordered to remain with about 100 others to quash the Philippine campaign for independence.

There was a problem, however. Many of the Buffalo Soldiers identified with the Filipinos "because they, too, were treated as savages by the Caucasian soldiers," Buell says. "So my grandfather did not want to shoot the Filipino soldiers."

Stokes was among the Buffalo Soldiers who married Filipinas. His wife's name was Maria Bunag, and they had three daughters, one of whom, Felicia, was Buell's mother. When Bunag died in 1917, Stokes could not serve in the military and care for his children, so he sent them to live with their mother's relatives.

The acceptance that Stokes enjoyed in the Philippines, however, did not extend to two of his daughters, including Buell's mother. Because the girls "did not look like their cousins ... and had darker skin and coarse hair," Buell says, they were treated like servants and beaten at their Uncle Nicolas' home, where Stokes had sent them. Older male cousins also repeatedly raped Buell's mother and aunt. The abuse went on for five years until Stokes found out and rescued them.

Stokes later remarried, to another Filipina, Roberta Dungca. He stayed 25 years in his adopted country before leaving for West Oakland with Dungca and the children in 1928.

Buell says her favorite memories are of her grandfather bouncing her, her younger sister and their cousin on his knee while he counted to them in Cantonese and sang in Tagalog. Stokes learned eight languages while in the Philippines, including Tagalog, Chinese, Spanish and various Philippine dialects. He even made gin in the bathtub.

He died in 1936 and is buried at the Presidio. A monument looms at the site, honoring the Tennessee fighters who went to the Philippines.

Buell says the monument serves as a physical reminder of the unique Filipino-black connection that remains relevant today.

"The relations between the African Americans and the Filipinos, the beginning of that, was in the Philippines. ... And it's important today in terms of Filipinos getting to know black Americans and (black people) getting to know the Filipinos -- to know that we have had that relationship way back, a hundred years ago."

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Twenty-Five Chickens and a Pig for a Bride: Book reading with author Evangeline Canonizado Buell. 7 p.m. today. \$5 donation. Oakland Public Conservatory of Music, 1616 Franklin St., Oakland. (510) 836-4649, [www.opcmusic.org](http://www.opcmusic.org).

Filipinos in the East Bay: 1906-2007: Buell's third book, with Evelyn Luluquisen, Lilian Galledo and Ellie Luis, is due out in January 2008. Arcadia Publishing. [www.arcadiapublishing.com](http://www.arcadiapublishing.com).

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