I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Nicky Calma

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Nicky Calma conducted by Caro De Robertis on November 30, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Narrator: Nicky Calma | Location: San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Caro De Robertis | Date: November 30, 2022

Q: So, Nicky Calma, thank you so much for joining me for this conversation, here in your office in San Francisco.

Calma: Very welcome, thank you.

Q: It's such an honor. So, could you please tell me your name, and in your own terms, who you are?

Calma: Okay. Well, my name is Nicky Calma and I come from the Philippines, I'm originally from the Philippines. I moved here in 1989 to kind of, like, explore the true me, the real me. I didn't have it that rough back home in the Philippines, but I had to leave the Philippines, because I was really searching to become who—I mean, who am I? And at that age, I was, like, around, I think twenty-one or twenty. It was very challenging, I was living with my family. And, you know, the Philippines is ninety-five percent Catholic, so that influenced a lot in our household. And my dad was very particular about, you know, getting—for the kids, there's two of us.

We're kind of, like, radicals, because I think we lived this closeted life as Catholics. We'd go to church every Sunday, my dad would make us read the Bible, you know. And kind of, like, okay, we—I need to get out of here. You know, so, things like that. But an opportunity came, and I had

the chance to come here to the United States, and then just worked my way to make the United States my permanent residence. And I identify as a transgender woman. My sexual orientation, it's kind of like a cross between straight and queer. Because I kind of, like, dug deeper about sexual orientation than, what really is it, for me. A lot of revelations, for me, started about my sexuality, about who I'm attracted to or who I would prefer to be with, when I was in my forties. But, I'm in my fifties, fifty-five to be exact, as of this talk.

Q: Oh, congratulations. May I ask what year you were born, and where in the Philippines?

Calma: I was born in 1967, and what was the other—?

Q: Where in the Philippines?

Calma: I was born in Manila, Philippines. I was born in a place where there was electricity, you know. And I grew up in the Philippines, in Manila, also. How do I say this? Been very glad that my parents were able to send me and my sister to good schools. I went to an all-boys disciplinarian Catholic boys' school. It was run by the Dominican priest order. Of course, religion was always in the picture. Everything was based on that. I learned a lot. I mean, those things that I learned, about religion, about faith, it was very, like, Madonna. It was kind of, like, guiding principles, but at the same time, taught me also how to become that radical person. That I sometimes, kind of like, "Why can't I love? Why can't I be with the person that I want to be?" Which is, at that time, I was attracted to men.

Q: Do you remember at what age you started to experience yourself as attracted to men or boys?

Calma: Oh, yes. I mean, it was early, early on. And so, when they say like, "Oh, being gay, or being attracted to the same-sex, is something that you just learn. It doesn't come naturally." I'm kind of like, no, I don't think so, because I already was attracted to a lot of different kinds of men. And I think there was this piece where—so, I saw my dad as my dad. And I love my dad, but I don't love him, at the same time. Because he's the one who was giving all this, "You can't do this, you can't do that," and everything. While I have uncles, I have older folks who were—we lived in an apartment complex—who I met, who were all very carefree about sexuality, about orientation. I mean, at the age of six, I saw pornography already, and I was like, okay. I mean, it wasn't that I was interested, but I think it was just, you know, when you get peer pressure and you're influenced by other folks. "Oh, let's look at it," and everything like that. And it was here in the United States when I started to realize, who am I? Who really was I dealing with in front of the mirror?

When I was, I think, maybe ten years old, before my first trip here to the United States, we would go on vacation in the "Summer Capital of the Philippines," called Baguio city. And it's up in the mountains, it's up there. And it's cold there. They grow strawberries, they grow things that can't grow in tropical settings, tropical weather. And it's a vacation spot for a lot of Filipinos, especially during summertime, to experience the cold weather and everything. And we stayed at this popular hotel that everybody stayed at. And that was the time when I first saw someone who was transgender. She was the one playing this musical organ in the lobby, entertaining people, providing music. And I think I was probably, like, eight or nine. And I was watching her, and

aside from my interest of, like, “Oh, I want to play the organ, too,” something like that. I looked at her, and, you know, I tell this to a lot of folks: kids will tell you the truth. And I was in that category at that time.

And I was looking at her, and I was like, this woman is too beautiful to be perfect. I was looking at her, she was gorgeous, she had beautiful hair. The way she played the organ, she was very graceful. Like, the music was also kind of, like, connecting with her movement, and all that stuff. And then she started staring back at me, also. And she was like, “What can I do for you? Do you have a request?” She was asking me. I said, “No, no, no.” I was a little shy. “I was just watching you,” I said. And then, my mom was also observing me, watching her and everything. And her name was Lady Valerie, I found out, and she was the entertainment at the lobby of the hotel. This organist, this humongous monster of an instrument. I mean, you really need to know how to operate this thing, and she was just doing it with two hands and her two feet, you know, with the pedals. So it was kind of like, Hmm, you know. That was my first exposure. And then—

Q: Do you have any memory of what it felt like? In your body, or thoughts that went through your mind? In experiencing her and seeing this person?

Calma: I think, I mean, if I can remember it right, when I first saw her, because she was wearing this beautiful halter top, and it was, like, a jumpsuit, and it had sequins on it. You know, like rhinestones and sequins. And that excited me. That excited me a lot. And being the eldest in our family, and at the same time, the first grandchild on my father’s side, I was a little bit spoiled. I always get what I want. When there’s a new record of this local superstar actress, I was always,

"I need to get that record," things like that. And I always tried to—I think I was lip syncing already, at that age, because I played the record and everything. But Lady Valerie, the impact was just like, there was a lot of questions. How did she get that beautiful breasts, and everything. Because, as I told you, kids tell the truth all the time. I kind of, like, picked up on her scent. This person is not like what I think it is, you know. And I couldn't put my finger on it, because I didn't know what transgender was at that time. In the Philippines, when you exist, and let's say you were assigned male at birth, and suddenly you became this flaming gay person. And even trans folks, they categorize them as gay.

And then, when you're assigned female at birth, and you become this big bull dyke, or you started to think that maybe I'm a man, you know, I feel a man. You're lesbian. The transgender did not really exist. And, also, having that Catholic influence was also, those were the unspoken words. You don't talk about transsexuals, you don't talk about transvestites. Gay and lesbian is already heavy hitters. Once you talk about that, everybody's quiet at the dining table. So trans was just not there. And that piqued my curiosity. What did she go through in the transition? And it stayed in my mind. And fast for—but that was the catalyst for me to start looking into, when my mom would have her manicurist come to service her, I would ask, "Put color on my nails, too," you know, things like that.

Q: You wanted that. You knew you wanted that.

Calma: I wanted that. Yes, I wanted that.

Q: Did she ever grant it for you?

Calma: Oh, yes, yes, I mean, it was there. “Just put it on,” she’ll just say that. And then she will tell me, “Make sure you just acetone, you take it off when your dad comes home.” And one time I took—

Q: So your mother let you. Pardon. Your mother let you receive manicures, as long as you removed them before your dad came home?

Calma: Yes. It was more just colors. And one time, I made a decision, a bold decision, not to take them off. Not to acetone them off. And we were eating, and my dad saw it, and he went in a rage. He was like, “What is this? What’s going on here?” And I said, “Oh, just playing.” And then my mom looked at me, and was turning red already. In her eyes, I could see, “What did I tell you? You need to take these things off.” And then, it was just really, like, my dad’s final statement was, “Take them off after dinner.” So, that was it. So, I already had this, as I said, I love my dad, but I don’t love him. And then I expressed to him, “I want to learn how to decorate rooms.” You know, interior designing and everything. Because he has a construction business, and I think his projection for me was to take over the business, later down the road. He was encouraging me to—”you need to explore a course in architecture or engineering,” and all this stuff. “Well, I want to do interior design. Or even just, like, art itself”.

And he always tells me that, “If you’re going to be living under my roof, and you’re going to be eating the food that I buy with the money I earned, then you have to follow my rules.” And that

was the catalyst for me to just really, “I’ve got to get out of here.” And it was not—kind of, like, rebellious, but it’s not, because I don’t have any choice if it doesn’t work, I still have to live in that house, you know. And I was like, “Okay.” I mean, there were limited options, but they were options that were for sure. Either I leave or—you know. And then the chance came for me to come here to the United States with a group of friends. And that’s what made me stay, that was in ’89. And since then, my eyes were opened to all of these concepts. Transgenderism and all this stuff. I read articles about Christine Jorgensen. You know, and when I got here, it wasn’t that easy for me. It wasn’t like I had a place to stay. I actually was with this group of friends, one of them is a leading actress in the Philippines, and she was contracted to do a show here in the United States for her fans to see her. And in that group, in our group, she has these friends who are not showbiz folks. I was one of them. I was the only one who had a visa, who could come to the United States. And all her assistants were not granted visas. So it was, “I’d like to hire you to be my production assistant for the show.” I said, “Yes, I can do that,” because I’d see that all the time, whenever she would go out and do shows. So, I took advantage of it. And then, I told my mom, actually. I said, “I might not come back. I’m just going to live it out there.” And she was, whether yes or no—because she knows that I can be very independent. I’ve done many things that I’ve made decisions for myself, and they were good decisions. They were little things, but it was good decisions.

So, when I got here, I told my friend, “Hey, I’m going to stay behind,” and everything. And she was telling me, “Well, you know, if you don’t come back and you become known to be undocumented or illegal here, or something, that’s going to reflect on me, because you are with my group.” I was like, “I’m not going to make that happen.” I said, “If I realize that I have to go

back, then I'll go back. But I just want to try it out." So that was the one that made a catalyst for me to stay, and everything. And when I did that, I had friends already, because we'd been coming in and out of the States for summer vacations. My whole family. And I met some friends here already. But this time, it was very different, because I had to survive. I only had, I think, $500 with me, and my two suitcases. And I didn't know the system, I didn't know how it worked. And then, you know, you get to hang out with—to meet these people. And that's when they got me into doing sex work. They said, "Well, you're going to be a good-looking man, and then you're going to get paid to do this, and, you know, you like to do these things."

Q: Did you identify as gay at this point?

Calma: At that time, yes.

Q: Or some other way? At that time?

Calma: No, it was gay, at that point, yes. But also, again, it was all happening at the same time. These folks who were influencing me to do sex work, they were all actually—I met them on the streets, because I would hang out in the streets. Because when you're young—you know. And I loved San Francisco. I mean, like, "I'm here," you know? And I met them. And most of them are trans women of color. African-American, particularly. And they were—at that time, they looked at the Asian girls as their little babies, or someone who they can ally with whenever they're working. Because these are big-sized trans women, you know. But they were transgender, I knew they were transgender. And that's when I started confirming already, "Okay, this community

exists. This identity exists. So, I want to be this." But it wasn't allowing [*sic*] for me at that time. I just got here, I'm starting a life.

Q: You were just trying to survive.

Calma: Yes, I was trying to survive. And some of them really were very nice, and kind enough to let me sleep on their couch, in their living room, in their place. They tried to make things work. I don't know whether they were trying to perpetuate sex work or something [*laughs*], because later, "Oh, these will be the new sex workers," or something like that. But, I mean, at the time, my view, also, of sex work was really more of like what I saw on television back home in the Philippines, with the American shows. And it kind of felt a little bit glamorous, because when they leave the house, they're all made up, beautiful. It's the kind of dresses that I like, miniskirts and everything, and all this stuff. And they were very nice. I mean, when they would ask me, sometimes, just to hang out with them, because they're feeling a little bit nervous or anxious or scared that the police might come around and do a sweep, at least someone is watching over them. And they would ask, "Are you hungry? Here. Here's a ten, go get something to eat, and come back later." I mean, there was this—I mean, every time I think about it, I was lucky. I was very lucky.

Because these people were nice to me. They kind of like, took me in, and I mean—I mean, they were generous in the way that they can be, letting me stay with them. And I learned a lot. That was where I learned a lot, to become street-smart. You know, what to avoid, what not to get into. They never brought me and influenced me to do drugs. They did it on their own, they were doing

it, but they were just really looking after us. There was probably, maybe, two or three of us who were always consistent with them. And that's where I have so much respect for women—anybody who does sex work. Because they were not only just taking care of themselves, but they took care of this group of people, they took care of others. And that was not what I knew, you know? I mean, some people—sex work is not, like, you come in at nine and leave at five. You can't choose who—if you're really serious with it, you can't choose who you're going to be with. There's this danger of this person that you're going to be with who might go cuckoo on you, or something. And some of them actually were telling me, I asked them, "Do you tell them you have a dick or something?" I would say that. "Some don't know." And that's where I—the first thing in me was like, "So what happens if they find out?" "Girl, that's when you get out of the car and you run." [*Laughs*] And I was like, "No, but that's dangerous" I said. "What if these people have weapons or something to hurt you?" And that's when everything was just connecting for me about sex work, transgender folks who have to do these things, and all this stuff. And I had a good—what to call this, intro to sex work, because these were real things that people were telling me, and what I was seeing. And then I tried to do sex work. I tried to do sex work. I had to survive.

Q: How did it go?

Calma: It went well, because first I was the fresh meat that was out there. I was glad, because these women protected me. I mean, there were some growing pains, because some of them may have felt jealous, because we were the new ones, the young ones that were being picked. Plus, there's this Asian factor that, "Oh, wow, Asian." How people use us as fetishes and everything.

Q: Yes, how did you experience that fetishization?

Calma: At first I liked it, because there's validation. But it didn't last long, because I was just—especially when I hear someone say, "Well, when I saw you oriental girls." And I'm like, "You make us sound like we're oriental sauces or something." [*Laughs*] And I was just absorbing all this knowledge, all this information.

Q: Because I imagine it might have also been different for you, as an Asian person who didn't grow up in the United States, who grew up in the Philippines, or in a country where you weren't othered for your race in that same way.

Calma: Yes, and what was so interesting, is that—

Q: It's a shift.

Calma: Yes, the shift was—so, I was, I would—the Johns [clients] that would pick me up, or would choose me to be their flavor of the night, they're mostly good-looking men, and I noticed that. And I think it was really because I was young, and I was new on the strip.

Q: May I ask just a quick question? Were you presenting as a gay boy, gay young man? Or were you presenting as female in this sex work?

Calma: Oh no. It was as female, because I learned, already, all—

Q: And was this your first time going out on the street, presenting as female? Was it through sex work, it was your first time?

Calma: Yes, yes.

Q: And what was that like for you?

Calma: It was confusing at first, and then I had so many questions. I would ask, "What if they find out you have a dick? I mean, you're not a woman?" And this one girl, I remember her name is Sylvia. "You're a woman! Just think about it, you're a woman! It doesn't matter what's between your legs. You're a woman. Look at you, you're a woman." And some of the girls would just, "No, she looks like an Asian with [*unclear*]." And, okay. [*Laughs*] There was shade already. But it was all loving shade, it's not putting people down. But it was confusing at first, it was very confusing at first. Because I was doing something that I think I was going to enjoy. I go back to Lady Valerie, you know, and I was looking so good, and everything. I wore a wig, it changed my look and everything. So, it was something I was liking, and then, at the same time, I was dreading a little bit of the sex work piece, because it's not something that—because, coming from a Catholic family, sex is sacred, sex is something that produces life, and all those sorts of concepts. So, I was confused, I was really confused. And I felt kind of like, "Okay, let's just go along with the flow here. Let's just let it roll." And the first two months were good. I didn't go

out that much, because I was also scared. Plus, it was cold, it was really cold. I told them, "How do you all keep yourselves warm?" And that's the one that didn't click in me.

They were using drugs so that they could stay up late and be on the streets until four or five in the morning. And that's when I kind of, like, Oh, okay. And that was it. And at that time, I was here as a visitor, as a tourist at the time. Because I told my friend, "I'm going to stay here." I had to work on my green card, I had to work on staying here permanently, legally and recognized. And that came around. And I was lucky enough to find people who were willing to sponsor me, and all that stuff, because I had strong ties in the Philippines. I revolved myself in the world of show business there, and most of them have relatives here, and friends. My friend connected me with them, and the rest was like, here I am at [the SF] Masonic [Auditorium], taking my oath as an American citizen. So, it worked out. But after that two months, I felt kind of like, "I don't think I want to do this." Or I'd just feel like, "Every night you have to do this, you have to put this." And that was also another piece that I was asking myself. I was bearded. I had a beard, I had hair on my face. And I watched them shave, and I was like, "Hmm, if I shave, it'll grow." And then that's when they said, "Oh, you need to do electrolysis. Oh, you need to do this." I mean, this was Transgender 101, 102, 103, everything. I was absorbing it. There's no amount that I can put of money for all this education that I was getting from these women. I mean, they were the ones who taught me everything. To be street smart, to learn about transgenderism, and all of these things that I needed to know to survive. But it came to a point where, "Hey, you know, I have options here. I have other things that I can do." I immediately tried to connect with some Filipinos. And this was just so funny. So, I was at Fisherman's Wharf, Pier 41, Pier 42, and I was just walking there, walking there, because that was one place that looked very happy for

me. And then I went through the back of Pier 41. There was this group of folks who worked for Red and White Fleet, Crowley Maritime. They're all speaking Tagalog. So I spoke to them in Tagalog, oh, [Tagalog][00:30:34]? You know, in Tagalog, "How are you?" And then they said, "Oh, what's going on?" And I was like, "Oh, just visiting." "Oh, you're just visiting? On vacation?" "Oh, yes, yes." And then I was like, "Do you guys know anything like, maybe, any jobs here or something?" Because I was willing to take anything at that time.

Because I was already like, "I can't stay long with these folks, they're not going to take care of me for the rest of my life." And sex work wasn't profitable for me, because I only had one dress I always wore all the time, and one wig that was synthetic, it was getting so bad. Even the girls that I was staying with were like, "Come here, we need to shop for a new wig for you." I was not concentrating on it. It was not something that I wanted to do. And then those people at Fisherman's— "Oh, talk to Carlito [phonetic]. Carlito is the manager of this catering company here, that does the Alcatraz boats." So, long story short, I was able to find an under-the-table job over there. I was earning $5.75 an hour, so that was already big for me. And what I did was, it was the Crowley Maritime Red and White Fleet. These were the boats that went to Alcatraz [prison]. Did the [San Francisco] Bay cruise. They had commuter boats from the Ferry Building to Sausalito and Tiburon, and all that stuff. So, what I did was, I had radios. When a boat is coming in from Alcatraz, they're going to radio me like, "We need two cases of Miller [Genuine] Draft, we need two cases of Coke, we need this, we need hot dog buns," and everything. And I'll prepare it. And then, once the boat comes in, I'd bring it there and then I'd drop it off. That was my job. I mean, this was four boats at the same time, coming all in. And it was a job. You know, it made me get over the whole day. I'd come in at six in the morning. Five o'clock, I'm done.

And then, luckily, the Loma Prieta earthquake happened. This was ’89. The bridge was down. The bridge did not work, something dropped off from the first thing. And then people were scared to ride BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit], and all this stuff. So Crowley Maritime, the company, brought in these large boats from Catalina Island. And the ferry commute from Ferry Building to Jack London Square started.

And they were short of people, and most of the people who were there were mostly, like, people who were cleaning. And I’m not trying to downgrade them, but they loved their jobs. They cleaned. They came in. At that time, they, “Do you want to come in?” They left, and they drank beer, or whatever. They invited me to go with them, but I was so concentrated. So they said, “Hey, Nicky.” At that time, my name was different. It was my deadname [name used prior to transitioning]. “Do you know how to bartend? Or, do you know how to mix drinks?” I can make a Bloody Mary, I know what a Screwdriver is. “Oh, yes, that’s simple, yes, yes.” “Do you want to be a bartender or something? You know, because we really need people to run the snack bars on the boats.” And I said, “Sure, why not.” And after that, when they brought me on, I was the first boat that came out from Jack London Square. We had six hundred people to go to the Ferry Building in San Francisco. And then, I didn’t realize that six hundred people wanted coffee. [*Laughs*] So, we had this special. I thought, because usually we only sell, like, maybe twenty or thirty coffees from Tiburon, because I know the inventories, because I load the boats. And we had this special, a dollar for a coffee and a donut. So, long story short, I sold six hundred cups of coffee with a donut, and I was tired. And then, after that, I just didn’t realize. I think people were so excited that this ferry was— “Wow, this is new, it’s a new thing.” It took people’s minds off, like, “Another earthquake might happen,” or something like that. I looked at my tip jar, and I had

almost, like, five hundred dollars in the tip jar, because they gave a dollar for the coffee and donut and they gave a dollar tip. And I was pleasant: “Good morning! How are you? Here. Fresh donuts,” and everything. And I was like, Okay. My mind started working. “Oh my god. Five hundred.” And I was the only one running the snack bar. And then coming back again through San Francisco to Oakland, the same thing happened.

I had, like, four hundred dollars in tips. And I was like, “Hold on. This is a good gig.” And I did that for maybe two months before they opened up the bridge again, and there was a little bit of a slowdown, but it was happening, but it gave me time to save money, to be able to afford things that I couldn’t afford when I first got here. The other bartenders, we would go out and eat a steak. In a certified steakhouse, not just, like, here and there. And it gave me the opportunity to have some money. And at that time, I was also kind of like, “Okay, now things are starting to move forward for me.” I was feeling confident about myself. But it didn’t last, because the bridge opened, and then the ferry rider just went down, and everything. But, since then, that was when I said, “Let me try retail. Macy’s, here we come.” Macy’s San Leandro. And I did that, and it was good, it was fine, but it was not satisfying. I meet new people. And there was this rigidness of if you’re only just a sales associate, and then you have all these managers, I mean, they make you do things, and you don’t even hear a “Please, could you do this.” I mean, they were just, like, “You work.” This one manager was like, “I can’t go into the men’s restroom, but can you look, there’s a puddle of water there, and if you can just, like, take care of it.” And I’m like, “That’s what janitors are for, not sales associates.” So, all this was happening, and then that’s when I started to try to find community, now. I was looking for community, and that’s

where I found Asian AIDS Project. They had a peer-leader program for API [Asian/Pacific Islander] gay men, and they were doing a pilot for API transgender women.

Q: So, you first connected with Asian AIDS Project in a search for community. In a search for building more community here.

Calma: Yes.

Q: And they had a project for gay men, they had a project for trans women. How were you identifying, and how were you presenting most of the time, at that time in your life?

Calma: Mostly, at the time, I was presenting as male.

Q: And what did you know about, or feel about, or wonder about yourself? At that time?

Calma: Yes, that's a great question, because I presented as male, but I already was starting to feel, with all the experience that I had with these trans women on the street, you know, and the sex work, and everything. I was like, "Okay, I really need to be certain, here, about who I am and what I do." And at Macy's, when I was working there, I was what they call the flyer. So, the flyer goes to hot spots, when it's busy, and they support, either ringing people up or helping other customers. And my shift was from, I think, three o'clock until nine o'clock, until closing. So, most of the time, I would either get assigned at makeup, perfume—it's mostly women's stuff. And I think it all just started falling in together. But, at that time, as I said, I was also

looking for community. Asian AIDS project had that peer-leader program that they were trying out for trans women. It was a trial run, they didn't have funding for it. They were supposed to do, I think, three or four cohorts of the peer-leader program for API MSM [men who have sex with men]. They hijacked one of them and they made it into transgender, because they were seeing transgender folks emerging, already. Like, in bars, and all this stuff. And this was, I think, 1993. And I went there, and I said, "Oh, just looking for any support, or something." And then I wanted to volunteer, also. And they took me in. There was a staff of seven people. And that's when I started to know folks in the nonprofit world around HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] and AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome]. Filipino Task Force on AIDS [FTFA] was there. San Francisco AIDS Foundation was there.

Those were the leaders, especially San Francisco AIDS Foundation. And I explored, until I went to Filipino Task Force on AIDS, because they were all Filipino, so we ate the same thing, we spoke the same language, and everything. And that's when the ED of that, the executive director of that, during that time, they were really having a challenge on how to reach out to highest-risk Filipinos for HIV infection. Because there's this thing about Filipinos, like, "Oh, no, we're not that. We won't get infected." At San Francisco General Hospital, Ward 86, the highest incidents of HIV infection for the Asian community, API community, was Filipinos. It was Filipinos. And that's why they were able to get some money, specifically Filipino Task Force on AIDS. So there was a lot of people coming to their organization, seeking case management and all this stuff. So it was just like, we had dinner one time, and I was volunteering, and then the ED was like, "You know, this is really what we're experiencing, this, this, and this. I wonder what we can do." So, I was like, "Well, did you ever think about, maybe, having a spokesperson, or somebody who will

talk to the community? Because they don't want to talk to you all, because you all are preaching, 'this is how you get infected,' maybe that's not what they want to hear." So we all thought about it, and then the idea of Tita Ida came around already. That was where, there's this famous actress in the Philippines who was a stand-up comic, and her thing was that she was nouveau riche [new-money]. She suddenly became rich, and then started to have breeding, and like, she was funny. She was just so funny. Teaching Filipinos the difference between rich, poor, different kinds of rich people, different kinds of poor people, things like that.

It was fun, it was slapstick comedy. And then there was someone who suggested, "Well, how about doing something with a character like that one?" She was called Dania Boudine [*phonetic*], because she was a little bit hefty. "Someone who, instead of all this comedy, maybe give advice, or something." And then we started toying around with the ideas. And then I said, I think that's good, let's try it. And I was just saying, let's do it. So, they took care of it. They had this search for Tita Aida. And, "Tita," as we call our aunties in the Philippines, "Tita," and "Aida." And at that time, when HIV was really—Filipinos have a way of talking to each other, how to say someone has AIDS or HIV. "Tita Aida, Tita Aida."

Q: People were already saying that? Using "Tita Aida" to mean, "Oh, like, she's visited?" It's a way of saying, "AIDS has come here?"

Calma: Yes, no, no, no. It's, "Someone has AIDS."

Q: They were already saying Tita Aida. So, owning that as a character.

Calma: Well, it wasn't a character yet, at that time. But that's what we heard. And we were like, "Oh, someone's saying that this is how they call people with HIV." Filipinos have HIV, Tita Aida. They'll say, "This person has Tita Aida," something like that. So, the Tita Aida thing was like, okay. Because "Aida" is the gay lingo for AIDS in the Filipino community. So, what do we call the person, Tita Aida? If they're talking about it and they use it, let's use that, so that they're familiar with it. So, they had this search for Tita Aida. And probably ten people thought it was a beauty contest, and they joined. [*Laughs*] "Oh, is there going to be a swimsuit competition?" And they had to explain, "We're looking for someone who can be a spokesperson of Filipino Task Force on AIDS and talk about HIV/AIDS to the community."

Q: Was this meant to be a paid position, or it was a volunteer position?

Calma: No. It was a volunteer position.

Q: And you were still a volunteer at the time.

Calma: I was still a volunteer at that time. And then, it was so funny because, "Oh, we thought it was a beauty contest." But there was a prize. There was a prize, it was $300 if you get chosen to be the Tita Aida. And I just wish I'd kept the stuff that we had at that time. But this was a spokesperson, and others just didn't get it. We ended up not having any contestants. And then, Rene Astudillo, who was the executive director, knew about my background in the Philippines, that I revolved around show business and all this stuff. And I was also getting into theater at that

time. And he just came up, “Why don’t you become Tita Ida? Just do it.” And I kind of like, Okay. So that kind of started more affirming my identity as trans. And I told that to Rene, “I don’t want to be a gay man who dresses up as a woman.” And he was like, “Well, how do you feel?” I was like, “I mean, I think I’m trans, that’s where I’m at. I want to express myself as a woman, I want to express my feelings as a woman. I want to eat like a woman, I want to dress up like a woman, and everything.” “Then do it, you know? But you’ll be the character and everything.” So that’s when I thought, I need to make a distinction between Nicky and Tita Aida.

So, we concentrated on the Tita Aida, to develop the Tita Aida character. And we kind of based it on the Dania Boudine kind of style, with, like, “Here you are,” and, you know, “Hello, welcome!” It’s, like, a monologue thing. And the thought that we had was, there was going to be a letter sender, someone who sends a letter asking advice on certain sexual issues. About condom use, or things like that. And I would reply live and give advice. So we were kind of like, “This might work. This might work. Where would we do this?” And we would do it in a club. Asian AIDS Project put this guerilla theater called Rubber Club, and they were looking for emcees. So, they had emcees, and then I would have a segment of the show where I would do that. And there’s this grandioso piano music. [*Sings*] “Oh, *hola mi amigos, mi amigas* [Hello, my friends]. My name is Tita Aida, and I am your hostess with the moistest tonight.” You know, things like that. And people were buying it, people were getting it. “Well, I am here to help a fellow Filipino man about issues in condom use,” things like that. So, I would read the letter. And the letter is a mockup letter, we would address the issue through the letter, and then I would reply, like, “Here.” One thing a lot of people remember about my doing that thing was when I was demonstrating how you should use water-based lubricants versus oil-based on latex products. So,

you know, the issue was, “I love using Vaseline, petroleum jelly, versus lubricant.” “But it’s not good. It’s really not good. So, here’s two balloons,” blowing the balloons. “Condoms. And my hand is a glove, latex, but here I’m going to use lubricant, and here I’m going to use the petroleum jelly.” And I would rub it. And then, suddenly, the petroleum jelly balloon, pop! So, people saw that immediately, and they were like, “Oh. Okay.” So, it was becoming very educational yet funny.

Because, sometimes, what I would do is, I would wear this miniskirt, and they would come up and they could see my underwear. It was like, someone would point it out and say, is that Fruit of the Loom underwear? I mean, anything to add comedy to it. At the same time, learning, teaching folks about HIV and AIDS, was really becoming a hit. I mean, it was every fourth Sunday of the month, and we would go to this club, the N Touch club, which is an Asian club, and then do the thing there. And that’s what started rolling for Tita Aida. And then everybody, like, “Oh, Tita Aida, can you emcee the show? Oh, Tita Aida, can you be here and do one of your standups? Can you do this, this, this, and this.” Yes. I wish I had an agent at that time. [*Laughs*] But I was doing it because I really— I mean, we would go to Ward 86, because the FTFA would have clients who were already at their deathbed and just needed support. And I would go as Tita Aida, actually. Just to comfort them, to hold their hand, because no one wants to hold them, or something. And that was a big, significant thing in my life, where I saw people who were dying of HIV, of AIDS.

Q: What was it like for you to go and spend time with them?

Calma: I mean, I can't put words to it, but it made me feel like, I'm glad I'm doing something to help others to understand what this is. Because HIV had a different face at that time. It had a different identity at that time. Every day, there was an obituary of BAR [Bay Area Reporter], Sentinel, and Bay Times, who died. And sometimes we would see an Asian name. And it was just sad, it was just really sad. And then when we would go to Ward 86, I would go with the case managers, I would always say, "This is it for them? I mean, this is the way you're going to go?" [*Shows emotion*] And it was just, I mean, it was just, there was no dignity. There was no dignity to die of AIDS. Because you couldn't do anything. I mean, they couldn't do anything, they were just lying there. And there was no medication, they were just waiting, and they were just—something has to be done. I mean, that's my thing. Something has to be done here. And it was hard. It was so hard. It was really so hard. And, at the same time, you feel helpless, because you couldn't do anything anymore. No matter how much comforting you want to give somebody.

Q: May I ask a question?

Calma: Yes.

Q: Thank you so much for sharing about this incredibly important experience, and part of cultural history. You say there was no dignity, are there any examples of how you felt or saw that, where homophobia or transphobia was part of how people were dying with no dignity? Or without opportunity for dignity?

Calma: I mean, as I said earlier, HIV had a whole different face at that time. There was—the finger-pointing of why this happened, it's like shooting bullets in a dark room. Because, how did we get here? How did this person—I mean, I felt, like, limbo. The way I interpret limbo is that you're just floating, you're not able to do anything. And the doctors couldn't do—I mean, that was the intensity of it. Even the doctors were just hopeless. I mean, there was just, "We are just waiting for this person to do their last breath and whisk them away." I'm sorry, I lost what you—

Q: No, thank you. Another thing I'm wondering about is, hearing you talk about the pain, and the incredible sadness of watching people die in that period, when AIDS had such a different face. And you have spent decades since as an AIDS activist and as a transgender rights activist and a leader. So, looking back, what do you think that that period meant for you? Looking back now, from your perspective of Nicky of today, what do you think that those experiences, those incredibly sad experiences, meant for you?

Calma: So, you know, I'm sure you're familiar—the FX [television channel] series *Pose* that came out. I cried when I saw that [*shows emotion*], because that was what was happening. You could feel that. I mean, every time someone comes up to me and says, "Hey, Tita Aida, I tested positive for HIV," now. Yes, I'm sympathetic. I mean, of course, I'm like, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. But, you know, nowadays, HIV's a manageable disease. As long as you're making sure that you're healthy," that's what I would say. And, "Hey, if you want to hang out, we can talk. If you need someone, here's my number." You couldn't do that before. You couldn't do that. Because the person is already on his deathbed, and he can't express what he's feeling, because he's in pain. And then, you know that scene, in *Pose* where the room wasn't decorated, it was kind of

yellowish? That was the scene of Ward 86. There were, like, ten beds. Each and every one was just—

Q: And this was Ward 86 of San Francisco General Hospital.

Calma: Of San Francisco, yes, yes, yes. And I liked going there, because I just wanted to make sure how I could contribute, but I also hated going there, because, you know. But *Pose* really did a good job, in looking into how it was before. And the stigma. Oh, my god, the stigma was the one that really was—going back to your question, you know, I'm in a different state right now, of my career. I try to get contracts for HIV programs to happen. I write reports. But sometimes I ask myself, maybe I should jump into another career, or do something different. But I go back to that time. And say, "Why am I doing this?" And I go back to that time, and I remember that people suffered. These were innocent people. They didn't want to get AIDS. They just wanted to live life as it is, and it was taken away from them. So, I think, as much as it's very painful to think about it, I also use it as a grounding exercise for me, to really help me continue the work that I'm doing right now. It may not—somewhere, somehow, reporting that a program was successful, I think, will trickle down to more funding, hopefully.

More data that we can get money, because stigma is still the strongest enemy here. Especially for marginalized populations, especially for folks—if you're not white, you're in that island. You will be at risk, you will be degraded, you will be berated. I mean, you are shit, basically. And if you're not loud enough, you really will not get anything. So, I go back, and sometimes I have to stop my medication. [*Laughs*] Because, "Okay, what is influencing me here, medication, or

what?" But it was real. You know, that's one thing that happened, it was real. AIDS was real. There was a day when there was no obituary. That was when the protease inhibitors came out already, all these new medications. The cocktails started coming out. There was hope. But we were still like, "Come on, thirty pills a day." You have diarrhea by that time. You put it all together. But it's something that was available. It was trying to save lives. So, that's good. I mean, I think, if I were to say, my activism, I was in the behind-the-scenes, the trenches, of the ugliness of HIV. Because we had to visit folks in SROs [single-room occupancies], you know, and their rooms were, I mean, cockroach-infested. They don't clean it because they lost hope in life already. And we were the ones who would, you know, Hey, and we would bring them out. That's why, I think, when people tell me, "What did you do during that time?" I was like, "Well, we came up with things that we think will help someone who is living with HIV or has AIDS to at least feel normal or empowered, or at least experience some goodness of life." So, we designed three-day retreats.

When we were the API Wellness Center , we had the support group for HIV-positive Asian and Pacific Islanders. It was so timely, because the movie *[The] Joy Luck Club* came out, and you know that movie is, everybody was crying. So, it was like, "Well, why don't we call it the Joy Luck Club?" And we would get over twenty-five to thirty folks, APIs who are living with HIV, come together in this one support group, and we would just serve food. I find food for folks. I would write to Honey Baked Ham, when they were still here, on Geary and Divisadero. Like, "We have this event." And they would give us, like, three turkeys, and two big hams, and all the sides that we want. And people were generous.

Q: And, by this time, you were working. You had a job, was it at Asian AIDS Project?

Calma: At Asian AIDS Project, yes.

Q: When did you start working there?

Calma: 1994.

Q: 1994. So, you had been a volunteer for a while.

Calma: A while, yes.

Q: All right. And how long did you perform as Tita Aida?

Calma: Well, it really bursted out. When I was volunteering for FTFA, this was in, I think, 1990, ’91, ’92. It was a process. It took a little while. It wasn’t just overnight, we just thought about it. It took a while to marinate it, to make sure that this was, you know. And even the outfits were all—I loved wearing suit types of thing. I was doing my shopping of putting this character together. And, as I said, I was being asked to emcee and to do my show, my stand-up, fifteen-minute show about that. And then I said, “Well, if I’m going to—” I had an incident at Macy’s, actually. I was still working at Macy’s at the time, and I was volunteering. I was becoming, already, aware of, “I think I’m transgender, I think I’m doing this.” So, I spoke with my manager

at Macy's and said, "This is what's going on, and is it okay for me not to wear a tie?" Because that is the biggest kind of, "Why do I have to wear a tie?" Women wear ties, but not every day.

Q: And so it was part of presenting masculine, or male.

Calma: Yes, because that was the requirement for a male sales associate. You had to wear a tie or a coat and everything. And I explained to her, "This is how I'm feeling, I started going to this clinic, Tom Waddell [Urban Health Clinic], and I'm taking hormones." I was doing electrolysis already.

Q: Oh, you were already taking hormones. Gender-affirming hormones?

Calma: Yes. It was really more, either black market or with Tom Waddell. Tom Waddell was slow, and black market, I mean, you've got to know the community.

Q: And you knew, then, that you wanted to live twenty-four/seven, presenting as a woman.

Calma: Yes, that was already the trajectory of it. And then my manager at Macy's said, "I support you, but you need to talk to HR. Because, you know, people will notice things." And when I got to HR, they were a little nasty. They were like, "Well, we want you to present yourself as the sex that you filled out in your application, which is male." I had put male. And I was like, "Okay." And then, I had a case worker at that time, at Tom Waddell and I told him, "Can I get a letter that this is what's happening with me, and also have some special

accommodations?" "You can do it, but we still would like you to come in and present as male." So, I could have stayed and prolonged that process of back-and-forth, but that's when I said, I want to start looking. If I'm doing this in my volunteer work, maybe I should get to it already, if that's what it is. And there was this piece about me that, I felt like that was the calling. That was what I was headed to.

Q: And in that time, having a job at a big company like Macy's, often there wasn't the kind of transgender employment rights protections, right? You would have to leave in order to fully change your presentation.

Calma: Yes. And I was thinking, if I'm going to come to work as a woman, it has to be fully-baked. Because, at that time, I would be perceived as a drag queen, or I would be ridiculed all the time. So, at that time, Asian AIDS Project already was like, Oh. They had the transgender peer leader pilot program, and I was part of it. And they found funding to have a transgender program through DPH, Department of Public Health. So, I applied for that position. But what happened was, because I was doing shows already in gay clubs, I ended up overseeing the API MSM program. Because of my affiliation with the clubs. We're all API MSM, and we're—

Q: Men who have sex with men.

Calma: Yes. And they congregate, and they socialize. And, you know, it was fine. To know that there was a transgender program, even if I'm not—I get involved in helping out, but I'm not overseeing it. I did the API MSM program, we continued the Rubber Club. I mean, we had a Tita

Aida's dating game. I mean, all of these things to promote, really, first, positive images, positive representation of API men. And, for me, even though I was already kind of like, okay, I do not identify with that, but this was my following. I mean, these were the people who, when I sent out postcards like, "Hey, we have this show coming up," bam, three hundred people will show up. And that's what we wanted to do at Asian AIDS Watch, is provide HIV education and awareness. Filipino Task Force on AIDS was there, we collaborated a lot. I felt like I was doing my job. I was doing something that was rewarding, that was helping people out, compared to when you go to Ward 86. I'm doing something good. So, that was the thing. And then, after that, I mean, this is just a quick synopsis of it. You know, we always look for love. Found love, but the love that I found was not what I thought it would be. I took a risk and moved to Dallas, Texas for a short time, because he lived there. Gave up my job at Asian AIDS Project, gave up my cute junior one-bedroom on Divisadero, which was only, what, $550 at that time? I had a garden, I had a barbecue pit, and everything. Gave that up, and then it didn't work out. Came back here, and then I found myself homeless again, because I didn't have a place. I had my car and I had my little U-Haul that I was chugging along on Route 66, coming back, driving. I had to start all over again. And I started, kind of like, "Maybe I could do sex work again, just for the meantime." I gave my paycheck to that guy.

I was in love. When you're in love, "Take everything," you know? "Take everything." But it was a good learned lesson. Came back, and then, supportive friends. People knew me already. I did a little bit of drugs at that time, I had to get it off my mind of what I was experiencing, because, "Damn, I've got to start all over again," you know? So, I didn't have a place to stay at. I had this wonky, dinky Toyota Tercel that had all my clothes in it. But people were nice, people were very

nice. They helped out. And then I told myself, I will never be in this situation again. I don't want to be in this situation again. And then I framed my mind into, what if there was a Tita Aida who had helped me in this time? And that's when, [*snaps*] reality. The drug use stopped. The looking for opportunities started again, and then I started picking up. And this is where all the cocktails and protease inhibitors were coming out. Because I found out I was HIV-positive. And I was like, "Oh." [*Laughs*] So, did I preach? Did I do what I was preaching? Prevention work? And everything became dark. I mean, everything became dark. But, as I said, you've got to have a good support system. I mean, that's what I tell folks who test positive now. I'm like, "Who's your support system? Who can you talk to when you wake up at two o'clock in the morning and question and cry and say, 'why did this shit happen to me?'"

Q: And how did you turn to your support system at that time, when you found out you were HIV-positive?

Calma: Yes. Yes, this was already '97, '98. And the former ED of Asian AIDS Project, Vince, he helped me a lot.

Q: Is this Vince—

Calma: Sales [*phonetic*]. Yes. Vince was like, "My mom lives in Oakland, she has a house. She has this space in her basement that you can use, if you want to stay there." "Can I take a look at it?" I mean, do I have to be picky? There was a bed. It wasn't being used. There was someone who lived there before, but it's been six months. So, "I'll take it. And how much do I need to

pay?" "You don't need to pay. Just use it." I mean, it was the worst condition, but it was something that was going to put a roof over my head. It's a start. It's a start, to get back on my feet again. I did shows, I took every opportunity. I would go out on a weekend, Friday, Saturday, line up all my shows. I would do N Touch, I would do Esta Noche [bars]. I mean, all these different clubs. I knew that I would do shows, and I would make at least $200 or $300, because each show that I did was either fifty or sixty dollars.

Q: Are you doing shows performing as Tita Aida?

Calma: As Tita Aida, yes.

Q: And you went to Esta Noche, too?

Calma: Yes, I went to Esta Noche.

Q: So, that's a Latino gay bar community, right.

Calma: And at that time, also, which I think I maybe forgot to mention, before going and doing all of this, there was this opening at the Department of Public Health to do some research. It was the very first—this was the groundbreaking piece, where I'm glad I heard about it and they made me part of it. It was the very first transgender health survey study. Because they wanted to fund transgender programs, but they didn't have data. So, Kristen Clements[-Nolle], who was an epidemiologist at DPH, created this survey to find out the prevalence of HIV in the transgender

community for women in San Francisco, just to have some data. Did 400 interviews. I think there was, like, almost 350 that all tested positive. So, it generated money for programming. And that's when I was still kind of doing things, because that was just a part-time job. I still had to survive and everything. And that put me in a different status, where, "Oh, I'm doing research work. I'm one of the research associates." I mean, they made it sound nice, but I was just basically doing interviews.

We were piloting the OraSure HIV kit. It was the oral swab, it was the first time it was being introduced into the market. We were the ones who piloted it. So, there was a lot of those first, and first survey. That survey is still being used, now, because a lot of things in there still holds true of what's going on in the transgender community. Like, the stigma, the prevalence of HIV. What trans women go through that impacts them to get infected with HIV. Violence, homelessness, all this stuff. I mean, people use the data in there up to now to get grants, which is really good, and I'm so happy that my name is on it. There were five of us who did the research piece to talk to different members of the community. And that was how I found out about myself, actually. [*Laughs*] Oh, my god, I might get in trouble for this, with Kristen. We were all kind of using this, and every time I would do a set of five interviews, I'd have five samples of the OraSure. So, took a kit, put it with the five. And then, they usually come back after, I think, a week or two weeks, because, at the time, they only did the ELISA test. I mean, testing was just not that sophisticated, like right now. Called after two weeks, I said, "This, this, this, I sent six, only five came back." This was the DPH clinic. "Oh, the sixth one had to go through the Western blot test, because we had a preliminary positive." "Oh, my god." So, that's when I found out.

And I couldn't tell the rest of what was going on. And that's when friends like Vince Sales came through.

Everybody was supportive, knowing the situation, that I was living in the basement of a house, that I lived with possums. There was a family of possums in the kitchen. They were nice, they didn't bother me. They never got into the bed or anything. But I was just like, okay. And then, something came up here. They merged. The Asian AIDS Project and Living Well network merged, they became the API Wellness Center. That was in 1998, that was already established as the API Wellness Center. And then there was something that came up, and I applied for it. And, since then, I've been with API Wellness, now San Francisco Community Wellness Center.

Q: Since then?

Calma: Since then.

Q: Wow.

Calma: Nineteen ninety-seven, yes. Ninety-eight, '98, actually.

Q: That's over twenty years.

Calma: Yes.

Q: And I would like to hear more about those years, and I'm wondering, you talked very beautifully about the way community showed up for you and supported you. And, of course, for so many queer communities, chosen family is such an important thing. And I'm wondering, first, throughout these years, were you in contact with your family of origin? What was that like?

Calma: Oh, no, I was in contact with my mom. Me and my dad never really had a relationship, ever since I moved here to the United States. He always says, "Well, you wanted to go there, then you do what you need to do." He was not being vicious. But I feel like he was also hurt, because I was not on his side to support him, or something like that.

Q: Did you disclose your gender to your mother?

Calma: I did. I did, and I told her, "This is what's going on. I feel like I want to do this, this, this." "Are you sure?" I mean, all of these things. Because moms will be moms. It's so funny, because every time I talk to her now on Facebook, she always asks, "Do you still wear women's clothes? Do you buy women's clothes?" It's like, "Mom, what am I going to wear?" "What about your underwear, do you now buy women's underwear?" I was like, "Yes, ma, what do you want me to wear? BVDs or Fruit of the Looms or something like that?" And she's just adorable, she's just like that. She still calls me my dead nickname, and it's fine, because I can say that she's always been there for me. She's always been there for me. Even though she has nothing to give, she's just there to listen. She's always been there. I was mama's boy, and my sister was daddy's little girl.

Q: So, she has stayed connected with you, been there for you, even as she's processed these changes.

Calma: Even if we fight. I mean, after a week, she'll call, before you pay the call, to do a long-distance call. Even if we fight, after a week she will call me, "How are you doing?" And she'll check in and everything, because I felt like she never lost hope for me. Because being away from your family, I mean, this was unconventional. I mean, not normal for a Filipino family. And she wanted to support the things that I wanted to do, but she couldn't, because my dad was always there. And there was a time that I hated them. I hated them. I didn't want to talk to them, I was just on my own. That was also when I was starting to use some drugs and everything. Drug use was all throughout there, and when I say drug use, it could be marijuana, I mean, whatever I could get hold of. But most of the time, it was the hardcore, the crystal meth, and everything like that, because that gets me perking. But, I felt like when I hated them, I was in that state, it took a book for me to realize that they do love me, and they love me on how they knew how to love. I don't know if that made sense.

Q: They loved you in the way that they knew how. With the tools that they had.

Calma: That they knew how, yes. Yes, yes. All those screaming, and all the cussing and everything. That was the love that they were giving me. It was love. I didn't look at it as—it made me realize. So, I read one book that had a significant impact in my life, that I was able to learn how to forgive myself, the things that happened to me and everything. Because there was a point I was hating the world. I mean, all these things happening. The book is called *All About*

Love by bell hooks. And it's so funny, because when I was finishing the book, I was on a plane, and my seat was by the window. There was an empty seat here, and there was this gentleman who was over there. And when I was finishing the book, it was on the flight. Oh, my god, I started crying. I started bawling. I wanted to call my parents, I wanted to call my sister, I wanted to shout at the world. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do this." People that I probably was vicious with, or mean to. And I started bawling, and then this guy next to me was like, "are you okay?" I was like, "Yes, yes, no, this book is really moving me." And then he offered what he was eating, he had chips. I said, "No, I'm good. No." And he said, "Must be a pretty interesting book." "It is," I said. "It is. It really is," I said. And that was where I was able to unlearn things that I learned that was not good for me, or maybe make sure I learned these things, but I didn't need to practice those things.

And that's when I renewed my relationships with people in this field, also. Because a lot of people in this field—you know, I think there's so much hate going on when you're not white. I don't know, I mean, I feel that way. They don't want to see an Asian transgender woman up there commanding, or talking, or something like that. I still get, even from the folks in the transgender community, sometimes, we have internalized transphobia. When you're doing good, some people don't want to see that, they want to see you fail. And sometimes I just stare at it. I'll control what I can control, and I won't control what I can't control. And control is not a word I want to use, but sometimes I have to, because sometimes, some people abuse things towards other people. Overseeing all these programs here. I want to be better. I'm always thankful, because we have programs for our community. And I just want to make sure that people understand what we're doing here. And then, suddenly, you have all these other organizations

popping up, wanting to serve transgender people, and yet, they just take the money. And they'll hire somebody, but they won't invest in that person. They'll hire a transgender person, but they won't invest in that person. A lot of trans folks who go into this field, and even not-trans folks who want to get into this field, they want to do good, but they're not set up for success. DPH, yes, sure, we have very strong ties with them, but the people that they hire, the requirement is that you've got to have a degree in public health, this, this, and that.

Well, I don't have a degree in public health. I do have twenty-five years of experience working with my community, and I think that's good enough. Because you probably haven't experienced things that I've experienced. And I say that, and I come from a place of love. Because, sometimes, you need to hit people with reality. It's so important. My community is not rich. My community is not, you know, all of us have experienced some form of discrimination. So, give us a break. I learned so much from this organization. How many times have I done many things that was bad for the organization? But they kept me. They invested in me. And, for me, I think this is where I'm going to retire. Because that's how it is. And I don't want to be a role model, but I just want the young ones, the new folks coming in, to see that we can succeed. We can do something. We can be productive. We can be meaningful. We can be at that table in decision-makings, and all this stuff. We can. So, we just need to make sure that we're aware of that. Because, when I was young, I didn't have any role models. Madonna and Cyndi Lauper were my role models, you know? And Madonna did some good things and bad things. [*Laughs*]

Q: But they were role models who were non-trans.

Calma: Yes, non-trans.

Q: And now, you know, you are a trans role model for so many people.

Calma: I sometimes get nervous when people come up to me and say, “I heard so much about you, I think you’re great.” My heart is pumping fast when I hear things like that, but I have to calm myself down, because I have to make sure that, “Look, you can look at me as your role model, but you have your own power. You have your own journey that you can make things happen, and make a difference in this world. And I’m just here to make sure that you don’t fall in the cracks of failure. If I see something already, I’ll let you know.” Because I always tell people that, I’m upfront. I’m very upfront. I will tell folks, “Don’t engage. Don’t do that.” I would give them ahead of time, already, because it’s better I say that to them. In a loving way, not in a condescending way. That, “Hey, you know, maybe you want to think about this, because I’ve been in this place before, I feel kind of like this is not a good fit or something.”

Q: What strikes you most about the way that trans and queer cultures have evolved over the decades? Like, what’s changed most, or hasn’t?

Calma: Well, you know, I feel like I can’t remember if I was that way when I was that young, but I think nowadays with all the technology, with all the things that people have access to, we don’t—they don’t try to educate themselves enough. It’s like, “Oh, there’s an on button. It goes on,” you know? Without even knowing, what’s the use of this? How did this come about? And this might be shallow or something, but, I don’t know. I traveled a lot when I was—I went to

Dallas, I love going to different places. We didn't have GPS at that time. And I told this to a lot of people, I said, "Wouldn't it be nice if there was this machine that you could put right here, and it would tell you where to go, so that you don't get lost? So that you don't have to bring that big—what's it called, the McNally thing?"

Q: Yes, the Thomas Guide, the McNally.

Calma: And just turn it on. Everybody was like, "Oh, that's not going to happen. That's not going to happen." Then, boom, here it comes. GPS, you know? And all that stuff, the technology. I wish—there's a big difference, definitely, definitely a big difference. Now, folks are a little bit more, especially the generations now, they're very, like, they know everything. Like they know everything. And that's fine, if that's the self-esteem that they have. I sometimes have to find a way how to, "That's great, but I think I might advise you to dig a little deeper and find that 'why' instead of just, like, going along with it. Because there's some history to all of these things that has happened." Even just right now, this new generation, they don't know about black market hormones, at first. And then, when they find out about it, it's like this revealed secret that they can get hormones from the streets and from other people. Sweetie, we've done that before, okay? I mean, we've done that before, and I don't want to go there. I feel like you should not go there.

Q: Some of it is knowing and understanding trans history.

Calma: Yes. You don't know what the hell you're shooting in your thigh, you know? Because you don't know if that medication was already exposed to a certain temperature, or things like that. Why did I work so hard so that we could get health benefits as transgender people? You have a doctor. You have doctors monitoring everything. Use them. And don't be in a hurry. But there's some nice things, also. Like, now, I'm so happy to see kids who realize they're trans, because that didn't happen before.

Q: Having a space to even know that and have the language for it.

Calma: Yes. I mean, things were different before, it was more challenging. And, again, I think there was so many main things that we always have to consider whenever we're thinking about comparing the generation now and the generation before. Like, for example, a lot of it revolves around HIV, because trans women are still impacted highest by HIV. Because of what they're experiencing around discrimination, violence, and just plain ignorance of people. And then, identities, gender identities, and all this stuff, there's still a lot of learning to do for other folks who do not understand what it is. I was watching television one time, and they were talking about gender identity, and, I don't know if he was a senator or something, "So, you're telling me that your gender is how you feel?" I mean, like, why are we still talking about this? And he didn't know. I mean, he was like, "Gender is what's between your legs." And the person was trying to explain to him, and it was just, oh my god, this is pathetic. I said, like, this is just not—

Q: What are your visions or hopes for the future, for gender liberation, gender justice? What would it look like?

Calma: I just hope that it will still continue. Discussions, goals, on what we want to achieve. And I think it's going to be just a continuing process. Because people will start thinking creatively, people will start thinking that, "Oh, this is not me, this is this." New term, you know? But I do feel like I do seventy-percent like the direction of how things are going. I almost lost hope when, the last election, I felt like Trump was going to win again. I mean, it's just a question of, which of the two evils do you want to support? But, again, I think we all just have to work together. My hopes are always going to be positive, for the good of everybody, for the good of things.

Q: What would your gender liberated future look like for trans people and gender non-conforming people? What would it look like, a future where people are completely free?

Calma: Yes, it's kind of happening right now, I think. It just needs to be pushed and understood. I mean, I think I would love to see the not-normal people that are in different positions. Like, the president of Walt Disney company is transgender. You know, that would be great. Maybe, for me, it might be great, but for others, it might be, "Oh my god, does Mickey Mouse have to be gender neutral, or something like that?" You know, I would love to see talented trans folks out there to take lead, to take control of things that they know, that they can contribute, to make it better. That's my dream.

Q: Dream of a world where trans people are everywhere, and are leading things.

Calma: We're everywhere, it's just a matter of—

Q: Yes, yes! Trans people are everywhere!

Calma: —how do we navigate, you know, and make sure that we get where we need to go? Where we need to be, and everything? So, that would be nice.

Q: Yes, thank you. And, backtracking just a teeny bit, we were talking about family. What does chosen family mean to you?

Calma: Chosen family, to me, I have a few chosen families. I think these are folks that provide validation, comfort, especially when the world is being vicious towards you. My chosen family is San Francisco Community Health Center. Asia SF [restaurant and cabaret], because I work there, too. And then, I also have a group of friends who, we're really like a family, because we have a group text, and I'll say, "Dinner, anyone?" You know, and then, ten minutes, no one's responding, "What the fuck, are you guys not responding or something? I want to have dinner." Crickets. And it's so nice, because it pisses me off that no one will respond, but that's how families are sometimes, you know? I mean, they probably don't want to deal with me, because they know that I'm going to talk about something that they might not want to talk about.

And that's the thing. But I'm glad we have the option to have a chosen family, because it is something that, it's not an excuse. I mean, a lot of people say, "Oh, you're just saying that they're chosen family because you can't find validation from other—" no. No. I mean, like, these people, I share common similarities and common goals and common likes with these folks. And

they're not bad. We get along. So, I think, to kind of put that definition that they are chosen family, it's already revolutionary. I mean, it's a revolution for you, because you are able to bring people to you and to bring people together. And you all can act the same way. You know, like in that movie Gladiator when they're all about to go to war, they all, like, position, and then they all go together. You get support from them. You get criticism. They get mad at you. It's like, what it is. Especially, my family's in the Philippines, so it's nice to have a chosen family here.

Q: That's very meaningful. You have all the layers.

Calma: I can go up to here and there, and it's not just one, but a few of them.

Q: My last question, and it's connected to what we were talking about, current younger generations and future generations, thinking about trans and queer folks of color fifty years from now, two hundred years from now. What would you want present or future generations to most know or see or understand about your life?

Calma: Well, I always thought that I would patent the Tita Aida. [*Laughs*] Because a lot of people say "You actually are a mark." Or they say something like, "You can market", you know?

Q: A brand.

Calma: A brand, exactly, yes, thank you. But it was not designed to be that way. I would probably just want to have, there could only be one Tita Aida, because things that I have done, I

can celebrate in it, and say, I've done those things. And I'm not asking for anything back in return. I would like people to remember, probably, me, like, for example, for that transgender survey study that we did in '97, that I was part of that. That that book is still relevant up to now, the results of that survey. That, "Oh, Tita Aida was here?" I want to be remembered in those ways. I also want to be remembered like, "Oh, she put the first API LGBT stage at pride," things like that. "She started HIV testing at pride." We were the first pride celebration in the country that provided HIV testing in their pride celebrations.

Q: And you started that?

Calma: We started that.

Q: And that was in what year?

Calma: Two thousand.

Q: Yes.

Calma: Yes. We provided HIV testing at the pavilion, at the API pavilion, and that started all organizations. We're at Folsom, we're at Castro Street, we're testing and everything. Because we're innovative here, we try to do things. But I think, just to be remembered, in some capacity, that I was once a contributor to something. Especially for API LGBTQI+ community that, yes, an inspiration for whatever they're working on, things like that. I'm not fond of recognitions. I

tell that a lot. Because I enjoy what I do, I really enjoy what I do, and I want to make sure that people understand what I'm doing. Like, the impact, the result, the intention, and the reason why I do things this way. Some people will agree, some people will not agree, and it's fine, that's life. And leave it at that. I can't ask for more. Before coming to the United States and staying here permanently in '89, as I told you, I was hanging out with a bunch of folks in show business. They were ready to launch me with other folks, to become young celebrities, they have generations and everything. And the role I was going to play was a gay man, and my dad caught on to it. He said, "No. You need to move out if you're going to play that role. I don't want queers here, I don't want gays here in this house." Okay. That was the first roadblock.

And then the second roadblock was, I wanted to take up communications, journalism. My dad won't let me, and he was going to pay for the education. He wanted me to take up engineering and architecture. So, there were all these roadblocks and everything, also. So, and then I was like, "Okay, I'm not getting anywhere. I'm just going to move, go away." And I was able to do what I wanted to do here. People recognize me, people know who I am. I'm able to do some projects, because a lot of folks, I see that they want to start something, but they can't, they don't have the tools to continue it. That's why I developed a leadership academy here, to teach trans folks how to identify what kind of leadership they have, they possess, and how can they be greater leaders in the community? I did what I came for, I think, I would say. Some of them were accidental, but I think there's always a reason why things happen, I think. And that's where I find myself all the time. Like here. It was a hard—it was a slow process from volunteer to supervisor to this, and then now I'm a director.

Q: Incredible. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Calma: No, I think my only thing is that I wish, for something like this, I hope that people find inspiration and that my life story, or what I've experienced that I've shared, would be something that people can find either comfort or security or inspiration or even just, like, entertainment. Like, oh, wow, I didn't know Tita Aida was this, I didn't know Nicky had this streak.

Q: Absolutely. No doubt people will find inspiration so much more in all of these stories and insights and everything that you've shared, thank you so much.

Calma: No, thank you. I appreciate this, this is really great.

Q: I appreciate it tremendously. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]