

From Philippines, With Scrubs; How One Ethnic Group Came to Dominate the Nursing Field

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Published: November 24, 2003

When Arlene Aguirre arrived in New York from the Philippines in September for an extraordinary round of surgery -- the separation of her 18-month-old twins, who are conjoined at the tops of their heads -- she hardly knew a soul in this country.

But at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, a group of Filipino-American women brought her pancit (a noodle dish) and adobo (a garlicky chicken or pork dish) and took her shopping at a nearby grocery that carries Filipino products like SkyFlakes crackers. They gave her a phone card to call relatives in the Philippines, took her clothes home to launder, and prayed with her at the bedside of the twins, Carl and Clarence.

It was entirely fitting that this coming together of Filipinos in a faraway land took place in a hospital. All of the women, including Mrs. Aguirre, are nurses -- as are a startling number of their compatriots in this country, and particularly in New York.

Filipinos in New York City are practically defined by that single occupation, and they are the largest ethnic group among nurses at many hospitals in the region. Thirty percent of the 173,000 Filipinos in the city and its suburbs work as nurses or other health practitioners -- four times the rate for the entire city population, according to the 2000 census. And many of the rest are their spouses, children or aging parents.

"If you meet a Filipino girl and say, 'You're a nurse,' you're probably right," said Clemencia S. Wong, a pediatric instructor at Montefiore.

"And if you meet a Filipino man he'll probably say, 'My wife is a nurse,'" said Pio Paunon, a Filipino man who is the nurse manager at Montefiore and the president-elect of the Philippine Nurses Association of New York.

For more than three decades, American hospitals, periodically short of skilled nurses, have aggressively recruited nurses from the Philippines, sometimes enticing them with bonuses of thousands of dollars. They prize Filipino nurses for their English-language skills and their education in public and professional schools that are modeled on American counterparts. (The Philippines was an American colony or commonwealth from 1898 to 1946, except for four years during World War II.)

The hospitals also value the nurses for their work ethic, their loyalty to employers and a tenderness that seems to stem from a culture where people insist on caring for their own aging or sick relatives. Nursing homes are uncommon in the Philippines.

"They're extremely respectful of patients and their family members," said Diane Aroh, Montefiore's chief nurse executive. "And they're very flexible, willing to take new assignments on the spur of the moment, willing to work extra-long hours."

United States immigration authorities have cooperated with hospitals by making it easier for nurses to obtain work visas and green cards giving them permanent resident status. A 2001 national survey by the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools found that 41 percent of the 789 respondents had received their nursing education in the Philippines.

Partly because of their strong ties to one line of work, Filipinos have no single Little Manila in the city, but there are concentrations of Filipinos in neighborhoods with large hospitals, like Elmhurst in Queens, the Norwood section of the Bronx and Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan. Jersey City, with 15,860 Filipinos, has the closest thing to an enclave, along Manila Avenue near the Holland Tunnel.

The prevalence of nurses has also helped give Filipinos here a distinctive demographic profile: 57 percent of the city's Filipinos are female; 49.7 percent have college degrees; and the median income of full-time workers is \$41,000, compared with \$34,000 for all New Yorkers.

The lure for the nurses is irresistible. With enough overtime and experience, they can earn \$80,000 a year, more than 20 times what they would make in the Philippines. That money allows them to buy homes in suburbs like Bergenfield, N.J., where 3,133 Filipinos live in a community of 26,247 and where Robert C. Rivas claims to be the only Filipino mayor in the Northeast. It also allows them to send money back home to pay for better schools for their brothers and sisters.

"We came from a Third World country, and I think this is our passport to earn a good living," said Maria Dolores Egasan, an intensive-care nurse who will be at the Aguirre twins' bedside today after they undergo the second of a series of operations to separate them. "It's like winning the Lotto."

Yet for those beguiled by the American siren song, the price can be painful. Many nurses leave parents and sometimes children behind. Ms. Egasan found herself so busy working nights that she decided to send her daughters, Jewel, 12, and Jamila, 6, back to the Philippines in June to be cared for by her mother. She keeps in touch with them with the help of phone cards and finds her longing for them only partly relieved by the news of how well they are doing at the schools she can now afford.

"That's your consolation," Ms. Egasan said.

Their distance from family is one reason Filipinos here are enormously dependent on compatriots. It also helps explain why Montefiore's nurses went all out to welcome and comfort Mrs. Aguirre.

"There's a Filipino custom that everyone becomes your uncle and aunt," said Leonora A.G. Dubouzet, a nursing administrator at the hospital.

Indeed, the network of nurses is so tight that many find spouses among the relatives of other nurses. Ms. Egasan, known as Dottie, came here in 1989 and met her husband through his sister, a nurse at St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. Three of her husband's brothers are married to nurses, one brother is a nurse, and their mother is a retired nurse.

Sometimes the nurses' world seems a little too insular. Their spouses, nurses say, complain that whenever Filipinos get together the conversation usually turns to medical shop talk: disagreeable patients, excessive paperwork, a stressful workload.

One way they avoid the topic is by immersing themselves in other Filipino passions. Many Filipinos are devoted Roman Catholics. Many take part in novenas -- nine-day prayer recitations -- and some sing in choirs like the one at St. Ann's Church in Norwood. For the lighter moments, every Filipino home seems to have a karaoke microphone, with Sinatra and Elvis impersonations particular favorites. Filipinos flock on weekends to spots -- like the back room at the Bamboo Grill in Bergenfield -- that offer ballroom-style dancing.

A good part of their earnings, nurses say, pays for regular trips back to their homeland. "Every time we go home it's Christmas for them," Mrs. Wong said, referring to "the gifts you have to bring."

The nurses pride themselves on not spending their time exclusively with other Filipinos. Many Filipinos, in fact, think of themselves as ethnic chameleons, a people whose history of living under a variety of colonizers allows them to blend into any culture -- even if, as Ms. Dubouzet said, sometimes "we don't know who we are."

"If you come to a Filipino gathering, they are so diverse," she said. "I'm married to a Puerto Rican. Clemencia is married to a Chinese man."

Because Filipino nurses have been in the United States in substantial numbers since at least the 1960's, they are now rising to senior levels in the health industry. Dr. Consuelo Dungca is senior assistant vice president for clinical affairs at the city's Health and Hospitals Corporation. Lolita B. Compas, a nursing instructor at Cabrini Medical Center, is president of the New York State Nurses Association.

In all these years, the lives and concerns of Filipinos here have been reshaped.

"The friends from those days are still my friends now," Ms. Wong said. "We were all single together, and we've had christenings, and now we're up to the weddings of our children."

But the nurses are worried about who those children will become. Filipino youngsters, easily making friends in their polyglot communities, are dressing in hip-hop clothing and shedding Tagalog, the leading language in the Philippines.

"We're very vulnerable," said Mr. Paunon, who has a daughter, 14, and a son, 13. "Our kids have nothing to hold on to. We blend in so well with other groups, we forget we're Filipino."