



First Filipina nanny helped community grow

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[Krystle Alarcon](#)

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Her parents called her "Socorro," Spanish for help – and she

indeed lived up to the name.

Socorro Alfonso, 62, currently resides in Porter Creek, quietly trying to heal from a variety of ailments.

But she's been through it before, as she battled breast and bone cancer only two years after she came to Whitehorse.

Like many immigrants, she remembers the exact date she step foot in her newfound home. It was Oct. 2, 1986.

Her employer was a kind social worker, who then had two children, Alfonso said. She said she considers herself lucky, as her employer never made her work around the clock – which is a common problem for many Filipino nannies who come in through Canada's controversial Live-in Caregiver Program, as the job stipulates they stay in their employer's home throughout their two-year contract.

“At 5 o'clock, she would say, ‘You stop. Sit down and rest. I'm home now and I will work,’” she said.

Alfonso had to fend for herself after her mother died at the age of 15 and her father seven years later. Both of them died of cancer.

In the Philippines, she did everything she could to survive – from selling cured pork on the streets, to hemming pants, and processing paperwork for construction contractors.

“I had countless odd jobs, I did everything,” she said.

She grew up with her cousins but always wanted to be independent. At 34, she decided to pack her bags and make her way to Singapore to care for an 82-year-old retired British soldier, named Frederick Minns.

He became a bit of a surrogate father to her, she said. But that's also because she cared for his wife as if she was her own mother.

“I would carry her to the bathroom. And she was a big woman, heavy. But I loved her as my own parent,” she said.

Her hard work paid off. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1988, she wrote Minns a letter asking for financial help for her chemotherapy. He sent her \$2,000, she said.

“I have a debt of gratitude to him,” she said in Tagalog, the native language of the Philippines. She said the same of her Whitehorse employer, who encouraged her to stay in Canada to receive treatment.

“I wanted to go home but she said I would just die in the Philippines with the poor medical system there – I owe her my life,” Alfonso said. Her employer also helped her obtain a Yukon medical care card through the premier’s office, she said.

Alfonso herself is also known to always lend a helping hand to others.

“She’s a pioneer and I definitely recognize her for that,” said Joy Allen, co-owner of Whitehorse’s KFC branch. “She created a ripple effect of helping others.”

Allen also came to Whitehorse as a nanny, when Alfonso found her an employer. Allen, who is also originally from the Philippines, found sponsors for around eight of her domestic worker friends in Singapore, she said.

Eventually, Allen and Alfonso became part of the first 10 Filipina nannies in the territory. When they arrived, there were only around four other Filipina women who preceded them, but they came to Canada by marrying Yukoners, Alfonso said.

They would spend their weekends together, camping, fishing, or simply staying at home playing mahjong, a Chinese tile game that

is commonly found in Filipino get-togethers.

“We are like sardines in my apartment, in one bedroom. All of my friends are there,” she said chuckling.

Then, the women stuck close together, Alfonso said. “When one walks, we all walk together. We all knew each others’ problems, there were no secrets.”

When Alfonso stayed in Vancouver for two years to get treated for cancer, she was very lonely, she said.

“When I used to go to the hospital (in Whitehorse), everyone was there,” she said, reminiscing of their close ties. “Now, someone goes to the hospital, nobody knows. It was really different when we were only a few Filipinos and we stuck together,” she said.

Her friends eventually moved on. “They finished their contracts as nannies and eventually bought houses, which distanced us,” she said.

Ailene Gayangos was part of their circle, a former nanny herself turned entrepreneur as the owner of the Asian Central Store in Whitehorse. She also thanks Alfonso for taking the initiative to help Allen and the rest of them arrive to Canada.

Each of the nannies sponsored or helped around 20 to 30 of their own family members and friends from the Philippines land jobs in the territory. They recommended them through the Yukon Nominee Program, and signed their contracts as supporters should their friends need financial help while integrating into Canada, Gayangos said.

And Alfonso isn’t done helping others just yet. Even though she’s on disability leave, she’s sending money to a four-yearold girl she adopted in the Philippines.

“I adopted her from a woman who had nine children and couldn’t afford to care for her,” Alfonso said.

Alfonso eventually made her way into waitressing, which she did for 10 years. Then she worked at Macaulay Lodge caring for seniors since 2002.

She’s recovering from surgery on her wrist, where she consistently has carpal tunnel pains. She can’t wait to go back to work, she said.

Her advice to the Filipino newcomers?

“Work hard, it’ll pay off. And say hi when you see fellow Filipinos.”

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