



A Nurse First | Episode 4

Opened doors

Paul Biluan: My story starts in the islands of the Philippines. I was born there, grew up from a very tight, religious family, a culture with big family rules and cultures that dictate you to follow what your elderly people would tell you, your family members, your parents. We never had a really perfect family. It was, I could say, dysfunctional in a sense. Yes, we grew up religious, family is tight but didn't say it was perfect. I was physically abused growing up. There were so much issues that I had wanted to leave the family a long time ago, but I guess everything happens for a reason.

Eventually, my parents put me in nursing school because they thought that's a way for me to leave the country and work in the United States. They called me a geek or nerd growing up. I've always been academically inclined. I don't really want to go to nursing school, I wanted to do IT or computer science because I'm a techie person, but I believe I have to follow my parents because they wanted what's best for me.

I came to the nursing school half-hearted. I really don't know what I was doing there. All I know is I'm a person who likes learning a lot of things, so I thought nursing would be boring. I thought I would be making beds and giving food to people, that's all there is for nursing because I really didn't understand what nurses do. I mean, I've never been in a hospital as a kid. As a child, we were poor so we're not able to really access care. We don't have insurance.

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Paul Biluan telling his own A Nurse First story.]

Paul Biluan: Eventually, on my second year of bachelor's degree, I fell in love with nursing. As soon as we hit the nursing sciences, I thought, "Oh, I could actually thrive in this profession, this is something that I really interested right now."

So reading on the nursing profession, I realized that nursing is not only providing care to people. That's one of the major things of why nurses are important, but there's also other ways that nurses can thrive in this profession such as teaching and educating people and reaching out to the communities and be role models and change agents.

After I graduated my bachelor's degree, I started work in the hospital, but I knew I wanted to do something more. And so I got an offer to be an instructor for a nursing licensure prep course, and that's what catapulted me to become a full-time nurse educator, eventually to my career. So before I left the Philippines, I was a full-time nurse educator traveling the whole country, going to top universities teaching nursing prep courses, both for the Philippine licensure exam and NCLEX. And I knew I wanted to learn more beyond what I learned from a bachelor's degree.

[Paul knew his career path would eventually take him to the United States, but he was also fully aware how long it could take to secure his visa. To make the most of his weight, he decided to complete his master's in the Philippines and set himself up to start his doctoral program, once he arrived in the US.]

Paul Biluan: I short-listed a couple of schools in Texas, and I landed in Texas Christian University. At that time, I wasn't looking for what school is the best out there. I looked at Johns Hopkins, I looked at many other prestigious school, but all I wanted is to start the doctorate class as soon as I could because I don't want to lose the motivation. I was new in the United States, I'm a first-generation migrant, and there's so much opportunities presented in my face. It's like a huge door opened up in front of me, and I'm like, "I'm going to take advantage of this, and I'm going to ride my momentum."

And so I applied to TCU. They're the only school that I applied to because they were the earliest to accept students. I remember putting my application on the last day of the application day because of all the transcripts and verifications that I need to submit, and I thought I wasn't going to make it, put up my application letter then three months later, they sent me a interview letter.

They put in Zoom meeting, they interviewed me. There is like three or four panel of doctor instructors, and they were asking me, "What are you here for? Why doctorate? Why TCU? Why be a nurse practitioner? What do you want to add to the profession? What do you want to do with your career?" So I didn't prepare for all those questions, but I know for a fact what I wanted to do. I wanted to get my terminal degree because, like I said, it felt like I had so much to prove with my life.

Being gay, being someone who came out for the family and it was heavily frowned on, they said I'd so much potential growing up, and I felt like when I came out as a gay, they felt like all of those potentials were gone. There is a perception back in my country that if you're a gay, you cannot be successful, or you're not going to find a good relationship, that you're basically second-rate human being that's not capable of doing anything good. But I didn't change. It's just that my gender sexual preference was different, but it's still the same person that they've known growing up.

Recently, I graduated from my doctor of nursing practice. It's been a four-year journey that allowed me to sit for the nurse practitioner board. I got the certification for that. The doctorate school was really brutal on top of the work that I was doing, and then COVID hit right in the middle of the doctorate school. There were so many challenges during COVID and even in my personal life, but the goals helped me stick to my plan because I dreamt of it. I wrote it down, and I told myself that I want to do it. It wasn't easy, but I made it happen.

I think goal setting is very important especially with us professionals. And I don't only write the goals, I also put timeline that way I know the duration of how fast I want to get there or how slow I want to get there. For me, goal setting is really very important. It's your guide to what you want to do next. Also, it also serves as, like for educators, we call it evaluation. So when you look back and evaluate how far am I right now, you can base it off of your goals like, "Oh, wow, I've written this down 15 years ago, and here I am, like I made it happen."

[I imagine it's an interesting paradox to have this traumatic relationship with your family, but ultimately, they sent you down this nursing path that it sounds like has come to fulfill your life. How do you reconcile that? And what is your relationship with your family like now?]

I believe that the universe will always prepare you for a something big. I believe in law of attraction. Growing up from a religious background, they say it's God. From non-religious people, they say it's the universe and the grand scheme of things in the chaos of the universe. There's always this divine being or divine power that leads you to where you should be, and I believe. I remember sitting on my desk on the first day of nursing school and hating it, hating it, hating it. But I was there for a reason. I was put in that desk, in that spot and I got that nursing spot for a reason. The universe put me in that situation because the universe knows that I can do so much more from it. It wasn't what I wanted at that time, but it's actually what I wanted to do. It opened so much doors for me, provided platform for me to use my voice for a bigger audience.

My relationship with family now is still a little bit shaky. I would say it's still very challenging. There's a lot of stuff that we're trying to sort on, because all of us grew from very dysfunctional family. We were ... My siblings, we were all abused as kids, so everybody have different levels of traumas. I sought help. Nobody wanted to do it.

In the Philippines, mental health is a taboo, and I was struggling from depression. At one point last year, I was suicidal and nothing mattered to me other than, I think I'm done with this life." The pain was so much for me to bear, I couldn't explain it to anyone, and I couldn't see the beauty of what happened to my life at that point. I was at the lowest point of my life, and that's what actually scared me because I was never like that. One day I looked at myself in the mirror and I couldn't ... I could not recognize, if that makes sense, but that's what I really felt, I could not recognize the person in front of me. It was me, but it wasn't me, like it's a totally different person. There was so much in my mind that I want ... I want someone to dissect it for me because for once in my life, I didn't know what to do, kind of like that feeling. And my therapist said, "Let me tell you something., It's always the smartest people that think they don't need help until they need help. So you seeking help from me is actually a good thing because you've realized you needed it, and that's what will help me help you."

And looking back, several years back, if I can see myself again when I was 10, when I was 15, I would probably tell myself, "You're going to do amazing things. Just keep doing what you're doing. Let the process take you there, but don't give up because you're going to do amazing things."

I'm the first person in my family to be a nurse. I'm the first person in the family to have a terminal degree or a doctorate degree. I'm the first in the family to be a healthcare provider as a nurse practitioner. I'm the first openly gay member of the family, and the first family member who spoke up and stood up against the norms that were put in front of me and powered through those restrictions and prove to everybody that I can be a better person despite all the things that they were telling me that I couldn't do, and I'm a first-generation US migrant.

And am I done with my purpose in my life? Definitely not. I'm only 35, I still have a full life ahead of me, and I feel like I still can do more for myself and for the people around me, for my community, and for my audience. But yes, I'm proud of myself talking about the things that I have to go through, it makes me feel proud about myself that I've gone this far. I'm not going to waste this life. There's so much more that I can offer. My life story is always about using challenges as a ladder to further you into your life, to

catapult you to the top. Using my struggles as a poor person from a very strict cultural background, as a gay person, as a person that don't have any idea about healthcare, was pushed into this by a family and now thriving. I want to use all those stories to funnel into one big message that says, "Whatever your background is, however your life started, whatever traumas you have in the past, whatever challenges that was put in your way, you can do so much more than that, and that's not the end of the world for you."

If you look at it, you are given a life that's full of opportunities, but it's really up to you to really start working on getting those opportunities, use these challenges to put you to the top. I want to be remembered as a person, as a nurse, that has powered through all these challenges and eventually I was able to make something that was beneficial for many people.

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