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OPINION

Op-Ed: My parents were essential workers — and they were treated like it



Joe Lumarda in his godmother's arms at his christening, with family members and nuns from the Sisters of St. Joseph's of Orange by their side. (Courtesy of Joe Lumarda)

By JOE LUMARDA

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In this time of pandemic, I find myself thinking often about my immigrant parents, the essential work they did, and our urgent need to rethink how society supports the millions of essential workers who keep the country and economy afloat.

As an investment advisor to wealthy families, I lead a life that is vastly different from that of my parents. Ted and Josie Lumarda came to the United States from the Philippines, my father in 1929 and my mother in 1955. They spent decades in the

service of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, my father as a head gardener, driver and all-around “guy,” and my mother as a housekeeper.

The sisters’ ministry has since evolved to become Providence St. Joseph Health, with hospitals across seven states. But back then it was a much smaller affair. Growing up across the street from the convent (or “motherhouse”), I had a one-of-a-kind family: one father, two mothers and hundreds of sisters.

My father began working for the sisters in the late 1940s and quickly became a valued and respected employee. The mother superior, Mother Louis, was particularly fond of my dad. When he started courting my mom, Mother Louis asked him to bring her by for “a look.” My parents’ wedding party consisted of seven people: my parents, two witnesses and three nuns. And when my parents were having trouble conceiving after five years of marriage, Mother Louis summoned them into her office.

“I’ll light a candle every day,” she promised. My mother was pregnant within a month.

When I was born, the nurses on the maternity ward wondered why a Filipina housekeeper had a long line of nuns waiting to visit. As the conversation turned to whether my parents would name me after my father, Mother Louis won the day. “No, his name is Joseph, because he is ours.” This was the loving and protective extended family I grew up with. My parents were not just employees; they were valued members of a community.

According to the Center for Economic Policy and Research, before the pandemic the U.S. counted 30 million workers in the categories we now consider essential: grocery clerks, nurses, cleaners, line cooks, warehouse workers, bus drivers and more. Forty percent of these workers are people of color, and 1 in 6 are foreign-born. Perhaps most telling when it comes to our collective attitude toward these workers is how many of them live in low-income families and lack health insurance. According to [data from the Kaiser Family Foundation](#) published in early May, 1 in 4 essential workers report having difficulties affording basic household expenses, and 1 in 7 are uninsured.

I was recently talking about these issues with my good friend Manuel Pastor, a professor of sociology and American studies and ethnicity at USC. Manuel reminded me that his *abuelita* worked as a housekeeper at St. Joseph’s Hospital, which abutted

the motherhouse in Orange. He said he thinks about his grandmother a lot these days for the same reasons I am thinking about my parents.

As a member of a task force appointed by Gov. Gavin Newsom to help guide California's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, Manuel said the group's deliberations often focus on essential workers. One especially urgent topic is the need for more senior care workers as the state's over-65 population is projected to double in the next two decades.

The question isn't just where we will find these workers, but how we will support and repay them for their essential work. Over the last few months, philanthropies, businesses and governments at every level have stepped up to bolster the social safety net. In addition to providing income support for affected workers and businesses, they have invested in food banks and other direct services and distributed personal protective equipment so that workers can do their jobs safely.

But what are we doing — and what will we do — to make sure essential workers have the respect and support they need and deserve when this crisis has passed?

One thing Manuel suggests is that we invest in increasing the voice of these workers. At the California Wellness Foundation, where I serve as board chair, we have long-standing relationships with heroic nonprofits across the state that are doing exactly that. One example is the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, which convenes community members and labor and faith organizations in Oakland to advocate for good jobs, affordable housing and safety for immigrants and other marginalized groups. Another is the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, which is stepping up its training, organizing and leadership development efforts in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Right now, however, these nonprofits and the many others like them are struggling with a tsunami of needs and demands in the communities they serve — including the need to capitalize on this moment when our nation is finally waking up to the sacrifices and the contributions of front-line workers. Supporting these groups in their organizing, policy advocacy and coalition-building efforts is critical to ensuring that workers can find solidarity, dignity and lasting respect.

After my parents could no longer continue their daily labors around the motherhouse, the sisters supported them in their retirement and greeted them with fanfare on their regular visits back. Later, after Mother Louis stepped down, I attended a party there

with my parents and was pulled aside by her successor. “You should know,” she told me, “that you will never have to worry about your parents.” The mother superior explained that the sisters were building a state-of-the-art convalescent facility for the community and that my parents would have a place there at the appropriate time until the end of their lives.

“It’s what we want,” she told me. “It’s what Mother Louis would have wanted.”

It was the full measure of gratitude one can receive for being essential. And it makes me wonder what our legacy will be to the essential workers serving us today.

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