



[Water and Power Board Commissioner Susana Reyes shares her personal history and version of Pinoy pride](#)

Los Angeles Celebrates Filipino American History Month in October



Board of Water and Power
Commissioner Susana Reyes

Susana Reyes retired from LADWP in April 2019 following 32 years of City and LADWP service. She was most recently the director of the LADWP's Low Income Customer Access program in Customer Service but had worn many hats before then having worked in the General Manager's Office, Human Resources, the Mayor's Office of Sustainability and the Department of General Services. The long-time public servant was excited to finally jump into retirement when she received a call from the Office of Mayor Eric Garcetti just three days after officially retiring. It was a call of duty, but nothing like any of the calls she had taken previously from bosses and mentors. She was asked to serve the ratepayers of the LADWP with a seat on the Board of Water and Power commission.



The Filipino Americans at LADWP gathered to share a proud moment with Commissioner Susana Reyes, in celebration of Filipino American History Month in October. Photo by Chris Corsmeier.

“I hadn’t even had a minute to settle into retirement,” the commissioner laughingly recalls. “But how can I say no to the Mayor, and the unique opportunity to be the first LADWP retiree and Filipino American to serve on the board?” Since her first commission meeting on June 12, 2019, Commissioner Reyes has made her presence on the Board known and felt, asking tough questions of staff and pushing the envelope to advance many LADWP initiatives including those related to sustainability and equity.

But the Board meeting on October 8th was special to her. During her opening remarks, the commissioner proudly spotlighted her cultural roots and announced that October is Filipino American History Month. The month-long holiday has been observed in California since 2009 through a resolution passed by California State Senator Leland Yee. Today, Los Angeles is home to the largest Filipino population outside of the Philippines, and Historic Filipino town just outside of Downtown is the first official geographic designation honoring the contributions of Filipinos in America. It is a special time to celebrate Filipino Americans who work hard every day to contribute to the nation’s second largest city as well as the entire United States. Among those are the approximately 600 who are part of the LADWP workforce and the thousands of others working for the City of Los Angeles. Addressing the Filipino-Americans present at the Board meeting, Commissioner Reyes said, “Representation is very important for the Filipino American community. To all my fellow Filipino Americans, this is a time and opportunity to reflect upon your achievements and highlight your diverse contributions to our national history and culture. I am excited to celebrate with all of you.”



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Towards the end of October after taking a commemorative photo with nearly 150 LADWP employees who identify as Filipino American, Commissioner Reyes settled into her office on the top floor of the LADWP Headquarters. Looking to the iconic Los Angeles City Hall she said, “Later this week, City Hall will be lit like the colors of the Philippine flag. It will be quite a sight and the Mayor’s Office will be hosting a celebration of Filipino American leaders especially the ‘Pinay’ (female Filipinos, a colloquial shortened version of Filipinas) visionaries.” Sure enough, the Mayor’s Instagram page captured the landmark lit up in the colors of the Philippine flag on October 25th.

A Pinay visionary herself, Susana Reyes has quite a personal history that was built on strong family support and a character she describes as “non-conforming” that she carried with her all these years. Born and raised in the Philippine capital of Manila, she is the second in a family of 3 girls and one boy. Her mother was also a civil servant but left public service in the Philippines to be a full-time mom when her father’s legal career representing the aeronautics industry brought the entire family to Hawaii, California and later back to Manila. Commissioner Reyes recalls that she and her siblings grew up with what she describes as a diverse view of the world. “I eat anything. I make friends anywhere,” she shares. “Having gone to different places growing up, I developed openness to everyone around me, and I’ve always found it strange, even at a young age, to experience other people who may not be as welcoming of other cultures and backgrounds as I was raised to be.”

She looks back to her college days back in Manila. Amidst political turmoil during the regime of

President Ferdinand Marcos, the younger Susana produced and directed radical plays in college that criticized corruption, waste, pollution, and rampant poverty. She took her plays to different barrios in Manila and joined protest marches, inspiring and empowering the disadvantaged but not without the threat of arrest. "My mom used to watch the news all the time hoping she wouldn't see me getting arrested by the police," she says. "While I'm sure it was difficult for them at the time, my parents allowed me to thrive, never questioning my activism." In return, Reyes continued to make her parents proud by completing her education with the highest honors.

Having experienced the third world struggles with water shortage, regular "brownouts" or power interruptions, and flooding because of poor infrastructure, Commissioner Reyes had many reasons to be spurred to activism. Seeing calamities and natural disasters, her perspective set earlier in her life led to a passion for the environment manifested in significant ways including launching and overseeing the City of Los Angeles' Facilities Recycling Program, holding the Vice President post on the Sierra Club's Board and executive committee, and taking the role of Senior Sustainability Analyst in the Mayor's Office of Sustainability. "Such experiences gave me the courage to look at the world through a different lens, and maybe, even, to polish those views for others," Reyes stated.

As robust as her career has been, Commissioner Reyes is also a mother and she, like many women in the workforce, balanced both responsibilities. As she raised her four children, she also made sure she imparted to them Filipino values and culture, fostering in them the same passion for the community and providing the strong family support she had while growing up. Her eyes light up talking about her family.

"It's important to me that my kids know who they are and understand their roots. I've shared with my kids our family's history including old World War II stories from my grandparents. They grew up here but they speak and eat Filipino. I even scolded them in Filipino when they were little, just so no one else understood what I was saying," she says laughing. "But I'm very proud of the fact that all my children are gainfully employed, raising their families and giving back to the community. I think that's the test to see if I've been doing it right." she says.

Recently, one of Commissioner Reyes' twins decided that instead of having a birthday party, she would gather her friends and have them help put together backpacks for foster children. The backpacks each had a blanket, teddy bear, a pajama set, food and snacks, helping the children in foster care have something constant in their lives should they need to move from house to house. Her other daughter who co-owns Coolhaus Ice Cream Sandwiches donated inventory to air passengers when Hurricane Sandy devastated the East Coast and cut off power to their New York warehouse. Instead of wasting perfectly good ice cream sandwiches, Coolhaus helped stock airlines that had limited food supplies also as a result of the disaster.

"I've told my children that they are privileged and as such, they need to step up," Commissioner Reyes said. "They get it. And I'm proud to see that they are visible, contributing and they make a difference."

When asked about what makes her proudest to be Filipino, Commissioner Reyes points out how Filipinos make easy friends. She says, "Filipinos usually treat everyone else like family, calling family friends 'Tito' (uncle) or 'Tita' (aunt). We are inclusive and welcoming of others." By building her network, Commissioner Reyes herself found it easier to be mentored professionally and to mentor in return. She credits previous supervisors who challenged her to take on different assignments and apply for positions as she progressed through her LADWP career. Over the years as she took on supervisory roles, she mentored many others both Filipino Americans and otherwise. "When I recognized talent, I

gave stretch assignments and challenged my staff so they can grow even more in their profession. It's my way of giving back and I'm proud to see many whom I've helped grow into management and supervisory roles."

She adds, "Another thing I'm proud about as a Filipino is that we are a hardworking people. You'll see that Filipinos throw themselves at their work and are very willing to finish assignments. And that hard work is driven by ambition and love for family. Filipinos are committed to providing for their families, planning for their kids' future, pushing to get them an education and a career. And while we make sure we find ways to provide for our children, we are also thinking of ways to support extended family in need."

She observes that despite being hardworking, many Filipino Americans unknowingly tend to be submissive to other cultures in the workplace, and that this may be attributed to the more than 300 years of colonization of the Philippines by Spain and another 40 by the United States. "This is what we call colonial mentality, and that's just not right. Being a Filipino American means being a change maker. The only way that change can be transformative is if you're really there, boots in the ground, understanding and stepping in, and making sense out of what needs to be change. I want our *kababayans* (fellow Filipinos or countrymen) to be more outspoken, to claim our place in front and center. We work hard and we deserve to let our voices be heard."

She on the other hand does not have a hard time being heard. The change maker in Susana Reyes is a force to be reckoned with. Even more so in the month of October when she represents her cultural community. "I hope Filipinos can see that with my post on the Board, I am speaking not only for them but for our ratepayers for the benefit of LADWP," she says. "As a commissioner, I am proud to represent, I can make controversial decisions and I'm not afraid of it." And for Filipino Americans at LADWP and the City of Los Angeles who know her, Commissioner Reyes inspires Pinoy pride and empowerment. *Mabuhay ka, Susana at ang lahat ng ating mga kababayan!*

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