A Family Educates to Prevent Hate Crimes: The Case of Joseph Ileto

By Stewart Kwoh

On August 10, 1999, Joseph Santos Ileto, a Filipino American postal worker was gunned down along his Chatsworth route by a self-professed white supremacist named Buford O. Furrow. Just hours after Furrow fired shots into a playground full of children at the North Valley Jewish Community Center (NVJCC) in Granada Hills, the killer encountered Joseph, who happened to be covering another mail carrier’s route that day.

Furrow approached Joseph and asked him to mail a letter for him. As Joseph agreed to mail the letter, Furrow pulled out his gun and shot Joseph nine times. Furrow later confessed that he killed Joseph because he looked Latino or Asian and because he was a federal employee. Furrow also stated that Joseph’s racial background and employment with the government made him a good “target of opportunity.” As Joseph tried to run away, the killer shot him a few more times before finally escaping himself. Joseph died from gunshot wounds to the chest and one to the back of the head and was the only fatal victim during Furrow’s rampage. The day immediately after the shootings, Furrow turned himself in to the authorities and confessed his guilt.

To his family, Joseph was fondly known as Jojo or Kuya, a Filipino term of respect for an eldest brother. With the death of their father at an early age, Joseph played a central role in the household. A filial son, a devoted brother and brother-in-law, Kuya was an honest and modest man who never hesitated to help others. Ismael Ileto, Joseph’s younger brother, recounted an incident where Joseph helped the local sanitation workers when they came around on their shift. “That’s their job,” Ismael recalls saying, but that did not stop Joseph from helping those men.

At 39, things were going well in Joseph’s life. While attending California Polytechnic at Pomona for an Engineering degree, Joseph went to work at the United States Postal Service. An avid chess player, Joseph had been featured occasionally in magazines and newspapers for his accomplishments. Joseph had also just become an uncle as his brother Ismael and his sister-in-law Deena celebrated the arrival of their son, Kyle. Close to his younger twin sisters Carmina and Raquel, and his loving mother Lilian, Joseph was the family’s big brother, their Kuya, in every sense of the word.

“We never even got the chance to say goodbye. I want to tell him that we miss his company and I hope he can see that we’re doing our best to honor his name,”’ Ismael said, fighting back tears, “I want people to remember my brother Joseph not just as a hate crime victim, but for what his name stands for: J.O.S.E.P.H.I.L.E.T.O. Join Our Struggle; Educate and Prevent Hate; Instill Love, Equality and Tolerance for Others.”

As the Ileto family received the shocking news of Joseph’s death that summer afternoon, coverage of a crazed lone gunman emptying bullets into a playground full of children was the local and national media’s greatest concern. Five people in the NVJCC shooting were seriously hurt and footage of young children being led out by the police were the recurring images sensationalized on television throughout the day. The brutal
murder of Joseph and the shooting at NVJCC, both disturbingly violent, were reported as almost unrelated events. The murder of the Filipino American postal worker received minimal news coverage. The media’s consistent failure to adequately cover anti-Asian Pacific American (APA) incidents can explain the public’s general lack of awareness of anti-APA violence. In 1999, although four racially motivated murders against Asian Americans occurred, only those that involved other religious and racial minorities such as the shooting of five at the Jewish Center along with the Joseph Ileto killing received public attention.

Asian Pacific American victims often receive less coverage than the victims from other racial groups. To a large extent, Asian cultures deem family matters to be private and many hate crimes against those of Asian descent have gone unreported. Because it holds the power to influence public perception, the media’s failure to report anti-Asian violence results in incomplete and inaccurate understandings of the nature and true extent of the problem. Enraged to find Joseph’s death being ignored, the Iletos decided to break their silence. Thus, this began the family’s transition into the spotlight of anti-hate crime activism.

In memory of Joseph, the Ileto family invoked the Filipino spirit of bayanihan, across different groups and has built a multi-racial coalition in their fight against hate crimes. Bayanihan is a traditional Filipino custom to help one another as one larger community. In their quest to speak out against hate crimes, the Ileto family has reached out to various groups that they had no prior affiliation with in a desire to build a larger community against hate crimes. They have built a coalition with a pan-ethnic identity that includes diverse groups from other Asian American communities to gay and lesbian organizations.

“We are pushing for a bill that will put criminals away for all motivations for hate crimes. For discrimination against race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation,” Ismael said. One of the problems that the Iletos are facing is that many politicians are reluctant to include sexual orientation on that list. The Ileto family met with the parents of Matthew Shepard and shared their grief. “We want a bill that covers everyone,” says Ismael. “Hate that stems from intolerance or ignorance is unacceptable no matter what form it takes.”

Since Joseph’s death, the Iletos have become actively involved with organizations that strive to prevent hate. The Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC) in Los Angeles has created the Joseph Ileto Hate Crimes Prevention Fellowship that serves as a memorial for Joseph by advancing education and advocacy around the issue of hate crimes and strengthening intercommunity networks as a means of preventing hate crimes. The family has also been actively involved with the Filipino Civil Rights Advocates (FILCRA), a group that worked with APALC to provide support for hate crime prevention. Recognizing that brutal crimes like the hate murder of Joseph continue to happen in our society even today, Deena feels the collaboration of various groups is especially important. “We need to be more outspoken. How many more have to die before we’re important enough…for people to listen to our issues?” Ismael asserted.

Full text available online:
http://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/UCRS%206_Joseph_Ileto_story_r2.pdf