

## **Statement of Ms. Candice Abrahan Sering**

**Candice Abrahan Sering**, 42 years old resident of Red Hook, Brooklyn in New York City, union representative at the New York State Nurses Association, and general member of Gabriela New York.

*(The Statement of Ms. Candice Abrahan Sering was taken through a Skype call on 17 August 2018 held at Greenpeace Southeast Asia – Philippines, JGS Building, 30 Scout Tuazon Street, Brgy. Laging Handa, Quezon City. I was interviewed by Mr. Mohamad Rayyan M. Domado, the legal assistant of Attorneys Grizelda Mayo-Anda and Hasminah D. Paudac, and Ms. Desiree Llanos Dee)*

**Q1: Can you please state your personal background?**

A1: My parents migrated from the Philippines to New York in the 1970s. I was born and raised in the United States, the youngest of the three (3) children. I grew up mostly disconnected from my culture and family roots in the Philippines, but I had a nice upbringing in Queens. I currently work as a union representative of the New York State Nurses Association. In 2008, I joined Gabriela New York, the overseas chapter of Gabriela Philippines, a grassroots alliance of women's organizations. My involvement in Gabriela encouraged me to learn more about Filipino history, culture, global migration, and current socio-political events.

**Q2: How often do you visit the Philippines?**

A2: I first visited Philippines when I was four (4) years old. I was actually traumatized by the experience because of the culture shock. I am not sure if my parents spoke *Bisaya* or *Tagalog* growing up since they are both from Mindanao. Regardless, not hearing English was foreign to me. Everything was hard to understand while I was there. My experience was disorienting because I was also out of my comfort zone. Back then in the 80s, there was no McDonalds yet so everything was unfamiliar, especially the climate.

After that first visit, I returned as an adult to the Philippines in 2004 with my mother. I met my mother's side of the family in Lianga, Surigao del Sur. Then in 2008, I visited my father's side of the family in Surigao del Norte. Since then, I have started to feel closer to my roots in Philippines, especially as a general member of Gabriela New York, an overseas chapter of Gabriela Philippines. Now I go home every year and usually visit my relatives in Mindanao as well as participate in events, solidarity and medical missions like the one I joined after Typhoon Yolanda.

**Q3: The Philippines is said to be one of the most vulnerable countries when it comes to extreme weather events. Have you experienced typhoons or hurricanes here in the United States?**

A3: Yes, the year just before hurricane Sandy in October 2012, there was Hurricane Irene. Though my first experience of a hurricane was in

New York when I was young. As an adult, I moved to Puerto Rico to study in 1998 and right after I moved there, Hurricane George hit the island and we were without power and water for at least a month. There was a risk of losing my whole semester at the University of Puerto Rico. After graduating, I moved to the Bay Area in the West Coast for few years, moved back to New York in 2005. Right after I moved back to New York, Hurricane Katrina hit, and many people fled from New Orleans to stay at the house I was living in because my roommates at the time had many friends there. Since living in New York City, there have been cyclones in Brooklyn which is very unusual and warm winters where trees bloom. Weather conditions are not normal or predictable much at all anymore. Now we have super storms and “bombogenesis” snow storms. The norm seems to be abnormal weather.

**Q4: Hurricane Sandy devastated New York on 29 October 2012. How was your experience dealing with it?**

A4: The year before when the news came out that Hurricane Irene would hit in 2011, they said it would hit us really badly. So, I evacuated since I live near the coastal area, but it actually was not so bad. I stayed with my *ate* [older sister] because she also lives here in Brooklyn. Then, when Hurricane Sandy was headed our way, I decided to stay, thinking it would be good to ensure nothing horrible happened like windows breaking, etc. I also knew a lot of people also deciding to stay in Red Hook versus evacuate because we are a small close-knit community. So for those reasons, it felt safe to stay.

The morning of the storm, there was already some flooding and I went out with neighborhood friends to see how far in the floodwaters came in. Things seemed okay. Later that night though, the storm started to hit really badly. The rain was constant and heavy. I live on the fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) floor of my apartment building so it was not so bad for me personally as I did not have to worry about flooding in my actual apartment. I have a friend in the neighborhood also in Gabriela New York, Tina Cocadiz, and we were texting the whole time during the storm to make sure we were both okay. She lived a few blocks away from me more inland, away from the coastline and had a vantage point from the third floor of her building onto the street.

Little by little, things started to happen. It was scary as I could hear and see the explosion of transformers in the distance cutting out power. In the middle of the night, the electricity went out. The water was coming into the neighborhood and flooding the streets from all different directions. Tina and I continued to text through the night, and she could see the surge starting to cover the parked cars on her block. The flood surge had really come in.

By the next morning, the surge had gone out. People in the street were coming out to assess the damage. When we went outside the

neighborhood, everyone was removing everything from their homes and putting it out onto the streets. It was like a big graveyard of everyone's personal belongings from mattresses to couches to dining sets and family albums. It was a sad sight. The contents of entire apartments were on the street. Everything was soaked and destroyed. There was no electricity, no water. It was cold; there was no heat. On our block we were fortunate, electricity came back within a week, but many of my neighbors went many months without heat in the dead of winter.

**Q5: Did any of your neighbors lose loved ones?**

A5: Fortunately no, not to my knowledge. But thousands of people who live in the Red Hook Houses, project housing subsidized by the government, were deeply affected. I would consider these communities the equivalent of the urban poor in the Philippines. They were left with no heat, hot water or electricity for months that winter. Some buildings are thirteen (13) stories high, with elevators that did not work because of the lack of power making access to food, water, and heat nearly impossible. The government response to the Red Hook Houses was slow, disorganized, and lacking as a result of common neglect of the government to respond to poorer communities in need. As a result, residents' health and safety were compromised for a long period of time.

**Q6: Were you able to see the actual wrath of the hurricane?**

A6: It was really dark, but I could hear the wrath. It reminded me of Hurricane George in Puerto Rico, hearing objects flying and hitting walls of buildings and crashing on the ground. When I texted Tina, I could sense that she was terrified. She could see from her window the parked cars get flooded in by the storm surge and starting to move with the water. It was especially scary for her as she lived next to electrical posts and many were combusting as the storm progressed.

**Q7: How did your experience with hurricane Sandy affect you, if any?**

A7: In the direct sense, I saw what it looked like to be a rapid responder in a way. We had a neighbor friend who lived in a garden apartment and she had evacuated to stay with family in Connecticut. Her building was marked to be demolished, so Tina and I had to quickly get all of her things out of her apartment immediately. It was not clear also how stable buildings were in the neighborhood after the storm. I think there is some virtual trauma I have blocked out of my mind and it is something I hope to not bear witness to again even though that is not a realistic hope considering the times we live in. There is an insecurity of seeing how we are not heading in a positive direction with the way corporations are often given free reign and governments both in the Philippines and the United States not really addressing this concern of the people most impacted by corporate power. Additionally, you could feel a great sense of economic inequality -- there was an exodus of people leaving Red Hook to escape disaster conditions we endured

through the winter. They were able to have access and resources to pick up and go to restart their lives. While others, like my friends, stuck it out to see our neighborhood recover. We could not afford to leave, but also chose not to leave a community we loved.

**Q8: How did the storm affect your livelihood, if it did?**

A8: At the time, I lived and worked in Red Hook. The restaurant where I worked was flooded in the basement, but fortunately not in the actual dining area since the building sits just a bit above sea-level. We may have been the only restaurant in Red Hook that survived the storm. I worked as a bartender and server there. Shortly after the storm, though we had no electricity, we were able to open the restaurant. We lit candles, and neighbors came to commiserate in the aftermath of trying to make sense of it all. We were eventually able to open the kitchen and actually serve meals. It became a sort of gathering place for everyone affected by the storm. Everyone was shell shocked about how bad the flooding was. Working every day after we opened was an intense experience of hearing all of their Sandy stories of loss. It felt like we were all mourning.

I was, however, super lucky I was able to go back to work in the restaurant not long after the storm. Our restaurant became ground zero for neighbors to convene, rest between clearing out their homes and putting their lives together. We shared stories, mourned together, and processed our experiences, keeping tabs on each other for safety. Aside from serving the customers, we listened to their stories and offered comfort and support. It was like everyday psychosocial debriefing and healing together. But it was also really exhausting.

At the same time in another coastal area of Brooklyn, Brighton Beach, Gabriela New York members linked up with other organizations to embark on relief operations. We were there to help a small Filipino community living there, gathering donations and support for them as they had been flooded as well.

**Q9: From the stories you heard and collected, what has been said to be the effect of Hurricane Sandy to these people?**

A9: We sometimes worry *na baka maulit* [that it might happen again]. There is panic based on this experience that everytime it rains heavily, there could be severe flooding. There is also a nostalgia of what this community was. Right after Hurricane Sandy, we were like a tiny corner of the world supporting each other.

Then after the storm, you saw an influx of builders and developers come and snatch up properties. The character of the neighborhood has changed significantly, and you can see a lot of new money and people who are unaware of what the neighborhood went through during Sandy. We were once a tight knit community of people looking out for each other and caring for each other's well being and now it's a bit

different. Many of the old buildings were demolished and rebuilt into brand new expensive condominiums. Such apartments are so expensive that none of the old residents can afford to live there so rents have increased and people have left. What is sad is that most of the residents moved out because many of them lost everything from their livelihoods to their homes.

**Q10: What was your involvement in Yolanda operations?**

A10: Just weeks after Typhoon Yolanda hit, I joined Gabriela Philippines through their relief program Lingap Gabriela. We went in a caravan with truckloads of supplies to Tacloban on a psychosocial medical mission for a few days. The journey to get down there by land was hard and long. Gabriela has a chapter there in Palo and we heard of areas not receiving any aid or response from their local government unit. So we set up a station to distribute dry foods and rice, conduct psychosocial counseling, do health checks and give out medicines, and engage with the children in activities to help them process their emotions. We also went to one of the mass graves, which was really heartbreaking as there were children playing there to stay close to their parents who had been killed in the typhoon. I witnessed the lack of food and medicine, vitamins, and other personal hygiene kits for the families. It was upsetting to know a lot of relief goods were not being distributed. They do not get the immediate basic care from the government. The community was really ruined by the typhoon.

**Q11: Do you have any idea about climate change?**

A11: Climate change has been progressively on the decline since my adult years. Hurricane George was my first wake up call. Now we see these tornados coming to Brooklyn. And every year now, hurricanes come hit the east coast of the United States and all across the Philippines more frequently. Experts report direct correlations to pollution and gas emissions, overproduction of goods, no-regulation of factories, and lack of corporate social responsibility. I also know and have seen the effects of mining for natural resources in my parents' provinces and how that creates an imbalance in the natural ecosystem as well, causing landslides, earthquakes, and massive flooding not to mention the silt that destroys the lakes where there once were fish. There are chemicals and leeching of other poisons into drinking water -- all of these are related to the corporate irresponsibility. They extract minerals for processing and profit gain while producing and excess of goods regardless of whether we even need these products. There is massive waste produced as a result. Moreover, their decision to keep on drilling kills marine lives, and the garbage from these companies contributes to the destruction of the nature and wildlife. There is a clear correlation for me and documented by scientists and researchers between what transnational companies are doing and the impacts on climate change.

**Q12: When you mentioned about these polluting companies, are you referring to fossil fuel and cement companies which were said by science experts to be the largest contributor of carbon emissions which fuels climate change?**

A12: Yes. Though they are just a few of the many culprits.

**Q13: What message do you have to these polluting fossil fuel and cement companies, if any?**

A13: As a member of a grassroots community organization and alliance that knows and understands the roots of their hardship, all these companies are obligated to take ownership and accountability for the damage caused by massive destruction of people's livelihoods, actual homes, physical health, and safe access to clean air and water. I would say stop plundering the Philippines' natural resources and keep these mineral resources in the land where so many families live and thrive. Communities depend on the land for their harvest and the seas their food and livelihoods -- all of these destroyed for the profits earned by transnational operations. The emissions and waste that accelerates the destruction of our ecosphere decreases the time and resources we have to live within it. There are better ways to conduct business that do not have to cause hardship and damage to the lives of millions of people. At this point in time, large corporations need to put all that money into research to ensure that our basic human rights are not taken away from us.

**Q14: Are you ready and willing to swear this Statement under oath before the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, if required to do so?**

A14: Yes.



**Candice A. Sering**  
15 September 2018