

## *Give Up Tomorrow* Interview Transcription

In your own words what is *Give Up Tomorrow* about?

*Give Up Tomorrow* is about so many things but I guess its about a political thriller set in the Philippines; its about a story of a young man who was wrongfully accused of a crime then sentenced to death. So it is about this injustice but the film is really also about how to fight injustice. It's about how his whole community and the international community ended up coming to his rescue and fighting really hard to help save him.

What prompted you to make the film and how did you find out about this man's story?

Back in 2004, Paco was sentenced to death. Initially he was sentenced to life in prison in 1997. And then when he was sentenced to death my friend Marty, who is Pilipino, his brother is Paco's brother-in-law. Marty is the producer on the film. So his brother told me about this story and he asked me to make an animation, because he knew I had a background in animation for the web to depict some of the injustices that happened during Paco's trial. So when I started doing research on the case, I agreed to do the animation. I figured out pretty quickly that this guy was in fact innocent, and then realized that this story was huge; it had to be told as a film. Within a few months, Marty and I just figured no one else was going to do it if we didn't so we quit our jobs, bought a camera and went to the Philippines and started shooting.

What were your emotions like during that transition period?

It was pretty shocking when we arrived in the Philippines. The first thing we did was we went to the prison where Paco was on death row because I wanted to meet him. We hadn't slept, jet-lagged, my first time in the Philippines, and we went to the prison and we waited outside. We were trying to figure out a way to get in. Paco couldn't, you know most prisoners can come to the gate to meet the visitors but he couldn't cause he was on death row. After 3 hours someone invited us in and we weren't really sure it was Paco or not. People were telling us to be very careful. There were a lot of people who didn't want this story to be told. We were getting a little paranoid. We ended up going inside the prison. The prison there is essentially a walled city run by gangs. Its nothing like what we see here in the US. So we went through this whole area, went into a dorm. There was no electricity at the time so it was pitch black. And I remember being led through, someone lit a lighter next to me and there were just bodies everywhere; men laying around. We had to walk really carefully not to step on people. I start to wonder, where am I being taken? I was a little bit paranoid. And then finally we got to a room where Paco was. And there was a little window in that room, so there was light and it was great. And that was the first time I met him. And over the course of the next four months we would visit Paco every chance we got. Little by little we realized that in order to make the film properly we had to include Paco's voice, because Paco wasn't allowed to testify at this own trial. We had to figure out a way to get a camera snuck into the prison so that we could conduct interviews with Paco. We had to get something with night

vision because often the electricity would go out inside and there was no light. So that's what we did. We conducted a series of interviews with Paco inside. We'd leave the camera inside, sometimes we'd have to bury it in the ground just to keep it hidden from the guards and we'd just leave with the tapes in our pockets.

What was your first impression of Paco, in that environment especially?

When you look at Paco he really fits the part of a thug or a gangster. He's a big guy and he can look kind of scary. So I think that is why initially when the arrest was made the media really portrayed him as a monster. And he really fit the part. He had a reputation for getting into fights. He had a pretty bad reputation on the island of Cebu growing up in high school. But honestly when I met him I felt so safe. He's just like this big teddy bear. He's so welcoming. It was something I got from people in the Philippines everywhere – always Are you okay? What do you need? Always making sure that we were comfortable. Meanwhile, he's there on death row, but he's always worried about everyone else first. He's a big guy but he has a really big heart.

What was it like trying to sneak a camera into a prison in the Philippines?

The decision to bring the camera into the prison we didn't take lightly. If we got caught obviously there would be consequences for us, but more importantly for Paco we didn't know what they would do to him if they found out. But he himself said he was desperate – he was on death row, his execution could be scheduled at any time. He said this is my last hope, we have to do this. It was a little bit ironic that our film was criticizing we kind of use that to our advantage because we did find a way to have the camera snuck into the prison. We had it brought in separately, in pieces and once inside we had to keep it hidden. We had a system in place where when we would do the interviews we had people on the outside that were able to tell us if guards were coming. We would know about 6 minutes in advance if a guard was coming so we'd have time to hide the camera. We were fortunate enough that there were no negative consequences for Paco when the video actually came out. One of the first things he asked us to do was to bring a short message to Spain and he knew that was his last hope. We recorded a message where he was just reaching out to the Spanish government and to the whole European Union, and said please help me I'm on death row here and there is nothing else that I can do. When we released that message we were afraid something else would happen to Paco because they would realize there was a camera in the prison but luckily nothing ever did.

Tell me what it was like to meet Mrs. Chiong and film her given her involvement throughout this entire case.

When I think about what I struggled with in the edit room most it was dealing with Mrs. Chiong because she is the first victim in all of this. Her two daughters went missing that's just a fact. I always had to keep that in mind. Over the years I think she made some very bad decisions out of frustration and wanting to find justice for her daughters she started telling lies. In a strange way I think because she thought that was going to help her get justice for her daughters not realizing that what she was actually doing was undermining the whole process; clouding the whole process. Once she started telling these lies there was no backing

out. So we present her in the film initially as a grieving mother, which she was. And then through time the transformation that happens when she really gets put in the public spotlight and she actually starts to get a lot of power and how she handles that and how she uses that, she has a connection to the office of the President, how she uses that to sort of interfere in the investigation. So showing her versus Mrs. Larranaga we are just trying to show two mothers who are dealing with such extreme tragedies both losing their children in a way and how they handle it differently. To answer your question about what it was like to meet Mrs. Chiong, one of the most important things for me, was to meet her personally. When I met her I guess my approach was I really just gave her space to tell her story. And that's what I did. And it was a little uncomfortable, and a little shocking because she wouldn't filter what she said she would just say anything and I think that really comes out in the film. And I think that that just really showed me the relationship that she had with the media in the Philippines' up until that point. No one was critical. I went with her as she was going to the courthouse to file an appeal as she tried to block Paco's transfer and right in front of me she's whispering into the judge's ears and she's joking with everyone that works there. And she's very comfortable. I guess it was just really shocking. There is a piece of me that's obviously very frustrated with her because I know the damage that some of her lies have caused to so many people involved in this case – Paco the co-accused, all of their families. But there is also a piece of me that knows her behavior stems from the fact that she was a grieving mother that lost two daughters and somewhere along the way was misled and started making a lot of bad decisions.

So it was very important for me to meet Mrs. Chiong. We had a couple interviews with her where we had other crews since we weren't in the Philippines at the time, but before we finished the film I wanted to meet her myself. When I met her I guess my approach was I really just gave her space to tell her side of the story. It was a little uncomfortable and a little shocking honestly; she wouldn't filter what she said she would just say anything. It really just showed me the relationship she had with the media in the Philippines up until that point, where she didn't have to censor herself, no one was critical. I went with her to the courts to file an appeal to block Paco's transfer. Right in front of me she's whispering into the judges ears and joking with everyone who works there. She's just very comfortable and I guess it was just really shocking. There's a piece of me that's obviously very frustrated with her because I know the damage her lies have caused to so many people involved in this case; Paco, all of the co-accused, all of their families. But there's also a piece of me that knows that her behavior stems from the fact that she's a grieving mother who lost two daughters and somewhere along the way was misled and started making a lot of bad decisions.

Having Mrs. Chiong at the center of this film was really complicated because she was this grieving mother but she had also done some things that make her come across as almost a villain in the film. I think something you said that really hits the nail on the head is that she's just so complicated. She's not a one-dimensional person, which is what we tried to show in the film and when we were working through the edit.

She had all of these different dimensions to her; she was a grieving mother but that she had also made some bad decisions. We didn't want her just to come across as a sort of one-dimensional character; we didn't want any of our characters to, but especially her.

Did you have much knowledge about the legal system in the Philippines before creating the film?

All the systems in the Philippines are modeled after the US because it was a former colony of the US. The main difference is that there is no jury. Everything sort of relies on one judge. And in this case we had a very mentally unstable judge – he was wearing sunglasses, he would fall asleep, he committed suicide shortly after the trial. My understanding of the legal system was that it was similar to the US but the biggest difference is that there is a lot of corruption ingrained in the system that is a little more accepted, blatant than it is in the US. We have a lot of innocent people who go to prison here, that have been sentenced to death here, but I think the main difference is that unfortunately it is more acceptable for people to use their influence within the system.

What does it feel like for you, to have a film that exposes a flawed justice system and to have the rest of the world see what needs to be done to correct that?

It is important to note right now that there is a new administration in the Philippines who really ran on a platform of anti-corruption and have doing everything they can to reform the system. In fact, the former chief justice of the Supreme Court was just impeached. There is a change, its happening right now in the Philippines. As much as this is showing a negative aspect of the Pilipino justice system, I think that what we found is Pilipino's all over the world are happy its being shown because its calling attention to a problem that they want to fix and the administration themselves want to fix and have been taking steps to make that happen. The Philippines is probably one of the most beautiful places in the world. What was so fascinating to me was telling this story, which is kind of an ugly story in so many ways, but its also set in one of the most beautiful places in the world. We also tried to capture that in the film. The Philippines isn't just this, but this is one element. As with every country in the world we have corruption and flaws in our systems and the reason why we wanted to bring this film all over the world is because people can relate to it everywhere. This isn't a uniquely Pilipino story, people can relate to it. I think that's why we've had the success we've had worldwide is because people see this and they can relate to it. Everywhere we've gone people come up to us after and say this reminds me of this case and they also relate to it on a personal level. That was one of the reasons why we wanted to make this film. It wasn't just to save Paco, we knew it was a universal story and we thought that it could inspire people to make change in their own community.

What was so fascinating to me, was telling this story, which is kind of an ugly story in so many ways and its very tragic story but its also set in one of the most beautiful places in the world. We tried to capture that in the film; this isn't the Philippines, the Philippines isn't just this but this is only one element. As with every country in the

world, we have corruption everywhere and we all have flaws in our systems. The reason why we wanted to bring this film all over the world is because people can relate to it everywhere. It isn't a uniquely Pilipino story. I think that's why we've had the success we've had worldwide. People see this and they can relate to it. Everywhere that we've gone people come up to us after and say it reminds me of this case and this case and they also relate to it on a very personal level - that could have been my brother. That was one of the reasons why we wanted to make this film; it wasn't just to save Paco. We wanted to bring this to the world because we thought it was a universal story and we thought it could inspire people to make change in their own community all over the world.

What is it like to know that you and Marty have made such a strong impact on the Pilipino community?

This whole process has been really a community effort; Marty and I have been at the center of it, but there has been so many people along the way that really make this happen. The people who are involved in this case who were willing to come out and talk to us that are really courageous, that are still fighting for justice for these guys after 15 years. We just really put a spotlight on them and gave them a platform to finally tell their story. It feels good to see so much positive come from something that was initially so negative. It was such a tragedy in so many people's lives, I think the film has given them an opportunity to come together to work toward something positive; it's given them hope again, it's given them a voice in the community again.

Tell me more about your decision to make a film apart from any other medium.

Documentary film is a really powerful tool. Because you can take people on a journey where they get to experience the emotions of the characters on the screen. For me personally, when I read about Paco's story initially, he had 35 witnesses who weren't allowed to testify at his trial and they wrote a letter that they just sent out to the public when he was sentenced to death. I read this letter and I read all about the injustices and it really just broke my heart. Paco and I are the same age, I really identified with him. He'd been in prison at that point for 7 years, and I had been in NYC at that point for 7 years. And it literally moved me to tears. It was just really heartbreaking. I wanted people to experience a little bit of what he and his family and all the people involved in this case experienced and I think film is the most powerful way to do that. But our approach wasn't just to tell Paco's story it was to talk to everyone involved in this case and to hear all sides and there are so many. This is a really sort of massive, very complicated case with a lot of players. That's why we spent 7 years making the film. We went to the Philippines 5 times, I probably spent about a year on the ground there. We wanted to interview everyone involved and ultimately, yes, Paco's family is at the heart of this story. But we were very careful to include all the stories in the film.

As far as screening the film and telling people all over the world about the story, you finally had a screening in Manila and Cebu...

After about a year and a half of touring with this film all over the world we finally had the opportunity to bring it home to the Philippines. Honestly we were a little bit nervous. For the past 15 years the media and the public have really taken the position that Paco and his co-accused were guilty, so we didn't know how it was going to be received but we knew we had to take it there. It couldn't have gone any better. It was sold out, we had standing ovations and we got so much media attention they actually had to give us a second screening and we were the only documentary in the festival that got two screenings. That was sold out again too and we had to extend our trip by two weeks just to accommodate all of the requests for media and more screenings. Some people that watched the film said we'll rent a theatre here in Manila and open it up so people can come and see it. It was amazing to see the media who was once so against Paco was ready to look at it from a different perspective. To sort of try to make up for what they had done in the past. They were the first ones to say this was a trial by publicity. We are finally seeing a real change on the ground in terms of the attitude toward Paco and his co-accused.

Just yesterday we had our premiere in Cebu, where the crime actually took place. It's a very controversial case and it was difficult to get the film there. A lot of theatres agreed to do it, but pulled out at the last minute. Yesterday, we were able to secure a venue; Marty and I were Skyped in to do a live Q&A with the audience. Again, we were very nervous because this is where it all happened and it was incredible. There were so many tears and people were getting up, journalists, apologizing to the Larranaga's for how they handled this in the past. It was one of the most special moments on this whole journey.

Have you heard from Mrs. Chiong after the movie's premiere in the Philippines?

After our first interview on the evening news, someone from her family also called and said hey, what about us? It was great for all the coverage that we got she also got to come out and speak to the press. What's really sad is that she is still saying the same things that she said all those years ago. Our intention for making this film was not just to get justice for Paco and his co-accused but also for the Chiong sisters. We know these men are innocent, they didn't do this crime, it was just impossible. So there is no justice for her daughters while innocent men are in jail.

On our web site we have links to some of the interviews with her that have come out and she is still saying the same things. Basically, this whole case rested on one eyewitness, a guy who was picked up 10 months after the crime. There are photographs of Mrs. Chiong giving him gifts, and in one interview she jokes about how he comes to visit her and she gives him money. We bring that stuff up in the film but in her recent interview she says she doesn't care for him and only spoke to him briefly. I am just sad that there are still so many lies that are clouding this whole case. If people would finally start to look at this fresh and honest then these 7 young men who've been in jail for 15 years would finally be able to go home.

What are your plans as far as the film being shown here in the US?

We started the distribution here about a year and a half ago and we went on to tour all over the world and the country. The film will be showing on PBS and will be available on the POV web site.

What does it mean to be a part of such a strong tradition here at the Center for Social Media Human Rights' Film Series?

I think the films that are shown in this series are the films that inspired us to make our own film. These are the films that made us realize how powerful documentary film is to create social change. To be invited to be a part of this is a dream come true to us. When we started making this film we had no idea what we were doing, our intention was to make a film that would help these guys that would maybe call attention to some bigger problems but we never know if it would be well received anywhere in the world, if it would get any attention. The fact that we are playing here is the ultimate validation and its just so exciting. Part of this process we just learned so much from all of the other filmmakers – they have been so generous with their time and we've been inspired by their films. So now to be able to share our own film and give back to the community somehow I think that also feels really good.