



# From School Settlement Worker to Author:

P2P Keynote by Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio

Founder of Filipino Talks | Comms at Together Project |

Author of *Reuniting with Strangers*

November 26, 2024





**Immigration & Settlement Studies MA  
at Toronto Metropolitan University**



**School Settlement Worker**



**Researcher**



**Journalist**





**Tour Guide in Toronto's  
Little Manila**



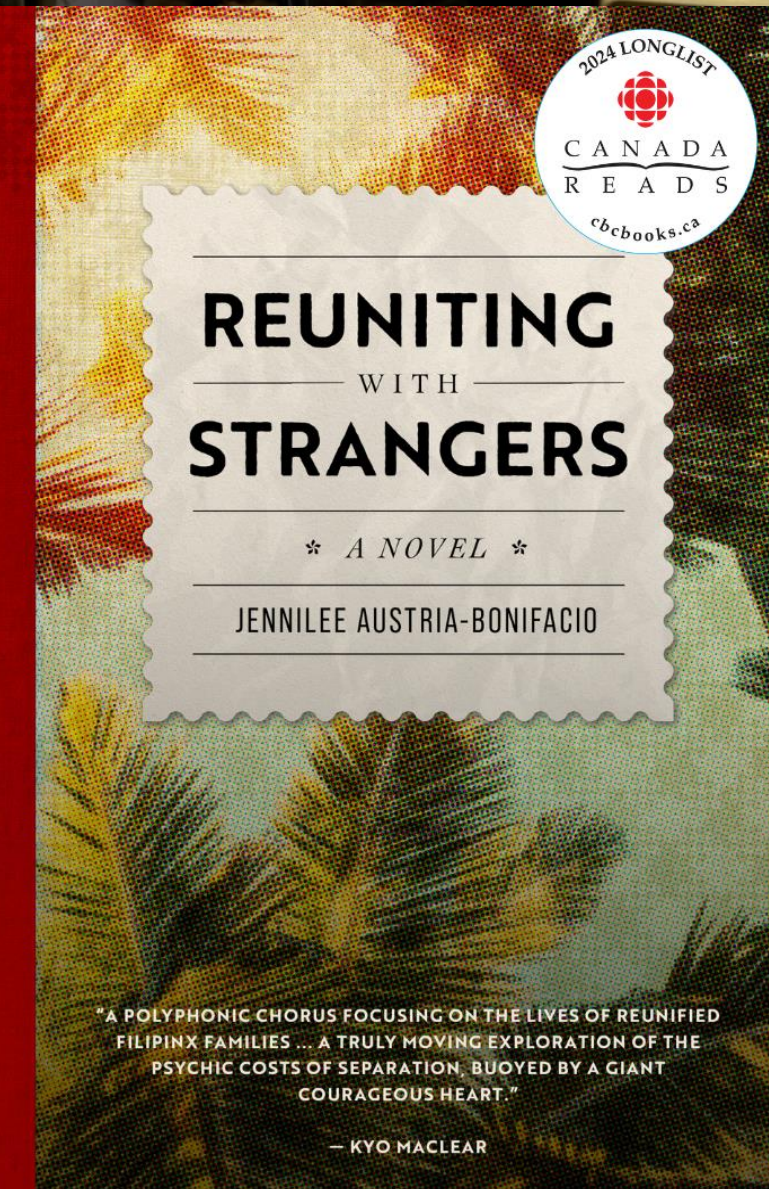
**School Board Consultant**



**Communications & Program Outreach  
Specialist at Together Project**



**Published  
Author!**



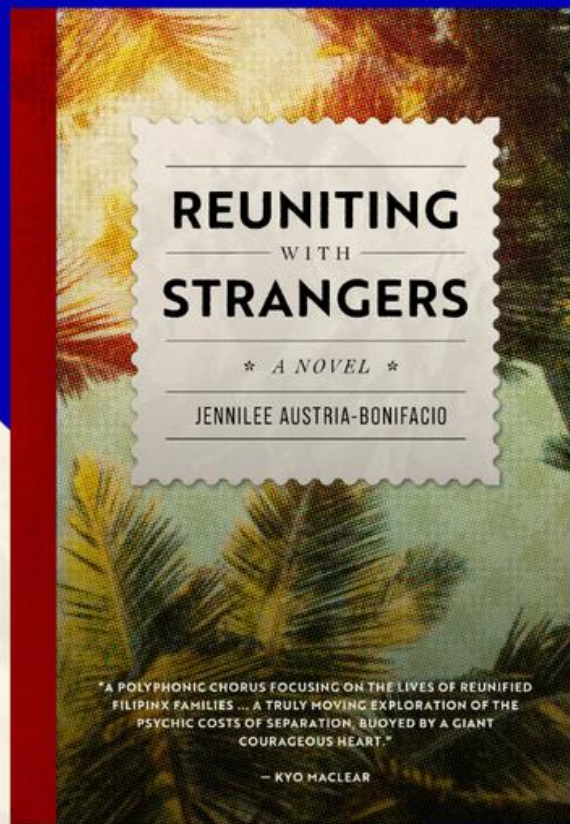
"A POLYPHONIC CHORUS FOCUSING ON THE LIVES OF REUNITED FILIPINX FAMILIES ... A TRULY MOVING EXPLORATION OF THE PSYCHIC COSTS OF SEPARATION, BUOYED BY A GIANT COURAGEOUS HEART."  
— KYO MACLEAR



# But before I tell you about the book...

**BEST BOOKS OF 2023**

**CBC  
BOOKS**

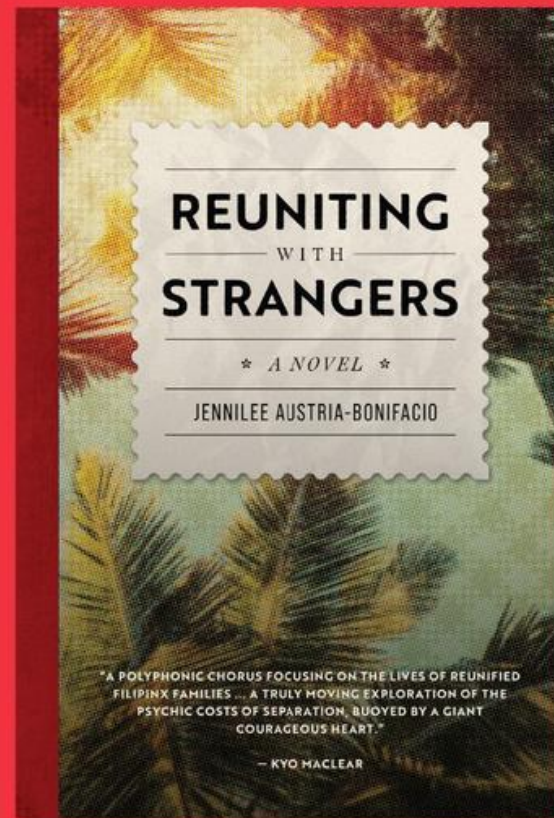


**CANADIAN FICTION**

**CANADA  
READS**



**2024 LONGLIST**



**CBCBOOKS**

*Reuniting With  
Strangers*  
by Jennilee  
Austria-Bonifacio

**TORONTO  
BOOK  
AWARDS  
2024  
FINALIST:**

**REUNITING WITH STRANGERS**



**TORONTO**



**My first family when I moved to Toronto:**

**The SWIS/LSP team at North York Community House!**



**I loved settlement work, but I saw something missing...**



# TOGETHER PROJECT

Communications & Program Outreach Specialist

“When I saw this job posting, I couldn’t help but smile.”



“My own great grandparents came here from Eastern Europe in the early 1900s, fleeing persecution and discrimination, and built a new life for themselves and their family.

More than a century later, I want to make sure that it remains a welcoming place for anyone who needs a refuge.”

-Josh, Welcome Group Volunteer

**1400+ VOLUNTEERS**

**1370+ NEWCOMERS**

**370+ WELCOME**

**GROUPS**

**TOGETHER PROJECT**  
togetherproject.ca | a project of MakeWay



“I googled Together Project and I said, ‘Oh my God, that’s my story as an immigrant. Maybe I can help motivate new immigrants to be like me: to go to school, to educate themselves, to find a home, to be of help to a new immigrant. I can share my story with them, and that way they’re going to be motivated to be more comfortable to land in a new country.’”

-Padina, Welcome Group Program Volunteer



# THE WELCOME GROUP PROGRAM

Matching refugee newcomers with groups of volunteers in  
Toronto, Mississauga, and Ottawa



Check Out Our Resources Website:

- Our Education Guide for newcomers
- Our Language Resources Guide
- A huge Resources Page filled with settlement services and programs

[www.togetherproject.ca/resources](http://www.togetherproject.ca/resources)





Where my  
settlement  
work  
story

begins:

**Sarnia,  
my hometown!**







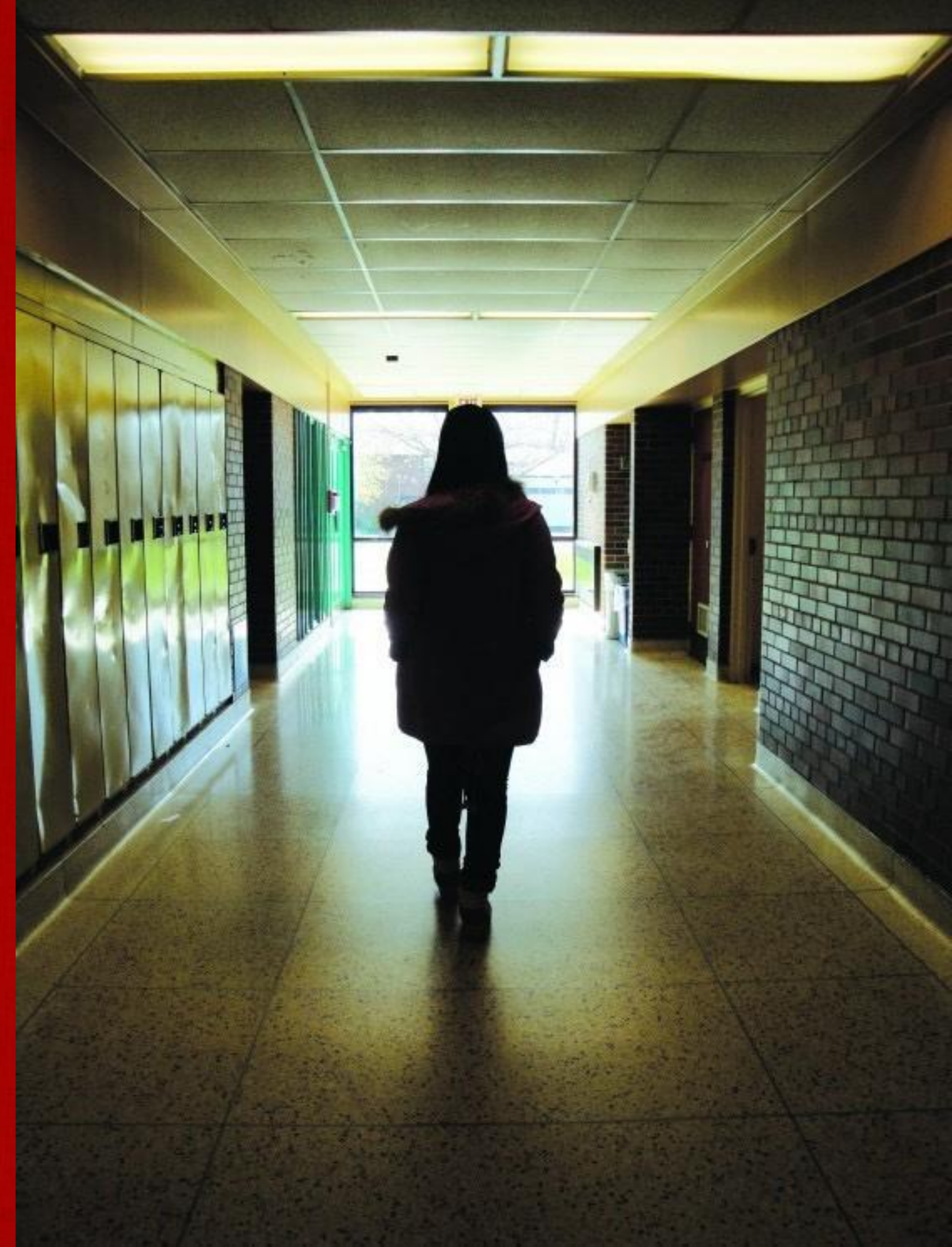
Every settlement  
worker carries  
stories about  
newcomers they'll  
never forget.

**Here's one of  
mine.**



The difference between  
Filipinos in Sarnia when I was  
growing up versus Filipino  
newcomers in Toronto?

**Family separation  
due to the  
Caregiver Program**





# Recommendation #1 for Settlement Agencies:

Don't overlook the value that Canadian-born applicants  
can bring to settlement services.





# Recommendation #2 for

## Settlement Agencies:

Don't replace your Filipino workers with non-Filipinos just because Filipino newcomers speak English.





# Question for Settlement Staff:

## What kind of bridge can you build?

After 6 years of settlement work, I started consulting in school boards to build bridges between educators and Filipino newcomer families and created...

## Filipino Talks!







# Filipino Talks:

An initiative to  
collaborate with...

-school boards

-educators

-settlement workers

-newcomer students

-newcomer parents

-artists and professional  
role models



# Filipino Talks Step One:

Survey the Filipino newcomer youth -  
have the school help you develop and distribute  
anonymous surveys

**Here's to the 1200+ Filipino Talks students!**



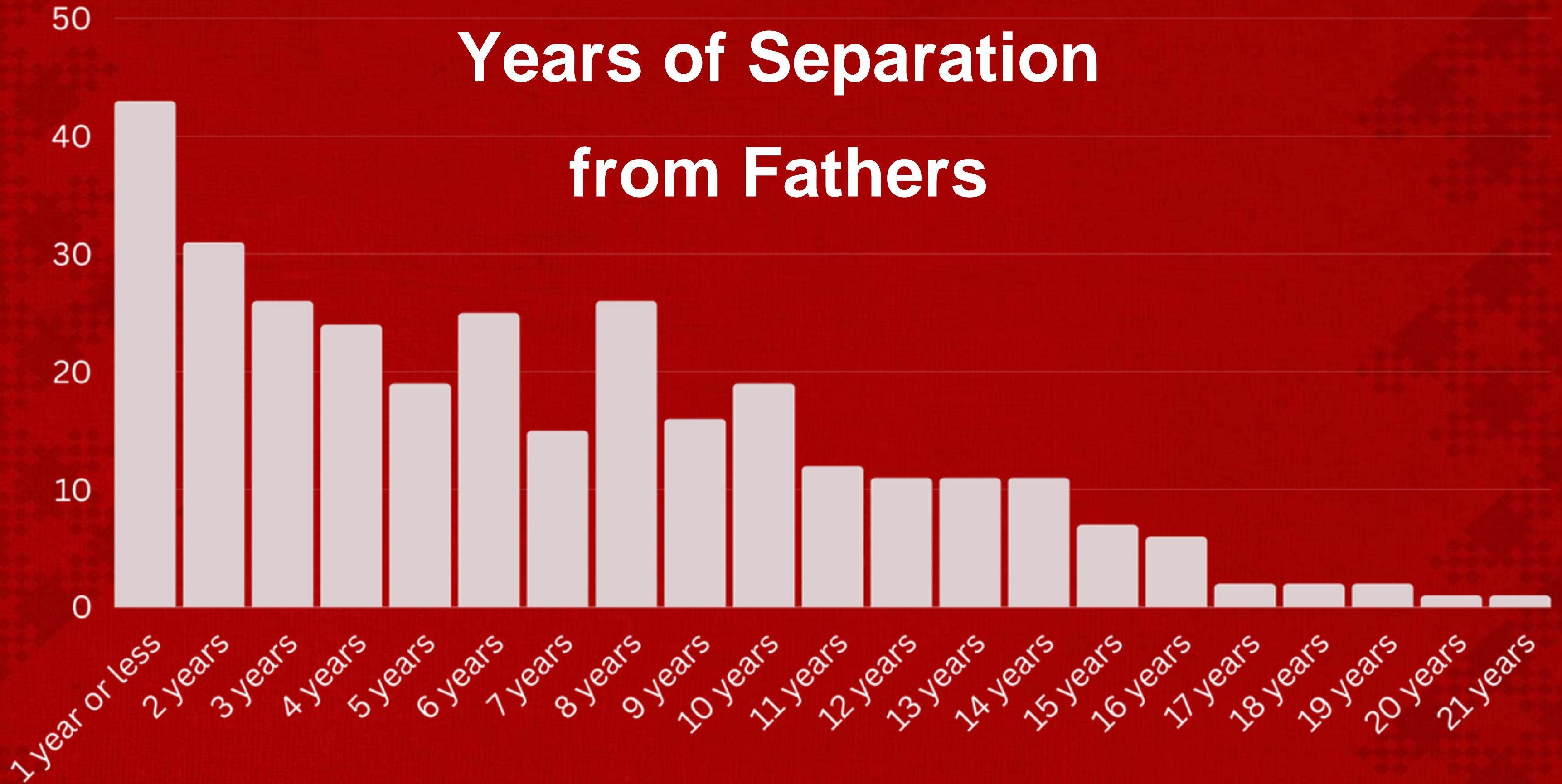


# Years of Separation from Mothers





# Years of Separation from Fathers



**Watch carefully...**



# Years of Separation from Fathers





# Filipino Talks Step Two:

Share data with youth, then run programs focused on reunification, professional role models, and community involvement

**64% of Filipino Talks youth...**

**-aren't involved in any activities or groups**

**-don't know anyone in their dream career**





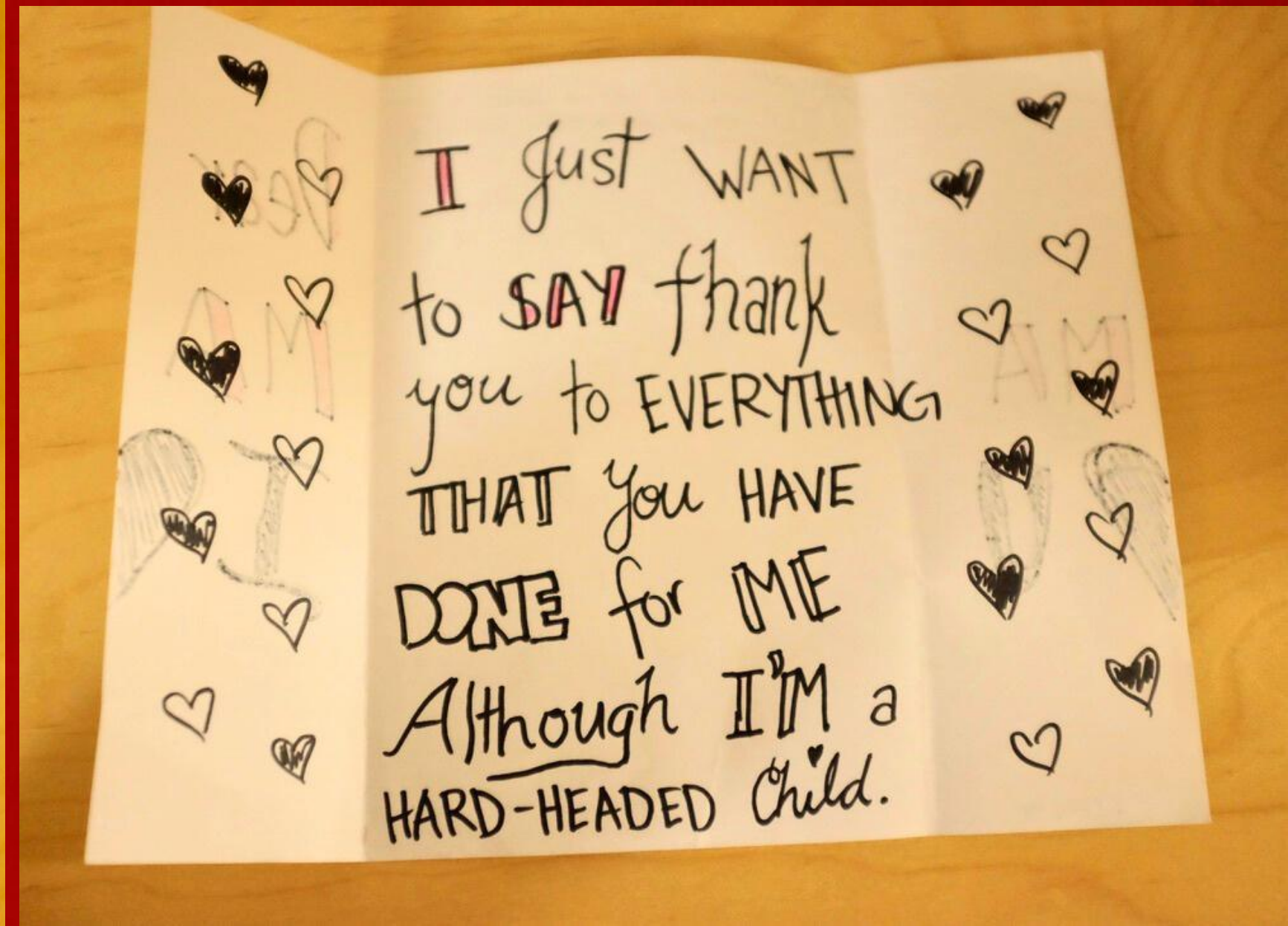
Filipino

Talks

Step Three:

Video

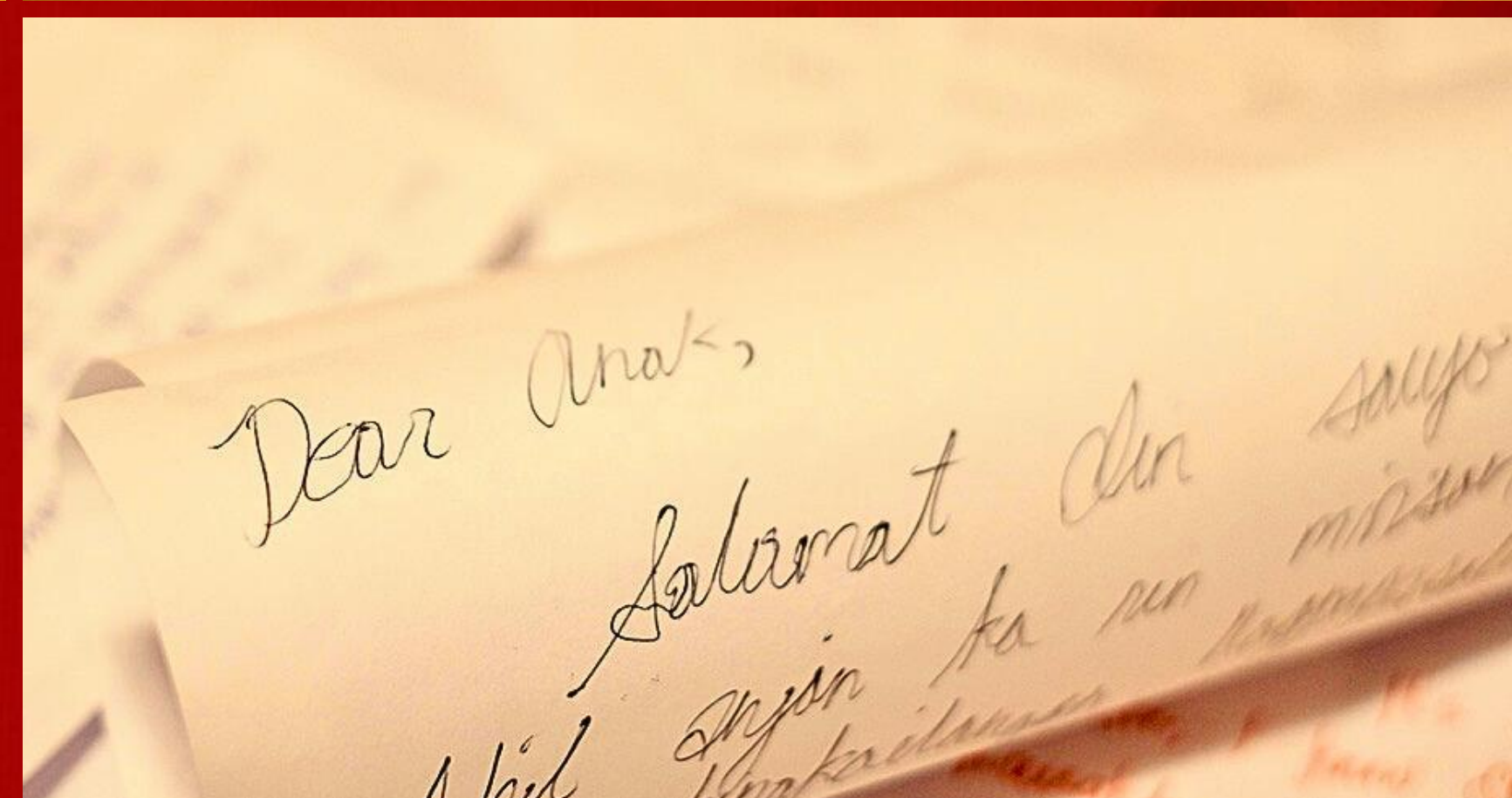
Project



Letters to Mama

[www.jennileeaustriabonifacio.com](http://www.jennileeaustriabonifacio.com)

[/filipino-talks/](http://filipino-talks/)





# Filipino Talks Step Four:

Share data with school staff and give them tangible strategies for reaching newcomer students & parents

## Solutions:

- Guest speaker profiles
- Frontline worker contacts
- Field trip ideas
- Book lists
- Even how to pronounce Filipino names!







# How to Pronounce Filipino Names

When you see “a,”  
say “ah” -- like Manila!

**1. Maricar Magpantay**

**2. Aivan Galang**

**3. Bayani Magsaysay**





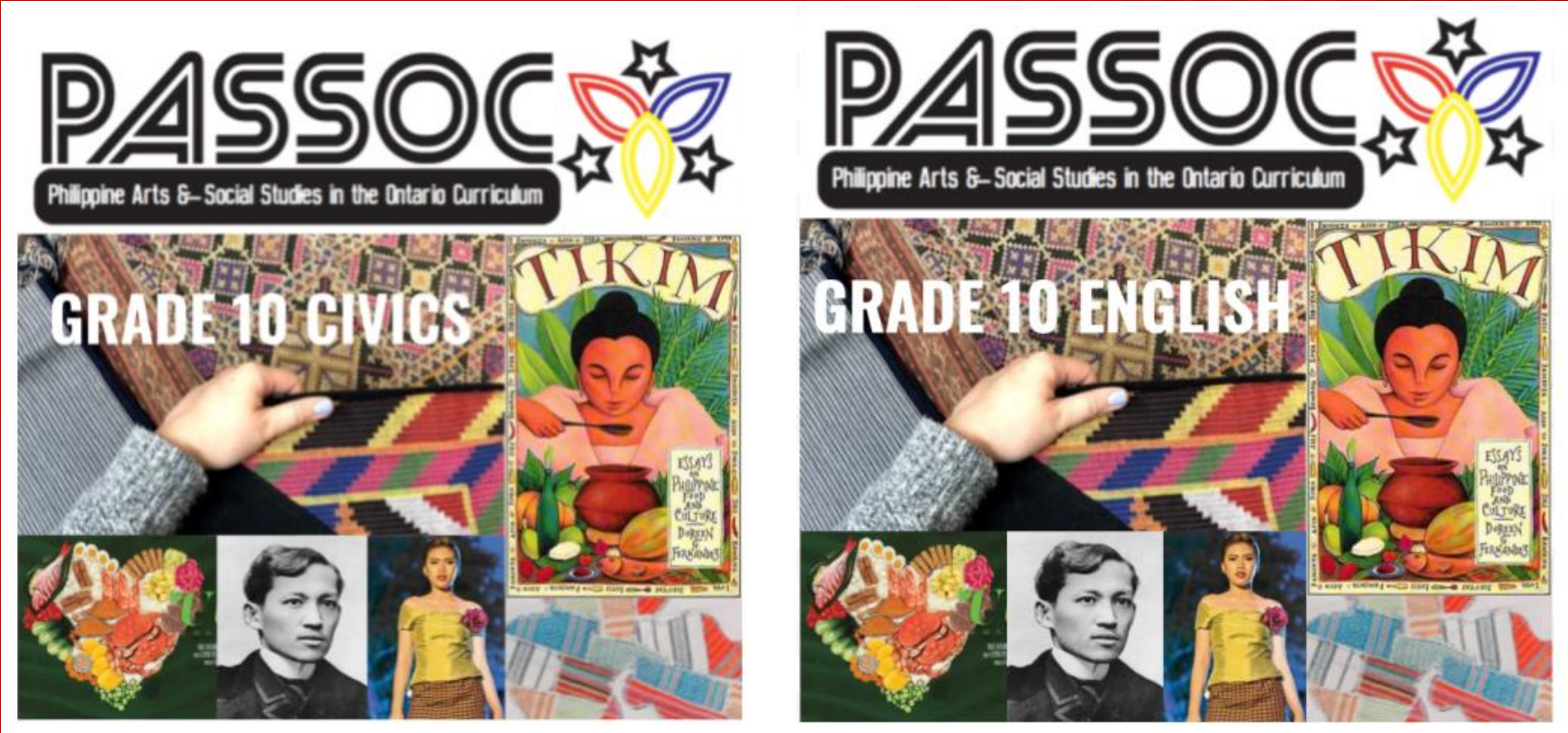
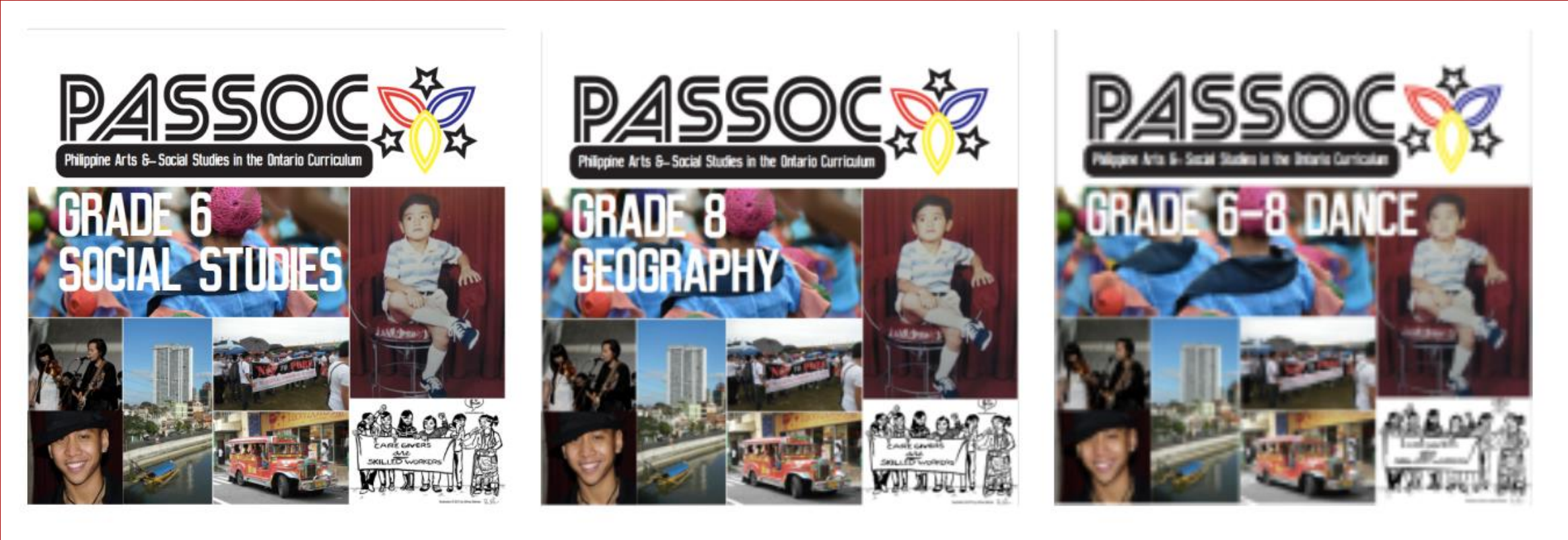
# PASSOC Project:

Free Filipino-Canadian Curriculum Packs made by  
Ontario teachers!



[www.passocproject.com](http://www.passocproject.com)





[www.passocproject.com](http://www.passocproject.com)



**Settlement work can weigh heavily on your heart.  
Here's to writing as a form of self-care!**





# And this is what inspired my debut novel, *Reuniting with Strangers*.

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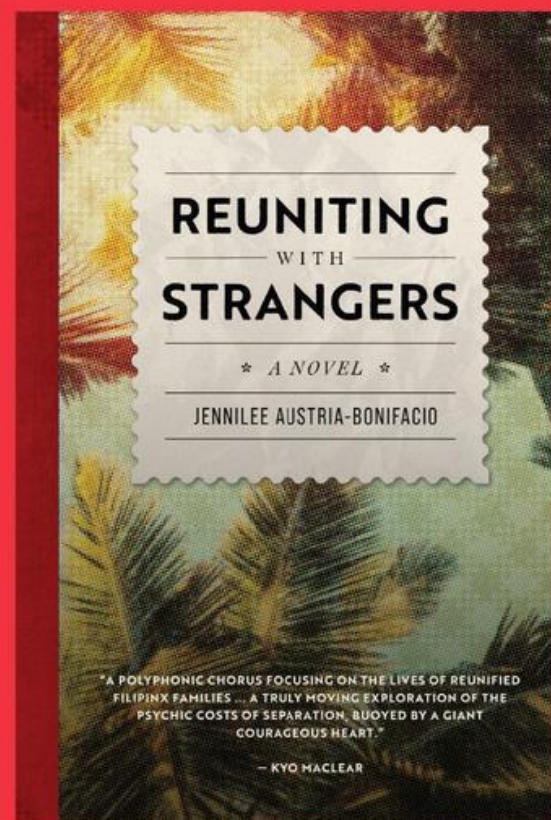


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**TORONTO BOOK AWARDS 2024 FINALIST:**

**REUNITING WITH STRANGERS**



**TORONTO**





**Kerr Street,  
Oakville**



**The Protagonist of  
Reuniting with Strangers:  
The true story of Monolith**



# Settings of *Reuniting with Strangers:*



Oakville, ON

Waterloo, ON

Toronto, ON

Sarnia, ON

Montreal, QC

Vancouver, BC

Osoyoos, BC

Iqaluit, NU

Saudi Arabia

Philippines





REUNITING  
WITH  
STRANGERS

\* A NOVEL \*

JENNILEE AUSTRIA-BONIFACIO

"A POLYPHONIC CHORUS FOCUSING ON THE LIVES OF REUNIFIED FILIPINX FAMILIES ... A TRULY MOVING EXPLORATION OF THE PSYCHIC COSTS OF SEPARATION, BUOYED BY A GIANT COURAGEOUS HEART."

— KYO MACLEAR

An Excerpt



**I called him Monolith because the name sounded as strong as he looked.**

**At thirteen pounds, he was the biggest baby that our tiny country hospital had ever seen. When he was coming out of me, I felt like he was ripping me in half. I begged for medicine to stop the pain, but when the nurses ran to the parking lot to ask my husband if he had any more money, they found that he'd spent it all on bottles of Red Horse beer. He said that since I was the one who got pregnant, I was the one who had to deal with it. I fell unconscious in a pool of blood.**



**I knew that I needed to get my son as far away from his father as possible. So when Monolith stopped breastfeeding, I put him in my younger sister's care so I could leave the Philippines to work abroad. And as I walked away, I heard him crying out for me, but I didn't turn back. I decided that I would only look forward to the day we finally reunited.**

**To the day when it would all be worth it.**



**Four years later, when my sister brought Monolith to live with me in Canada, she told me not to come to the airport.**

**“Ate Vera, I’ll ask my friends to drive us to your place. Before Monolith comes, clean up as much as possible. If you have breakable things, put them on the highest shelves. If you have sharp things, put them inside a locked closet. And make a big plate of eggs, garlic-fried rice, and extra Spam—Spamsilog is Monolith’s favourite. Ate, are you listening? Do you hear me?”**

**I took a day off to polish the doorknobs, mirrors, and every inch of my cracked parquet floors, and I fried enough Spam for six little boys. The entire time, my face hurt from smiling.**



**When they arrived at my Kerr Street apartment, I was about to scream with joy when my sister shushed me. My baby boy was sleeping in her skinny arms, and she quickly set him down on my bed.**

**“He’s five years old and already fifty-five pounds,” she said, barely looking around at my freshly cleaned apartment. Her hair was so messy that it covered most of her face, and she kept pulling her sleeves down like she was cold, though the apartment was very warm.**

**“You seem tired, Sora,” I said. “Why don’t you have a nap with him in my room? Rest ka muna—we can catch up when you’re awake.”**

**“My friends want me to stay with them until I fly back home tomorrow,” she whispered, glancing at my son. “They’re still outside. I don’t want to keep them waiting.”**

*-Reuniting with Strangers, page 3*



**I was so disappointed. I knew she had to go back to the Philippines the next day, but I wanted to stay up all night and ask her about everything I'd missed in Monolith's life.**

**I wanted to know about his goals, his dreams, his likes, his dislikes—I longed to hear every little detail. With the twelve to thirteen-hour time difference, there was never a good time to talk to each other.**

**If I texted her, she would only say that she'd tell me everything when she saw me in person. I had been looking forward to this moment for years.**



**“At least let me take you out for lunch before you leave tomorrow,” I begged. “There’s a Max’s Restaurant in Toronto, only an hour away from here. I heard their chicken tastes almost as good as it does in the Philippines. It can be our Christmas celebration!”**

**Sora glanced at Monolith, her expression inscrutable. “It’s too early to celebrate Christmas,” she said. “I’ll just text you when I get back home.”**

**She thrust an Incredible Hulk backpack into my arms, kissed his cheek, and hurried away.**



***She's probably tired from the journey, I thought. It was a two-hour drive from our Batangas town on the Tagaytay Ridge to the Manila airport, a fifteen-hour flight to Toronto, and a thirty-minute drive from Pearson Airport to Oakville.***

***Twenty hours of travel would be hard on anyone. And most of all, she's probably devastated to leave her beloved nephew behind forever. Who wouldn't be?***



**I tucked Monolith under my covers and curled up next to him, breathing in his scent. He smelled like warm sun, like lush earth, like damp tropical sweat, like home. His hands were surprisingly big for his age, and I intertwined his strong fingers in mine and sighed.**

**I had never been happier in my life.**



# P2P: Let's Connect!

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**Meet me at the  
signing table!**