

From newcomer to community builder: Karen makes Huron home

"When I was younger, I told my mother, 'when I grow up, I'm going to marry someone with blond hair and blue eyes.' She thought I was insane," Karen laughs, remembering the moment.

The idea sounded like a fantasy.

In the small town in the Philippines where Karen grew up, blond-haired, blue-eyed people were only seen on TV.

Yet years later, in a farmhouse north of Goderich, Karen smiles. Dreams can come true.

The second of four children, Karen was primarily raised by her mother. Her father, like so many other Filipinos, worked abroad.

"As far as I can remember, he was out of the country. He worked for an oil company as a pipe fitter. He would go somewhere, like the Middle East for example, for a year or two, then come back for a couple of months and then go back again," Karen explains.

Karen describes the town she grew up in as rural and close-knit, with cousins and neighbours regularly dropping in to visit or play. Visits to the city would only be for special occasions, like picking her father up from the airport.

As a teenager, Karen was drawn to get involved in her community, joining a church choir and youth organizations. Through those activities, she learned her commitment to the social well-being of everyone may require personal sacrifice.

"The day before exams, our choir had a concert. We practiced until late at night and then the exam was very early in the morning. I was so tired that I fell asleep during the exam. I thought I was going to fail. But, for some reason, I passed," Karen remembers.

That exam was her ticket to university, where she spent four years completing a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture.

Karen was determined to succeed. As a university student, she got involved in various religious and political organizations.

"We were trained to become involved in the community, to have initiative, to be the difference we wanted to see in the county," she remembers. "The most important lesson I learned was to develop relationships with people, to develop my social skills."

After graduating, Karen found work as a trading officer for an agricultural export and import company, later as an office furniture salesperson, and then finally as work-from-home virtual assistant for a real estate company in the United States.

It was during that time that Karen explored online dating.

"I put my profile on a dating site, and a Canadian guy responded. We started sending messages, but I wasn't sure if this guy was serious. We talked for a while, maybe for a few months, and then I never heard from him again," Karen remembers.

A few months later, he reached out again. After a few months of messages back and forth, he decided to fly to the Philippines for the two of them to meet.

"I prayed, asking that if he is the one, then let him be the one. If not, please take him away," Karen remembers.

"The week before he came, I told my mom, 'hey, someone is coming, he's got blond hair and blue eyes'. I told her he was cute," Karen remembers.

"After three days, we decided to get married," she says.

After that pledge, Karen asked for divine guidance.

He was the one. Three months later, the couple wed, with his parents, sister and brother-in-law arriving from Canada for the marriage ceremony.

And then, reality hit. Karen and her new husband were divided by permits that took seven months to process, before she could rejoin him in Canada.

Karen remembers arriving at a farmhouse near Dungannon.

"It was totally different than in the Philippines. Back at home, we live in a rural setting, but I had neighbours, who would just show up at your place. Over here, all I could see was land. And if you wanted to see a neighbour, they were a few kilometres away and you had to drive and schedule something to be able to visit," Karen says.

Her experience in rural Ontario might have been isolating, except for a chance encounter.

"The day after I arrived I met a Filipina at Walmart. She looked at me and say, 'oh, Filipina' and we talked to each other and exchanged contact information. Then, she invited me to parties and connected me with other Filipinas here," Karen remembers.

That connection, with other Filipinos living in Huron, Perth and Bruce counties, is one that Karen has cherished and nourished.

"We try to connect with each other. I never really felt homesick at all because there were always Filipino people that were getting together, making Filipino food and sharing it with the community here," Karen says.

Karen remembers the first year of life in Canada as one where she was constantly learning.

"I learned how to cut grass and use a riding lawn mower, that was my first driving experience," Karen says, who later got her driver's license.

And the learning continued on the farm.

"We lived in an old farmhouse and had a woodstove. I learned how to cut wood, stack wood, start a fire," she says.

There were lessons on taking care of animals and caring for pigs.

"And then in my first year, I got pregnant. Nine months later, our daughter arrived," Karen says.

Then, Karen and her husband purchased a farm.

"In one week, we had our baby, we moved, and we started farming for ourselves," she remembers.

Within the next eight years, the couple would have three more children. As the children became older, Karen started working off the farm.

"I started working as a waitress," she says. "And I later became a supply educational assistant for the school board. It's been a good job, I like working with children to support them and teach them basic life skills."

Then last year, in 2025, Karen became a real estate agent. She says her husband and children now help her get homes ready to sell, a job she finds deeply rewarding.

For her work as an educational assistant and her role in supporting other Filipinos, Karen was nominated for a 2026 *I Am Huron* award, a campaign to highlight the positive impact immigrants make in our communities.

From being a recipient of hospitality and welcoming, Karen has returned these kindnesses to become a community leader, organizing events like Christmas parties or summer get-togethers. Though the Filipino community was small, with just about 15 people when she first arrived in 2011, it's grown considerably.

"Karen is the spark who starts the fire for projects, organizing events big and small," says Lilian Adviento, who nominated Karen for the award. "She has the mission of welcoming people and is making newcomers feel like home."

Beyond her immediate family and the Filipino community, Karen credits her husband's extended family and her church in Goderich for helping her feel a sense of belonging in Huron County.

"People welcomed me with open arms, I'm really grateful," Karen says.

Reflecting on what surprised her most about living in Huron County, Karen points to the vastness of the sky and the different way farming is regarded here compared to the Philippines.

"It's a totally different world. In the Philippines, when you're a farmer, it's not a really prestigious job. But over here, farmers have big operations, so it's changed my mind the way I see agriculture. It's totally different"

Her advice to other newcomers moving to Canada and settling in Huron County is simple: come, stay open, learn to drive, lean on the community, give back and be grateful for the opportunity, even if it looks nothing like what you imagined.

"Nothing is impossible if you believe and work hard towards your goals and dreams," Karen concludes.

The I Am Huron awards celebrate the contributions immigrants and newcomers to Canada make in Huron County's communities. Nominations are received from the community, reviewed by a committee with lived experience of immigration, and awarded at a ceremony.

The project is funded with support from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

For more about this campaign, visit: <https://www.huroncounty.ca/i-am-huron/>