

## Faces of the Employee Free Choice Act

# Asela Espiritu

Registered Nurse  
Yorba Linda, CA

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### Building the American Dream

Nearly 30 years ago, Asela Espiritu, a native of the Philippines, immigrated to California on a work visa after finishing nursing school. Now a naturalized citizen who’s married with three children, Asela transferred to a Kaiser Permanente hospital in Orange County in 1987, drawn by the high-quality education the local schools offered her children. The nurses at Asela’s new hospital were not union members, unlike at the other Kaiser facilities in southern California. It wasn’t until 1999 that Asela began to consider how a union could make a difference for her and her fellow nurses.



### Improving Her Workplace

“I was struggling to juggle everything as a mother and a nurse, and the quality of care was suffering,” recalls Asela of that time. When a manager arbitrarily denied vacation time that Asela had earned, her frustration came to a head. Her husband, who worked in administration for Kaiser, had recently transferred to another facility where the nurses had union representation, and encouraged Asela to look into organizing. She soon realized that nurses at her facility were being paid less and didn’t have the same benefits as nurses at other Kaiser hospitals. Asela began working with United Nurses of America to organize at her hospital.

Because of a neutrality agreement between Kaiser and UNA, the nurses were able to join the union within three months, with no interference from management. Salary, benefits, and working conditions improved “by leaps and bounds,” says Asela, as did patient care, because “nurses are at the table to influence quality and staffing.” Furthermore, staff turnover and vacancies dropped significantly, with “nurses at the door waiting to work for Kaiser,” in contrast to nursing shortages facing many other hospitals. “Kaiser’s continued success is a message that companies can survive by treating workers well and allowing employees to unionize,” says Asela.

### Why We Need the Employee Free Choice Act

“Though my experience unionizing was nearly perfect, reality is not like that for far too many others, and that’s why we need the Employee Free Choice Act,” says Asela, who serves on the board of directors for her union and has been involved in national negotiations with Kaiser. She tells of a nearby hospital that fired a pro-union nurse, cut salaries, and made threats when nurses voted in favor of joining the union 13 months ago. “Nurses who care for the sick and elderly are being fired when they try to organize. As an immigrant, I know that’s not what America stands for.”