

Delivered at CSUDH on Oct. 23, 2010 on the Celebration of Filipino American History Month and honoring California Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye & former Lt. Gov. Mona Pasquil. Event hosted by Assemblyman Warren Furutani.

## **Filipino American Heroes**

By Florante Peter Ibanez, MLIS, MA

Dear friends, family, and community leaders.

I'm here to talk about some heroes.....And many of them are in our book – “Filipinos in Carson and the South Bay”

When is the last time you heard of a Filipino American Hero? Was the name, Bobby Balcena who came from San Pedro High, who is recognized as our first Filipino American national league baseball player, or was it Larry Itliong, Philip Vera Cruz, or Pete Velasco who co-founded the United Farm Workers Union with Cesar Chavez. Maybe you heard of Vicki Manalo Draves who won two Gold Medals in the 1948 Olympics in London.

We have some recognizable names in entertainment with Lou Diamond Phillips, Rob Schneider, Dante Basco and my favorite, Tia Carrere. But did you know that the Rocky Fellers who lived in Wilmington and Carson appeared at the Apollo Theatre with a young Stevie Wonder, and live on national TV on the Jack Benny Show, the Diana Shore Show, the Jackie Gleason Show and even with Ed Sullivan. They sang their hit song “Killer Joe” long before we heard of APL of the Black Eyed Peas, Nicole Scherzinger of the Pussycat Dolls, or the new rising star, Bruno Mars. Speaking of stars Cheryl Burke has been “Dancing with the stars” for a few years now and has won twice in a row.

Last July I had the opportunity to meet author and retired Rear Admiral, Connie Mariano who grew up in San Diego and was the White House doctor for almost a decade to both Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton and their families. Ben Cayatano who attended our local Harbor Community College, UCLA and Loyola Law School, where I work, rose to be Hawaii's 5<sup>th</sup> state governor.

But we are here to honor our newest heroes in public service. I've had the pleasure of knowing Mona for a long time now and just met Tani for the first time today but their stories are what our pioneers, our Manongs (a term of endearment and respect for an elder) believed in when they first came here in the early 1900s. The American Dream of being able to rise up from humble beginnings.

For our first Manongs who dreamed of coming to America to be educated and work, send money back to their families and eventually go home rich, their colonial education from their American teachers of the ideals of Democracy and Equality didn't prepare them for the harsh reality of life in America. Still they endured the hot back breaking work in the sugar plantations of Hawaii, the west coast farm fields of asparagus and grapes, the salmon canneries of Alaska,

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the anti-miscegenation laws that denied them companionship and even murderous race riots like the one in Watsonville that took the young life of Fermin Tobera in 1930. With few first wave Filipinas coming with them, most of them lived their entire lives in America from coming as teen agers to growing old dying in a bachelor society.

They endured being only able to have the rank of “stewards” in the Navy with duties of houseboy, cook and chauffer to White officers. Few of them complained and they were proud to wear an American uniform. With the start of WWII they had to petition to be allowed to join the Army to fight, and a special order made it possible for them to join the all Filipino 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. When the stories of the Bataan Death March and action of Filipino Scouts and Guerrillas became known, the “little brown monkeys” as we were previously called had become the brave allies and defenders of democracy who fought and died side by side with American boys.

My daughter’s grandfathers both proudly served in the US Navy. My dad, Cleto, was already working in the US and joined up the day Pearl Harbor was bombed and my lovely co-author & partner for life Rose, knew that her dad, Pete Estepa, served in Vietnam and retired from the Navy after more than 22 years of service. Both of them are gone now but they would be proud to be here today and see how far we have come and celebrate with us to honor Tani and Mona.

Yes, We have had our heroes, but they may not all have recognizable names. Our pioneers have put food on the table of America while striking for fair wages. They helped forge the United Farm Workers Union and had to convince Cesar Chavez and his Mexican American union to join their Delano Grape Strike already 8 days old. Our fathers and mothers have struggled against adversity to enable us and their grandchildren the chance to go on to higher education. Filipino Students joined with other 3<sup>rd</sup> World strikers at San Francisco State and became the catalyst nationwide for others to fight for Ethnic Studies and to include Asian American and Filipino studies and faculty.

Warren Furutani and our generation of activists also organized beyond our campuses into the communities, against the Vietnam War and against the Marcos Dictatorship in the Philippines, and to protect immigrant rights in the 70s and 80s. I am proud to have been a part of that historical movement along with my partner Rose and others here, for social justice as part of the Union of Democratic Filipinos, better known then as the KDP.

Today I am a Librarian and an Educator. I hold the office of President of the Asian / Pacific American Librarians Association. I serve on the Steering Planning Committee for the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Joint Conference of Librarians of Color or (JCLC). I teach the Filipino American Experience class at Loyola Marymount University. I have a passion for knowledge that I believe is a strong component of our culture from our collective Filipino up bringing. Isn’t it appropriate

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that we celebrate Filipino American History here at this great university institution? I had the opportunity to work with some of the archivists here from this library today at the LA as Subject 5<sup>th</sup> annual Archives Bazaar at USC.

Did you know that we have had our own Filipino American Library here in Los Angeles since 1985 only because Helen Agcaoili Summers Brown took it upon herself to make it happen. As a retired LAUSD teacher and counselor from the So. Bay, she called together her friends and family and started off with her father's book collection which he had built in his role as a colonial education administrator in the Philippines. Before she started the library she said, "I looked around and there wasn't anything". Auntie Helen collaborated with Uncle Roy Morales for permission from the Filipino Christian Church in LA's Historic Filipinotown for basement space and the Philippine American Reading Room and Library (PARRAL) was born. By 1999 it had outgrown its space thru donations and volunteers and was renamed the Filipino American Library.

What Tani and Mona represent is just a continuation of that same pioneer spirit to believe in the best of American and to struggle to make it a reality for not only Filipinos but for all Americans. That is why they have risen and been recognized. Not because they are just Filipino Americans who have succeeded, but rather because they have striven to be the best at what they can contribute as Americans. That is what public service should always be about. November elections are around the corner. Let's make sure we all exercise our power and tell others to vote as well. Remember that Tani & Warren are on the Ballot.....

Just as it takes a village to raise a child. Mona and Tani and all other leaders know that they have not been able to attain their positions all by themselves. They have generations to thank of those who came before them and helped pave the way. They and we all have solid roots that we can stand upon. The Manongs and Manangs, the WWII Veterans, nurses and other professionals that fought for fair licensure, students, are all community heroes. Our own families, our parents and relatives that sacrificed so that we would not have to endure their same challenges and hardships are our heroes.

It is said "That for whom much has been given, much is expected". Mona and Tani provide us and the other young aspiring Filipino Americans of our community, as highly visible role models with the solid knowledge that "if they can do it, so can I". Mona and Tani are especially important for our young women. We have always known that Filipinas, our lolas, our mothers, our titas, our sisters are the backbone of many families.

Many more of us have untapped talents and leadership skills still waiting to be awakened and to be utilized. Uncle Roy Morales, another of our local heroes who taught the Filipino American Experience classes at UCLA for over 2 decades used to say, give back to your community the 3

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T's, Your Time, Your Talent and Your Treasure. Don Nakanishi, the former Director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA said of him, "He has influenced literally thousands of Filipino American Students... He is a national treasure". One of his community efforts came after the 1999 hate crime murder of Filipino American postal worker, Joseph Iletto. Uncle Roy helped popularize the slogan conceived by Joseph's cousin, Victoria Martocci using JOSEPH ILETO 's letters in his name.

**Join Our Struggle, Educate, Prevent Hate Instill Love Equality and Tolerance for Others**

What we acknowledge in our book was the simple lesson that every family has its heroes. Please take the time to discover your own family histories of immigration. Capture it on video or record their voices so that their stories will not be forgotten. During the eulogy of my grandmother Amalia's memorial, Only then did I learn of her life here in Los Angeles as part of the first wave Manangs. She came as the wife of a labor contractor and bore my mother, Laura, in the San Fernando Valley and my Uncle Marcy in Stockton before the family returned to the Philippines and my grandfather passed away. My grandmother struggled as a single mother to feed and shelter my mom and aunt's and uncles (all 5 of them) in the Philippines during the war. She was a strong Pinay.

So many unsung heroes have gone before us to pave the way. We all need to take the time to honor them and capture their stories before it's too late. "That" is the real significance of Filipino American history month for all of us. **That there are heroes among us.** Now Tani and Mona and others have stepped up to set the pace for the rest of us. We have no choice but to move forward with them. **Together we can all rise up as heroes.**

Thank You for this opportunity to participate in our celebration of Filipino American History Month and honoring Mona and Tani tonight.

I'd like to close with a flashback from the past.

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Back in the Day we used to chant this at demonstrations and rallies. Please raise your fist and join and repeat after me.....

**Makibaka! Huwag Matakot! / Dare to Struggle! Dare to Win!**