

Original Directions

Greg Macabenta, faces the challenges as NaFFAA's newly-elected National Chair

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I must confess to not having impressive academic credentials...what I know, I learned from life." This was the opening statement in Greg Macabenta's profile, and it was true. However, he has achieved much that that statement carries more weight to who he is and what he has done for himself and the community.

A publisher, editor, advertising veteran and community activist, now Macabenta has added another achievement in his long list as the newly elected National Chair of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations.

Original directions

Macabenta believes that NaFFAA still needs to achieve its original directions, instead of forging new ones, namely, the socio-economic and political empowerment of the Filipino community in America.

"When the need for NaFFAA was discussed at the planning meeting in Salinas that resulted in the first National Filipino American Empowerment Conference in Washington, DC in August 1997, we all agreed that important events were happening in America that our community had no hand in shaping; that we were mere bleacher viewers rather than participants; reactors rather than proctors," he said.

He also admits that after 11 years, the community is still struggling. "But through NaFFAA, our community has gained a seat at the table in Washington DC and in many other state and city fora where once we were mere onlookers," he said.

Macabenta also would like to focus on making NaFFAA more sustainable and self-reliant, and provide services that its members can utilize. He believes that by strengthening NaFFAA's image, implementing key programs and providing meaningful services, generating operating funds and program funding, the organization will survive beyond the lifetime of its founders.

Challenges

But as always, challenges are part of the cycle. Macabenta believes that one of the hurdles they face as community workers and volunteers is how to persuade the greater number of the community to become more involved, as well as how to care more about the issues that affect them in the long term.

"If we have so much difficulty getting our own people to appreciate the importance of NaFFAA, is it surprising that the American mainstream has not recognized us enough?" he said.

Also, Macabenta first task is to bridge the gap between their generation and the youth -- to persuade them that they are not "the leaders of tomorrow," but the leaders of today.

Empowering the youth

Starting on life at such a young age (Macabenta was associate editor of a national movie magazine at 16 and an established national feature writer, screenplay writer and assistant director at LVN Productions at 17), he believes that the youth are the key to empowerment. "I believe I can understand this better than most because I was engaged, involved and battling on the frontlines of my chosen trade from an early age," he stressed and explained further, "I did not want wait to be invited to the table. I fought for my right to sit at it and to lead. It wasn't easy but nothing is."

It was all a matter of survival, he said. For him, he was doing it for himself and his family. Macabenta believes that the youth should similarly be engaged and take the lead for themselves and their children.

"We who purport to be leaders of this community are walking off into the sunset," he said and added, "They are the ones who will be left to carry on the mission. In fact, many of them are doing that -- but in their own way, and in a manner that is largely unconnected to the efforts of the older leaders."

Issues

Macabenta sums up the issues of the community under the heading of social, economic and political. "Social issues involve education, health, housing, youth-senior-and-women issues. Economic issues have to do with the fact that, despite our huge numbers in America, we continue to be consumers rather than producers, workers rather than business owners," he said and added, "The Golden Rule states: 'He who has the gold makes the rules.' We need to own the gold in order to make the rules."

As for political issues, Macabenta commented that political power comes, not from the barrel of the gun but from the wallet and the vote. "If we have economic power, we will have political power. And if we have voting power, the politically powerful will look to us as a source of strength."

He also explained that all these issues are interrelated. Succeeding in one important issue, such as the Veterans Bill, can fail because we have failed to address the other issues.

But Macabenta remains optimistic. "Meanwhile, we will have to address them with whatever means we have on hand," he said and added, "I assure you, we have enough ammunition to fight a respectable battle -- we just need to appreciate that fact."

In closing, Macabenta's statement on achieving NaFFAA's original directions holds true. Also, now being the National Chair, he is taking on the challenge on leading the organization the way he has built his life. "My whole life and career have been built on virtual 'spit, prayer and bubble gum,'" he said and explained, "I have had to make something out of very little. Thus, the challenges we face at NaFFAA are *deja vu* for me." ■



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Photos courtesy of Greg Macabenta



Publisher's Note:

A man with a mission

Greg Macabenta is a man of stellar achievements and claims that everything he has learned, he gained from life. Yet his thirst for more remains unquenchable. Recently elected as the National Chair for NaFFAA, Greg Macabenta faces new challenges but he is eager to take on his new responsibilities and has accepted his fate -- as a man with a sublime mission -- to serve his *kababayans*. The Asian Journal SF Magazine brings you this fitting tribute to a leader with a giant heart and an ardent love for the FilAm community here in the US. ■