

OPINION & FEATURES

A doable stimulus plan

A measure that has been passed by Congress and is now awaiting the President's signature may yet be one of the answers to the current economic crisis and at the same time may provide a long-term solution to the problem of poverty. The measure, the Tourism Act of 2009, creates the Tourism Development Estate Zone Authority and the Tourism Promotion Board.

Alejandra Clemente, president of the Federation of Tourism Industries of the Philippines (FTIP), said the tourism economic zones to be developed by the Authority would create millions of jobs and generate \$10 billion in foreign exchange. She said that tourism could be an important engine of socioeconomic and cultural growth and generate investments, earn foreign exchange and create jobs.

Many countries today are visited by millions of tourists every year and earn billions of dollars in foreign exchange. According to the World Tourism Organization, in 2007 the top five most visited countries were France, 81.9 million tourist arrivals, \$54.2 billion in tourism receipts; Spain, 59.2 million, \$57.8 billion; United States, 56 million, \$96.7 billion; China, 54.7 million, \$41.9 billion; and Italy, 43.7 million, \$42.7 billion.

The Philippines was visited by only 3.4 million tourists in 2007, compared with the 17 million of Malaysia, 14 million of Thailand and 14 million of the small country of Singapore. Clemente said that even Vietnam, which is still recovering from the devastation of a long war, was slowly overtaking the Philippines.

The Philippines could study the experience of Spain which was an underdeveloped country until the 1960s. It developed its tourism industry and is now one of the top five most visited countries and the second biggest earner from tourism in the world.

Spain is not resting on its laurels and is continuing to develop business models that are environmentally, socially and culturally sustainable.

What does Spain have or, for that matter, what do Malaysia and Thailand have that the Philippines does not have? The Philippines has many tourist attractions like Boracay, one of the best beaches in the world; Palawan, "the last frontier," which has exotic wildlife, white sand beaches and natural wonders like an underground river; Bohol, which has the world-famous

Chocolate Hills and superb diving spots like Panglao and Balicasag; the Banaue rice terraces, called the Eighth Wonder of the Modern World; and Tubbataha Reefs, an excellent diving spot. The Philippines has a gentle, hospitable people, most of whom speak English. A melting pot of Malay, Chinese, Arabic, Indian, Spanish and American culture, the Philippines is a culturally active nation inhabited by musically and artistically gifted people.

What the Philippines lacks is a comprehensive, systematic tourism plan. A lot of infrastructure has to be constructed to bring many destinations up to world standards. Many hotels still have to be built to accommodate the growing number of tourists.

And the government has to improve peace and order conditions; it has to crack down on kidnapers, robbers and con artists.

The development of the tourist industry would have a multiplier effect on the economy. The tourism



master plan would create 30 million jobs over a 10-year period and earn about \$10 billion in foreign exchange. When the number of tourist arrivals increases, there will be greater demand for food and services. A burgeoning tourist industry would benefit agriculture and the information technology industries. More factories would be needed to manufacture supplies for hotels and resorts.

A growing tourist industry could absorb the tens of thousands of overseas Filipino workers who have lost their jobs and are returning to the country. These workers only need to be retrained so that they can enter the tourism industry. An added advantage

is that they would not have to leave the country again, and the social problems created by absentee parents would be partially relieved.

Government officials are pushing stimulus plans to revive an economy that is being affected by the global economic meltdown. The tourism program envisioned under the Tourism Act of 2009 is one concrete, doable stimulus plan. If President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo wants a ready answer to the current economic crisis as well as a long-term plan to solve the problem of poverty, she can find it in the measure that is just waiting for her signature. (*Inquirer.net*)

GUEST EDITORIAL

Her process of political literacy and diplomacy

(Part 1)

"The shape of my life is of course determined by many other things: my background, my childhood, my mind and its education, my conscience and its pressures, my heart and its desires. I want to give and take from my children and my husband, to share with friends and community, to carry out my obligations to man and the world, as a woman, as an artist, as a citizen."—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Shape of her life with mosaic's empathy and fairness

Anne Morrow Lindbergh was writing about her beliefs, but she might as well be describing the shape of the life of our petite but mighty beloved Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon. I have seen consuls come and go: Consuls Ruperto Baliao, Consul Pete Chan, Consul General Edwin Bael and Consul General Willy C. Gaa. But ConGen Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon trumps them all for her mosaic's empathy and fairness. Mosaic's empathy and fairness, for she displays them without regard to her constituents' status, or ranking, but with a full regard for the human presence before her.

I have witnessed past demonstrations in front of consulate offices; at times defiant and hostile statements hurled at past consular officials at press conferences, particularly during the unpopular Marcos dictatorship years. The defiance took on an atmosphere of outright hatred towards these consular officials. Sometimes earned, and seldom unearned, as in Consul Pete Chan.

Not too long ago, LA Consul Pete Chan became the frontline guardian of fairness and equal treatment of our *kababayans* in LAUSD. He stood with the community in defiance of the LAUSD's senior management's practices of institutional discrimination towards a group of smart Filipino accountants who scored high in a civil service promotional exam in the late nineties. Two LAUSD senior managers wrote demeaning language which negatively profiled Filipinos, prevented them from speaking Tagalog at work, frozen out of career promotions and accused them of cheating at promotional exams, and used LAUSD stationary to inflict workplace abuse. I witnessed grown men over 50 cry in my presence as they related how they were made to feel: diminished, fragmented and abused. Even *Los Angeles Times'* editorial did these Filipinos injustice as they covered the viewpoints of senior management, without the benefit of investigating nor securing the side of the aggrieved Filipino-American accountants, compel-

ling a group of civil rights-conscious Asian American leaders to dialogue and register their complaint with the paper's editorial board and shared with them their disappointment over their editorial policy reflecting how they were then out of touch, and seemingly frozen in their practices as if facing the headlines of the 1950's.

With our Filipino-American community and other civil rights' supporters, then President of the LAUSD's Jackie Goldberg heard the accountants' allegations of institutional discrimination. The community was patient and waited while their complaint was placed as the last item for that evening's board meeting agenda, requiring the community to stay until midnight.

Of course, folks came dressed in their *barong tagalog*, with lapel signs of "Stop Workplace Discrimination" on their garments. The LAUSD board heard their complaints, substantiated by strong evidence, supported by actual case studies, and the Board unanimously ruled in their favor. The LAUSD employees were then capably represented by PHISELA (Philippine School Employees of Los Angeles).

Some community leaders, with innate nurturing traits, managed to spontaneously organize a potluck, and even though close to midnight, folks celebrated their success with *pancit* and cold egg rolls in the parking garage. A win for civil rights, and a win for *bayanihan* spirit, initiated by the civil rights leaders of the community who founded the Coalition of Filipinos Against Workplace Discrimination, aka as CAFWD and with personal support from Consul General Pete Chan. CAFWD, pronounced "KAPWAD," is a variation on the word, "KAPWA," to see myself in the other, a thesis of what President Obama's campaign message to Americans, "We are each our brother's keeper," in keeping with the spirit of fellowship we hear at homilies: "We are God's children. Within us, we become God's work, and with us, ends God's work" (Father Jerry's homily at St. Brendan's *simbang gabi*), and for me, empathy.

Empathy and presence are the words I use to describe this consul general, for she consciously practice both in gatherings I have observed her in. She listens to folks who approach her, not prescriptive, but a welcoming presence towards another that she may learn from them first, before she enunciates and shares her policy.

But tested in a public gathering with a news reporter's automatic default to spreading misinformation, and you will observe Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon walk towards him, with patience, and lots of respect, educate him regarding the consulate's policy of "no monies will be handled by this office for any civic organization, and only for



Consul General Mary Jo Aragon, at the mosaic rose sculpture for Lilly Disney, outside the Walt Disney Hall Music Center.

Photo by Prosy Delacruz

required fees for processing passport, identification, and various government procedural licensing matters to serve its citizens and constituents, and then, you will notice her with slight inflection in her tone, yet, modulated and firm.

Consul General Aragon earned kind words from a militant feminist women's organization, Gabriela, when she took care of the folks involved. How? She made daily inquiries to the Philippines and phoned daily then Gabriela's chair Professor Anna Lisa Enrile's mother. She was not required to do so, nor mandated by her duty statement nor called for by the scope of her duties, yet she did. Perhaps, it was out of consideration towards another mother worrying about the safety of her daughter, and though understanding that circumstances were beyond her control, as those in charge of national security in the Philippines exercised their detention powers to the extreme, albeit without due process, she took extra steps of assuring another woman, a woman exercising empathy towards another. She did not have to. Just like Consul Pete Chan did not have to. But they did. She is careful to tell us that she represents the Republic of the Philippines, but truly she represents the best part and the true essence of the Philippine people, generous in spirit.

When disasters struck the Philippines, she was the first to rally our civic organizations to collectively help our fellow countrywomen. And she manages to give love in the details, including collecting a memory book of motivating and inspiring "can do," "*kaya natin*" words conveyed and uniting Filipino-Americans to their *kababayans*, in the midst of disaster recovery!

Okay, Mary Jo will blush at my mention of that, and would remark "*Naku naman, hindi naman siguro.*"

And with gratuitous generosity, she will describe first the leadership of Ambassador Willy C. Gaa, shown here being interviewed by Yong B. Chaves, a correspondent for *Balitang America* of ABS-CBN channel. She will also describe the leadership shown by Cabinet Secretary Alberto Romulo.

(To be continued this weekend)

Prosy Abarquez-Delacruz, J.D. was appointed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to LA City's Convention Center and Civil Service Commission, and served 2005-2008. She is now retired, following a 27-year public service with California's Department of Public Health, and now blissfully works as a features writer for *Los Angeles Asian Journal*. Her writings have taken her far and wide in meeting folks and appreciating their innate traits. ■



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