

# OPINION & FEATURES



AN ACT OF CONTRITION. President Barack Obama, surrounded by members of Congress, and others, signs the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, Monday, June 22, in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington. AP Photo by Ron Edmonds

## A moment to exhale

WHILE pundits are busy pummeling President Obama with criticisms and shaking their heads in dismay over his actions on Guantanamo, General Motors, the health care system and Iran's civil unrest, the President makes himself even more vulnerable to flagellation by admitting a nasty habit – smoking.

Pres. Obama ruefully admitted his fight with the big C (cigarettes, that is) but redeemed himself by signing one of the toughest laws ever formulated in American history -- the anti-smoking law that seeks to keep teenagers off the habit.

After all, the President did promise his wife, Michelle that he would quit "huffing and puffing" if she allowed him to run the presidential race. A smoking candidate would just simply run out of breath in the neck-and-neck battle for the finish line.

She proudly tells *60 Minutes* how she has outed him from the habit. For Michelle, there is simply no room in the White House for a President with a constant cloud of smoke.

However, the President has vaguely ac-

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knowledgeable moments when he "fell off the wagon."

"Almost 90 percent of people who smoke began at 18 or younger," he said. In his youth, Pres. Obama was just one of many who fell prey to the vultures of the tobacco industry. "I know I was one of these teenagers. And so I know how difficult it can be to break this habit when it's been with you for a long time."

But whether Pres. Obama sneaks a smoke now and then is not the issue at this point. It is a human weakness that he sheepishly admits and all for a good cause. Perhaps, his bold confession of this achilles heel would be his key motivation towards his own personal change. (*AJPress*)

## America is in Carlos Bulosan's heart

IT WAS a crime to be a Filipino in California," Carlos Bulosan said.

**ESSAY**  
Racedah Perlada Umbalin

*America's in the Heart* is a literary classic. It reflects the collective life experience of thousands of Filipino immigrants who were attracted to this country its legendary promise of a better life.

I'm not too fond of reading books, but for the sake of a book reports I went to our library to borrow *America is in the Heart*, but the book was missing and it would take them a week to get a new copy, so I didn't have a choice but to buy the novel from a bookstore.

The first thing I thought when I began reading the book was that I would not be able to relate to the subject: the life experiences of a man who suffered from a poverty and was pushed to work abroad for the sake of his family.

It is the same situation millions of Filipinos are facing today.

In the first part of the story, *America* establishes the rural background that projects Carlos as the archetypal peasant boy seeking "life of ease and comfort" in the dreamland of milk and honey. Carlos was born in 1913. He grew up on the family farm in Binalonan, Pangasinan, where the struggle against nature and the feudal system had earlier driven two elder brothers to escape to the US. The Bulosan family is depicted as tightly knit with both parents working hard. The father was tilling the land and the mother was

earning extra income as an itinerant vendor.

The book tells the story of Carlos from his early days as a peasant child in the Philippines to his days as an itinerant laborer and reformer for Filipinos in America. His family had no choice but to work collectively, while he and his siblings toiled in the fields of Pangasinan or in the United States, so they could have a better life. One thing that struck me about the book was the concept of meeting your siblings for the first time when you're old enough to remember it. When I read the scene where he first meets his older brother Leon, it seemed very foreign to me. It touchingly brought home the point that many working families do not always have the luxury of living together.

The Bulosan family never seem to be fully together because at least one sibling or parent is away, trying to do his part to help the family survive.

The second part is the "novelistic" section. It's sad and angry part. As it unfolds, we see Carlos encountering fascist violence by the police, racist violence by the white farm workers jealous over the loss of employment during the Great Depression, and the corrosion of moral values into which he was born back in the home country. It was hard for me to really relate to all this, although I certainly felt for them and their struggles.

As Carlos travels all across the West

Coast, he meets many great people and seemingly by chance he encounters his brothers who came to America before him. Maybe it was vastly different then, but I had a hard time imagining that continuous traveling on the US West Coast would lead you to your family and old friends as often as it did for Carlos. Perhaps it was because early Filipinos were confined to certain districts.

The novel reflects the hard life of a persecuted nationality in a foreign land. With no rights to own agricultural land and with the additional risks of being beaten up just for conversing with white women, Filipinos were despised on the West Coast and were treated like criminals or monkeys. With no legal recourse or organizations, Filipino workers were often exploited by the white contractors or by the Chinese and Japanese who owned the gambling establishments and whorehouses. This pattern of exploitation led many to drinking and violence, which further aggravated the hatred of their kind by the whites.

Carlos can't join the US army like others so his choices are very limited – he can either become a gambler or a criminal, or he can settle for what limited income he can generate menial jobs. But Carlos perseveres, he educates himself, and he can even actually publishes a book of poetry. He decides not to be defeated. Carlos has serious dreams, and they enable him to win this inner struggle.

Combined with the other truths in

the story, the novel is certainly wonderful in the realist tradition. Carlos is essentially ruled by his own choices, and not by his harsh environment. Though he is at times forced to steal or beat up people in order to survive, Carlos makes a conscious choice to avoid this type of behavior to educate himself and become a writer, and this is exactly what he does. While he is at times vanquished by his environment, in the end he still makes the decision to control his own fate.

The issue of dehumanization is also very important here because this was what Carlos had to face on a day-to-day basis in nearly every situation involving people other than fellow Filipinos. Carlos is often treated like an animal by the people he encounters – he is yelled at, beaten up numerous times, called all sorts of names, and is discriminated against in nearly every dehumanizing situation, and he keenly observes the same treatment given to other Filipinos in America. These people are just scraping to get by, whether by selling bootleg liquor like Carlos, his brother Amado, becoming robbers like his acquaintance Max, or working menial jobs.

All his efforts to help his people initially fail with both the unionization movement and calls for American citizenship fizzling out. He certainly could have chosen to simply give up, ending his remaining days drinking himself to death or gambling, hanging out with prostitutes, or working in degrading menial jobs; but he doesn't give up.

The last part of the book relates Carlos Bulosan's experiences in trying to organize the Filipino labor movement, and his intellectual emergence as a writer. Throughout this part, Carlo regains his faith in America and meets more people also fighting for Filipinos. He reads about uneducated people writing the story of their people and their struggles. America eventually becomes part of Carlos through his struggles and eventual successes in this vast, complex country. He wants desperately to help America grow into the country he knows it could be, and he sacrifices so much for America. His hopes are contained within America, and so he realizes that America is also contained within him and his heart.

He so eloquently celebrates the heroic spirit of migrant workers who travel far to find their dream country. His failed quest yields a book powered by a dream society.

America is in the Heart beautifully recounts the pain faced by countless laborers who arrive in the United States to earn for their families back home. Many of the passages in the book read like poetry, yet they also remain very accessible to many of us ordinary people for whom the plight of migrant workers is a fairly foreign concept. One of the most compelling issues brought up in the book is gender discrimination. I admire the clarity and honesty of the writing, how he shares his harrowing yet ultimately inspiring experiences. (*Inquirer.net*)

## I Met Heroes In Boston

SURREAL, simply surreal. On a small stage by a busy street in the heart of Boston, the national anthem of the Philippines was sung as the flag of the Philippines was raised. Witnessing this rite were hundreds of Filipinos who were proudly quietly celebrating their Independence Day.

This scene was happening in the plaza of the Boston Cambridge Marriott, host to the first GK Global Summit. Six hundred GK advocates and over one hundred volunteers from the Boston area converged to commit themselves to their people, to declare that there were Filipinos who would not give up on their own, who would commit themselves to be builders of dreams.

For a brief moment in time, Filipinos from the home land, from the United States, Canada and even from Singapore, "Filipinized" the Marriott, Harvard and MIT. From the way everyone sounded and looked, they seemed like scenes from Manila as there were more Filipinos than Americans. The hotel lobby, restaurants and function rooms became spots where Filipinos took over and where Americans seemed like tourists.

More than 230 years ago, Boston witnessed an act of defiance by Englishmen who had become settlers in America, an act now known as the Boston Tea Party. Last June 12 - 14, Boston witnessed another act of defiance, mostly by Filipinos who had become American citizens. The Boston Tea Party symbolized a determination for justice and independence, and strangely enough,

the GK Global Summit symbolized a determination for the same.

Acknowledging the generous and valiant efforts of Filipino-Americans to match the work of local counterparts in building homes and communities in the Philippines, Gawad Kalinga chose to celebrate the Philippine Independence Day in Boston and use the occasion to send a powerful message to all Filipinos – that solidarity is possible, that hope is available, that honor is attainable.

The GK Global Summit was a grand reunion of people who came from different places and professions representing the multi-sectoral feature of a collective struggle to lift the impoverished out of their historical fate and the Filipino people out of their collective shame. Addressing the divisiveness and a lack of concern for poor Filipinos that had weakened and shamed us as a people, a band of patriots gathered to make a collective declaration of patriotism and heroism.

Special friends of GK attended the event to commit their continuing support, including individuals and families who have sponsored their own GK villages, partners from the corporate world and the academe, and representatives from the various branches and levels of government. Known personalities and public servants came, not just to be special guests of the event, but more as appreciative audience to ordinary Filipinos determined to take on extraordinary challenges.

It was an emotional weekend. For three days, delegates witnessed the progress of a work that

began so innocently in a major relocation site where hundreds of thousands of informal settlers could not find the formula to transcend their poverty. With the help of determined volunteers, generous partners and a growing engagement with progressive public servants, Gawad Kalinga has become a beacon of hope for the millions of families that are enslaved by a historical poverty.

More than a format of community development, GK is turning out to be a powerful spirit of caring and empowerment, a way of relating to others, from the poor to those who help the poor. This has exemplified in several ways, from the way that local government officials have steered their towns and cities in a manner inspired by GK to the way that GK is establishing itself in Singapore, Columbia, India and Brazil without leaning on Filipinos or resources from Filipinos. They simply want to learn about the GK values and principles, and then the fundamental parameters in beginning to build relationships, homes and communities.

Many will have written about the GK summit in Boston by the time this article comes out. That is the way I wish it will be. Good news must sell if ever our people will have a clear sense of the power of hope and how the noble and inspiring can change people think, the way government governs.

GK did invade Boston and has left many Filipino Americans there highly charged and eager to join the journey of nation building. GK's 2024 vision presents a pathway towards lifting the poor out of poverty; it also presents a manner by which leadership is transitioned to the next generation.



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