

PACCAL celebrates Women's History Month

by MOMAR G. VISAYA
AJPress

NEWARK, NJ—The Pan American Concerned Citizens Action League, Inc. (PACCAL) held its 10th Annual Women's History Month Celebration by honoring Filipino-American women achievers in their respective fields at a gala event held on Sunday, March 29.

Consul General Cecile Rebon, in a written message, extolled PACCAL for helping instill women's consciousness in the community and the awardees for their achievements that inspire others to follow their examples. "I am glad that there in the US and in the Philippines, women are given equal opportunities and many of them have, in fact, distinguished themselves and excelled in their chosen professions," ConGen Rebon said.

Betty Buenviaje, PACCAL's president, on the other hand challenged the evening's guests to face the challenging times

ahead. "I believe that as a woman and a community leader, there are many challenges that we must tackle head-on. There are many times that we may feel discouraged because of the pressure, but with the strength that God gives us, we can overcome them all," she explained.

This year's women achievers awardees are Ledy Almadin (community service), Analisa Balares (young professional), Zorayda Baluyot de Leon, M.D. (medical profession), Araceli Mendoza, R.N. (nursing profession), Juliet Payabyab (humanitarian), Corazon Rivera (business), Rhodora Ursua (health and human service) and Maureen Javier Varco (performing arts).

Analisa Balares, CEO and founder of Womensphere, honored her grandmothers as she delivered the response on behalf of the eight other awardees.

"My perspective now on the role of women in the society and

everything I do now is shaped in large part by the legacy of my parents, and my grandmothers," she shared.

Balares explained that her parents were both raised by women who got widowed early in life, and eventually became responsible in raising their respective families as single mothers.

"My grandmothers were strong and powerful women. They did everything—from washing other people's clothes to planting rice to planting and selling vegetables and fish to growing copra—to raise their families. Not only did they raise my parents with dignity and values, they raised them with a love for life, a deep sense of faith and generosity of spirit that defy the fact that they were in an impoverished situation," Balares added.

Every year for the past ten years, PACCAL has been celebrating the courage, vision and determination of women, through the organization's Women Achiever Awards.

"I reminisce 10 years ago when PACCAL first started celebrating the achievements of Filipino-American women," Linda Mayo, PACCAL's executive director wrote on her message. "I look back at the wonderful contributions of women around the world, fighting for the right of suffrage, for education, for battered women, for equal rights," she added.

This year's awardees come from diverse fields.

Rosemarie Parreno received her award for her efforts in the field of education, specifically for her efforts in teaching English as a second language. Last month, *New York Times* honored Parreno at the *New York Times* ESOL Teacher of the Year awards.

Parreno currently teaches ESL (English as Second Language) at Hostos Community College in the Bronx and at P.S. 75. She arrived in the US as an exchange teacher scholar at the Northern Illinois University. Prior to this post, she was an ESL teacher/supervisor at

the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), a US-funded organization for refugees bound for America.

Ledy Almadin is the awardee in the field of community service. She is currently the president of the Catholic Action of Mary, a lay organization at the Resurrection Parish in Jersey City. The organization sponsors many religious activities in the community such as the Pabasa, Salubong, Simbang Gabi, pilgrimages and the Santacruzan.

Dr. Zorayda de Leon is the current president of the Hudson County Medical Society and as such, she has been very active in raising funds for the organization's various medical missions. Araceli Mendoza, the current associate director in the Renal Division of the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City and the Vice President of the Philippine Nurses Association of New York, is this year's awardee in the field of nursing.

Juliet Payabyab is no stranger to community service as well and this year, her humanitarian

efforts are being recognized by PACCAL. Payabyab is the first woman president of the Philam Lions Club, the first Filipino Lions Club in the East Coast. She was also a two-term president of the Philippine American Communities Executive Council (PACEC), an umbrella organization of Filipino American civic organizations.

In the field of business, this year's awardee is Corazon Rivera, the indefatigable woman behind Bona Tierra Realty, which she established with her family back in 1988. Rhodora Ursua, on the other hand, is the honoree in the field of health and human service. Ursua is the director of Project Aspire, a community-based research project aimed at improving health access and cardiovascular health status of Filipinos in NYC and Jersey City.

Maureen Varco is the lead female vocalist for Opera 3000 and has performed in numerous shows and theatre productions. She is this year's honoree in the field of performing arts. ■

Social Security clogged with disability claims

by MATT SEDENSKY
APWriter

TAMPA, Fla.—For all the talk of an impending crisis in Social Security, one already exists: The system is clogged with hundreds of thousands of disputed disability claims, a backlog so big that some people wait years for a hearing.

Social Security officials blame underfunding, understaffing, a dramatic rise in cases and an increasing number of claims involving hard-to-prove ailments, such as back pain, depression and anxiety.

Even with a \$500 million infusion from the federal stimulus program, it could take years to clear the backlog. In the meantime, many of those who have applied for benefits struggle to make ends meet.

"I keep thinking every month I'll hear something," said 56-year-old Tampa resident Karen Slater Chambers, who quit her job driving a delivery truck after a series of accidents and injuries. She applied for disability four years ago, was turned down and is now awaiting an appeal hearing.

Social Security benefits are available to people who can no longer work because of a disability, regardless of whether it was suffered on the job or off. The monthly checks average \$1,063.

Someone seeking benefits must first send an application and wait an average of 106 days for a decision, according to the Social Security Administration. The agency denies nearly two-thirds of the applicants, who then can request a hearing to appeal.

Then the real wait begins. Those who received a hearing last fiscal year had waited nearly a year and half on average—twice the wait time in 2000, according to the SSA. More than 765,000 people—about double the number in 1998—are now waiting for a hearing.

Sixty-one percent of applicants who go through an appeal hearing are ultimately approved for disability benefits.

Since 1990, the number of Americans receiving Social Security dis-

ability has more than doubled, to 7.4 million, while the number of staffers to process the claims—and sort out the fakers from the truly disabled—has dropped by around 5 percent.

Also, Astrue noted that at the start of the disability program in 1957, the vast majority of applicants were blue-collar workers, generally with a single disability from a traumatic accident. That is no longer the case.

Recipients receive benefits if they are deemed mentally or physically unable to work and the condition is expected to last at least a year or will lead to the person's death.

People injured on the job can often collect workers' compensation, though it generally runs out after a certain amount of time, while Social Security benefits continue as long as the disability persists. In Slater Chambers' case, she opted against workers' compensation by settling with her employer. But the settlement money is long gone.

Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Fla., introduced a bill that would require a hearing be held no more than 75 days from the time it is requested, and a final verdict no more than 15 days after that.

Castor represents Tampa, one area where the backlog has been particularly bad. "It's crushing, especially during the economic crisis," she said.

Astrue said Castor's proposal does not take into account the time applicants need to prepare their cases. He has set a goal of a nine-month maximum wait for a hearing.

Applicants increasingly have found they are unable to navigate the system on their own—85 percent of them, by Astrue's estimation, hire a lawyer or obtain other representation to help prepare their paperwork, gather medical records and ready them for a hearing.

The Social Security Administration is approaching the problem from multiple angles—experimenting with electronic records to speed up medical reviews, hiring more judges and other staff, and adding offices—but the efforts only go as far as the funding.



Karen Slater Chambers looks over Social Security disability papers, Tuesday, March 31, 2009 at her home in Tampa, Fla. The accidents and injuries had driven Slater Chambers, 56, out of the delivery truck she drove to a convenience store, where she pumped herself with painkillers just to make it through a shift of cashiering and stocking. The pain wouldn't fade, though. Her body no longer moved the same. She couldn't work. And so, she did what she considers the last resort: She filed for Social Security disability benefits four years ago, was turned down and is now awaiting an appeal hearing. AP Photo by Chris O'Meara

The recently passed budget gave the Social Security Administration \$126.5 million more than President Barack Obama requested, and many see the increase, combined with the stimulus relief, as the best chance the agency has had to relieve the backlog.

Slater Chambers said she has constant pain in her neck and back and her hands go numb, making it hard to grasp things. She said she cannot even win an arm-wrestling match with her 6-year-old granddaughter.

"Why would I put myself through four years of not knowing if I could keep a house or food?" Slater Chambers asked. "It's like they don't realize that I just can't. If I could work, why wouldn't I?" ■



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