

OPINION & FEATURES

Nurturing our own

AMIDST the political turmoil and outrage caused by the now infamous constituent assembly, amid the chaos being caused by the onset of the presidential campaigns, representatives from various sectors in the Philippines converged in Boston, Massachusetts for the 2024 Gawad Kalinga Global Summit 2009. The summit ran from June 12 -14, working towards a single-minded and altruistic goal—"A World Without Poverty."

Prominent figures as Vice-President Noli de Castro, Philippine Daily Inquirer's Conrad de Quiros, Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay, GK Champion Tony Meloto and GK Builder Dylan Wilk took time from their hectic schedule to discuss possible solutions to fight the neverending battle against poverty in the Philippines.

Even Cambridge Vice-Mayor Sam Snyder, on behalf of the City of Cambridge, gave his full support.

"The city of Cambridge supports the GK global summit to unveil the GK vision of 2024 of poverty eradication. What a noble goal that is, to discuss and think about it

and chat strategies on how to do it. The two countries (Philippines and US) have a special relationship. There are 3 million Filipino-Americans residing in the United States, about 100 percent of them are gainfully employed.

They participate in all facets of American life and strengthen the bond between our countries. I believe that sponsoring this kind of activity livens our community and creates avenues for a better world," Snyder said.

"We launch GK as a global movement, to bring Filipinos out of poverty, slum after slum, town after town. Based on our experience, it

is possible that we can get the Philippines out of Third World without having to depend on foreign aid, depend on too much funding, we have the land, resources and talent," were the words of GK Champion Tony Meloto, urging Fil-Ams to contribute to the effort.

"The difference between a rich and poor country is the citizens' love for the country. If we love our country, we will bring it out of the Third World even before 2024. We believe by 2010, we can do that because of our partners, our target now is to get land for 5 million families by 2024," he further said.

An impossible feat, it may seem, especially since Fil-Ams are going through tough times



Vice President Noli de Castro gets introduced to some of the delegates by GK executive director Luis Oquiñena. AJPress photo by Momar Visaya

with the economic recession as well. If we think about the miracle of the five loaves and two fish that fed a multitude in the Bible, we would probably come to an unlikely yet valid conclusion—more than the miracle itself, the resources possibly came from what little people had that they volunteered to share that day—an act that turned meagerness into a veritable feast. (AJPress)

The swine flu and heroism

I UNDERSTAND everyone is concerned over the swine flu pandemic in the Philippines. But that's nothing compared to the national illness being spread by the swine in the House of Representatives (yes, that's what the abbreviation Rep. before their names means).



STREET TALK

Greg B. Macabenta

And we know who the swineherd is. She is Mistress of the Piggery by the Pasig where the

trough is and where the pigs converge to gorge themselves.

With such disheartening news coming out of Manila, it was such a great relief to attend the first Gawad Kalinga Global Summit in Boston, Massachusetts from June 12 to 14.

It was a Gathering of Heroes. Even those who would otherwise have been classified as villains back in the Philippines were at their heroic best during the three-day gathering of GK advocates and volunteers from all over the world.

Most of the delegates were based in the US, but there was a large delegation from the Philippines that included Vice-President Noli de Castro; Senators Kiko Pangilinan and Migz Zubiri; Congressman Rufus Rodriguez; Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap; Metro Manila Mayors Jojo Binay of Makati, Freddie Tinga of Taguig and Jun Bernabe of Paranaque; Governors LRay Villafuerte of Camarines Sur, Sally Ante Lee of Sorsogon and Victor Yap of Tarlac; provincial Mayors Dennis Go of Gerona, Tarlac, Tito Arion of Daet, Camarines Norte; and Sonia Lorenzo of San Isidro, Nueva Ecija; and Brig. Gen. Natalio Escarma III, Marine Corps Deputy Commander and Commander of the Marine Forces in Southern Philippines. There were two other provincial mayors, one from Iloilo and the other from Southern Leyte whose names I failed to note.

Among the former cabinet officials present were Nonong Cruz, DND, and Cito Lorenzo, Agriculture. Lorenzo is among the key movers of GK.

There were also delegates from Malaysia, Colombia and India and a large delegation from Singapore, which will host the next summit in 2010. The Colombia and India delegates said they would like to adopt the GK concept in their home countries.

Friday and Saturday, June 12 and 13, were spent on GK testimonials, an exercise in restoring faith in men and hope for the nation. Both days saw the public officials talk about the impact of GK on their respective constituencies and their own efforts to adopt the "GK Way" in their governance.

The unspoken rivalry between Makati, Taguig and Paranaque as the most progressive Metro Manila cities with enlightened policies and comprehensive social services for their residents was obvious in the presentations of Binay, Tinga and Bernabe. They all spoke with pride of their respective accomplishments. Despite my cynicism, I noted that the claims were grounded in fact.

I must confess to being partial to Makati and to Paranaque, being a resident of the latter and having created the slogan for the former ("Makati—Mahalin natin. Atin ito") over two decades ago. But after listening to Tinga speak, I could not help being impressed.

Another truly admirable presentation was that made by Gov. LRay Villafuerte of Camarines Sur ("Just call us CamSur"). The young son of a traditional politician, Luis Villafuerte of the Lowest House of Congress, dispelled the old saying that one cannot expect good fruit from a tree of questionable qualities (of course, the elder Villafuerte washed his hands of responsibility for the reprehensible plot to railroad the Con-Ass, so maybe he deserves some credit).

In the few years he has been in office, LRay Villafuerte, who currently chairs the League of Provinces of the Philippines, has transformed his province into one of the most progressive in the country, and the fastest growing in terms of investments, tourist traffic and revenues.

In recognition of his accomplishments, he was named Outstanding Young Person of the World by the Junior Chamber International for Business and Entrepreneurship and conferred the TOYM Award for Entrepreneurship in Exports by the Philippine Jaycees. He also received the Tourism Entrepreneur of the Philippines Award from the Department of Tourism and the Philippine Center for Entrepreneurship.

In subsequent conversations I had with Jojo Binay and Jun Bernabe, I pointed out the contrast between what I had heard from them and what was routinely written about the national government, specifically about the occupants of Malacañang and Congress.

"The real hope of the nation are the LGUs," said Binay. "If, at the city and municipal level, there is progressive governance and a delivery of social services, the provinces will follow suit. And the rest of the country will also be progressive."

To say that Binay provides adequate social services to his constituents is actually an understatement. Makati has a hospital and a university for its citizens and even the squatters who have been relocated to a 3.2-hectare location in San Jose Del Monte are entitled to unheard of privileges.

Unlike other cities that ejected their squatters, relocated them to far-flung places and left them to fend for themselves, Makati has allowed former "informal settlers" to avail of the city's social services, including free education.

A project of GK and the Makati government, the "Dreamland" will have 480 homes in a community complete with a school, a medical clinic and a chapel. Makati purchased the land and provides the civil works and community facilities while GK handles project management, as well as the spiritual and moral guidance required to truly transform the former slum dwellers.

In his presentation, Binay said that the city has provided attractive tax incentives to private companies that have contributed to the project, such that, in one pledging session alone, they raised P11 million.

Despite owning a home in Paranaque for the past

41 years, it was only at the GK Global Summit that I met Jun Bernabe, a junior of the multiple-term mayor Florencio Bernabe, Sr. But he impressed me with his vision for the city and its improved services.

I acknowledged that I actually had a pleasant experience at city hall on my last trip to Manila. I had decided to apply for a senior citizen's card, having heard about the many privileges enjoyed by people in that age category. I had expected the usual long wait and disinterested over-the-counter attitude of the stereotypical government employee. But not in that instance. When I asked how I could apply for the senior's card, I was ushered by a clerk to another office in a far corner of the building and entrusted to a team that immediately attended to my needs. In 15 minutes, I had my senior's card, along with literature on privileges and how I could avail of them.

Two other mayors who should have been present at the GK event and would have bared impressive city histories were Sonny Belmonte of Quezon City and Bayani Fernando of Marikina. They, too, have proven the validity of Binay's thesis that true progress and reform can happen at the local level.

One can argue that the Gawad Kalinga Global Summit simply allowed the government officials present to show their "good side" but that they inevitably have their "bad" side—the side of kickbacks, overpricing, ghost employees, monopoly of businesses and the rackets and every conceivable sin attached to politicians.

But that, precisely, is what I find admirable in Gawad Kalinga and its founder, Tony Meloto.

Two years ago, at the 10th Filipinas Magazine Achievement Awards—which usually confers the honor only to Filipinos in America—we made an exception of Tony Meloto—we gave him an Award for International Achievement.

In doing so, I pointed out that, while Meloto is a bona fide hero, his real heroism is in his ability to bring out the heroes in everyone else.

Maybe, Meloto should be asked to clean out the Pig Sty by the Pasig. ■

Inspiration

THE first time I saw Imelda Marcos up close was on July 2, 1985. It was her birthday and she was entertaining a massive crowd of well-wishers at Malacañang. Stiletto heels made her more statuesque. Her large brown eyes—said to be a genetic endowment from a Spanish friar—were riveting. Clad in a plain sheath dress, Ferdinand Marcos' first lady was a stunner.

More stunning than the natural beauty of the birthday girl, however, were her jewels. Around her neck were precious gems the size of which you normally see only in the Smithsonian, with a matching pair of earrings. I half-expected to see the Hope Diamond adorning her finger.

Those were dangerous days of regular, often violent street protests against the Marcos regime. In California, the San Jose Mercury News was running a series on the Marcoses' enormous ill-gotten wealth. The articles were reprinted in the Philippines and were passed around in the so-called parliament of the streets.

But if Imeldific was worried, she would only show it at her husband's oath-taking, hours before they were whisked off to Clark Airfield and then to Honolulu by US forces on Feb. 25, 1986.

On her birthday in 1985, Imelda Marcos was still the "mother of the nation," still haranguing visitors including the press with lectures and doodles of circles and squares on white board to illustrate that the Philippines was the center of the universe.

The only other person in power I know who regales visitors with lectures using a white board is Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, although her topics are less esoteric.

On special occasions President Arroyo also likes displaying heirloom jewelry—the type that reminds you of camphor chests and perfumed fans. But none of her precious pieces—the ones that are shown to the public, anyway—comes close to the collection of Imeldific.

Imelda loved shoes, butterfly-sleeved gowns, and jewelry. Unable to belong to royalty either by birth or affinity, she took to wearing glittering



SKETCHES

Ana Marie Pamintuan

tiaras even in the slums of Tondo, and you could be sure the gems were all genuine.

Her husband gave away Rolex watches to the enforcers of martial law; Imelda liked Patek Philippe. In her final months in power when I covered the presidency, I rarely saw her wear the same dazzling jewelry set twice, except for a pair of huge champagne earrings and ring that she wore several times, unless she owned several identical pairs.

Imelda was not the only jewelry display rack at Malacañang; the entire presidential residence was dotted with gem-encrusted icons.

Imelda was a prayerful person, just like President Arroyo. There was a particularly impressive icon of the Virgin Mary, nearly as tall as the ceiling, with a crown of gigantic pearls.

I've always wondered what happened to those priceless pieces. After the 1986 revolt, former Marcos presidential guards said the icons, artworks and jewelry were carted away by the first wave of people who prepared Malacañang for the arrival of Corazon Aquino.

Imelda managed to take along with her a still substantial jewelry stash of about 400 pieces, which US authorities promptly confiscated upon her family's arrival in Hawaii on Feb. 26. A US Customs inventory showed that the most expensive set in the collection consisted of a sapphire, ruby and diamond bracelet, earrings and brooch valued at \$1.49 million.

That hoard has been turned over to the Philippine government, together with two other jewelry collections estimated to be worth a staggering \$15 billion.

Ferdinand Marcos was a brilliant, lucky man—a person of destiny, just like someone we all know. But the Philippine presidency does not pay enough for anyone to earn even \$1 billion after 20 years in power. And even if you dig up the entire gold course in Intramuros where Marcos supposedly found part of the fabled treasure of Japanese war general Tomoyuki Yamashita, it's doubtful that you would find a treasure worth \$15 billion.

The enormity of the wealth when compared to the legitimate earnings of a Philippine president should make it easy for the government to recover the assets from the Marcoses.

Yet the Philippine government still does not have final, irrevocable ownership of the jewelry, or many of the other Marcos assets valued at a couple more billions.

After 23 years, all the assets are still locked in litigation. If the government doesn't have a case, the jewelry would have to be returned to Imelda Marcos, according to sacked justice secretary Raul Gonzalez.

But there's still a case, according to his replacement, Agnes Devanadera, whose office also has supervision over the Presidential Commission on Good Government. So Imelda cannot get back her jewelry.

And that's where things stand, 23 years after the fall of Marcos. His heirs cannot get hold of his assets, but neither can the nation use any of the wealth.

Imelda is back in the party circuit, with guests wanting to have their picture taken with her. The stunning beauty now looks bloated, by medicine or the cruelty of aging. But she's singing again, and occasionally flashing impressive jewelry. She has started her own line of faux jewelry and she promotes Philippine shoes.

Not bad for someone who, as part of a so-called conjugal dictatorship, has been accused of some of the worst crimes against the nation and humanity.

If we keep seeing the sins of the past repeated in this country, especially in the last eight years, a major reason is our failure to make anyone account for the crimes of the dictatorship.

Imelda Marcos is a constant reminder that you can get away with anything in this country. Her husband's cronies are also back, with one hoping to become the kingmaker for the next president in 2010.

Her continuing good fortune is the best inspiration for all the crooks who believe they can easily get away with evil and immoderate greed even when they are no longer in power.

For the sake of future generations, it shouldn't always be this way. Change can still happen in 2010. (Philstar.com)



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