

People and Events

Mental health issues among Asian Americans in NYC public schools highlighted in report

by MOMAR G. VISAYA
AJPress



Michael Jablon, a student at Eleanor Roosevelt High School, explains some of the findings that he and his fellow student leaders uncovered for their Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP).

AJPress Photo by Momar G. Visaya

NEW YORK – Asian Pacific American students make up over 13% of New York City public school system's 1.1 million students, yet they are still a highly invisible and overlooked population, according to a recent report by the Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP), a youth leadership program of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF). "ASAP believes that New York City public schools are unaware of, and neglect the mental health needs of Asian Pacific American students," the report said. "They lack the knowledge of culturally competent strategies in working with Asian Pacific American students and have limited access to appropriate mental health trainings and resources."

school students in the city.

Citing national surveys and existing reports, ASAP students said that 30% of Asian American girls in grades 5 to 12 reported suffering from depressive symptoms and that 1 out of 2 Asian Americans have difficulty accessing mental health treatment because of language barriers.

The report also cited common causes of mental health problems among Asian Pacific American students, among them: family pressure to succeed, language barriers, outcast and misperception of Asian Pacific Americans, harassment and bullying. APA students are also less likely to mention their mental health concerns to mental health professionals.

"Help-seeking behaviors are complicated by cultural barriers and the stigma of mental health, seeing counseling as taboo," one of the student reporters said.

According to an interview, negative impacts of unmet mental health needs include poor school attendance and performance. "Students are more likely to skip classes, not attend school and receive lower grades when they are not receiving the necessary support and resources to address their mental health needs," the report added.

ASAP recommends that guidance counselors must have an increased cultural competency as part of their professional development requirements. The student

leaders interviewed several community organizations and found that mandated cultural competency trainings could be effective in helping guidance counselors learn how to work better with New York City's diverse student population.

"Being a culturally competent guidance counselor means understanding certain taboos and students' heritage. This understanding can help in their interaction with students, creating an environment where students are understood," the report further said.

While guidance counselors may mean well, there are still students who are not comfortable talking to them, and this the ASAP students recognize. They are suggesting that schools provide alternative resources – such as peer counseling, music and art therapy – that best fit the students' needs.

According to them, alternative to guidance counselors based on students' needs could help provide effective interventions and reduce risk factor for poor mental health.

"Students who feel more comfortable speaking to peers their own age can greatly benefit from trained peer counselors. Also, alternative therapy offers opportunities for students to de-stress in a supportive environment," added the ASAP report.

The numbers don't lie: 8% of NYC high school students reported attempting suicide in the past year, 12% say they smoke marijuana and 30% say they experience sadness that keeps them from their daily activities.

The concept of the Asian American community as a "model minority" extends to this next generation and through projects such as ASAP, CACF is able to challenge the stereotypes of this myth by speaking out on behalf of marginalized families in the community, specially immigrants struggling with poverty and limited English skills. ■

'Sonata for Our Heroes' honors Fil-Vets of WWII

THE PHILIPPINE CONSULATE General presents *Sonata for Our Heroes: Unsung Filipino WWII Veterans*, a unique photographic exhibit participated in by photographers from Manila, California, New York and New Jersey, to run from June 7 to 19, 2009 at the Philippine Center at 556 Fifth Avenue, New York.

This special event will focus on veterans or family members of deceased veterans, in this year of the signing of the ARRA law by President Obama that included in its provisions the long-overdue recognition of the Filipino veterans' invaluable service to the US military in the Philippines during WW II.

Photographs were submitted by members of SINAG I The American Society of Philippine Photographers, the host organization based in NY and NJ; Camera Club of the Philippines, Manila; and FotoSeven, in southern California, along with Rick Rocamora of San Francisco and Jercy Garcia of Manila.

The *Sonata for Our Heroes* exhibit is the Consulate's Independence Month showcase event, a photographic tribute to

our veterans, in thanks for their selfless fight for freedom," noted Consul General Cecile Rebong. "It is timely that this tribute will run through June 19, the birth anniversary of our National Hero, Dr. Jose Rizal."

In March, the Consulate sponsored an evening that featured a Thanksgiving Mass and an acknowledgment to these Filipino veterans, represented by those living in the New York / New Jersey area, as well as to those who had worked for the passage over the years of these provisions of what was termed the "Equity Bill."

"We are planning to exhibit about 40 or so photographs, so this is a modest but united attempt by these photographers from various locations to honor our Filipino heroes, whether they reside in America or the Philippines," says Rene Ner of SINAG, exhibit director and proponent of the joint exhibit. "The photographs may be serious, sad or lighthearted, but at heart the spirit is to celebrate our WW II veterans."

As part of the Independence Month celebration, the Consulate will also host a book launching of *Tears in the Darkness*, on the



Bataan Death March, on June 16, as well as for America's Second-Class Veterans by Rocamora on June 10. It also kicks off toward the end of June its Summer Cinema festival of notable films by Filipinos or those set in the Philippines, such as *The Great Raid*.

For more information on the photo exhibit, contact Deputy Consul General Millie Thomeczek or Marivic Dimaculangan at the Philippine Consulate, (212)764-1330, philconsulate-ny@mindspring.com, or Robert P. De Tagle, project and research manager, (201)434-1964, phil-sourcing@gmail.com. ■

Fil-Am teen from New Jersey ...

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president of RMHC-NYTSA. "This was especially noteworthy in view of the fact that so many of these students assumed the role of parent/caregiver to ill parents while lending financial assistance to the family by way of part-time jobs – and, in spite of this, not only succeeded academically but also found time to volunteer."

Bustos is one of those students. When her mother suffered a stroke in 1994, their world began to change. As the only child of the single mom, Bustos got the support of her relatives, doctors, paramedics, physical therapists, occupational therapists and nurses and this pushed her family to continue to thrive. Her mom's condition has guided her towards a career in the medical field and she feels that the medical community has done so much for her mother that she feels compelled to give back.

As a student, Bustos was able to maintain an impressive GPA while balancing exemplary extracurricular commitments. In school, she has served as the Public Relations chair of the Community Service Club, the organization in charge of researching, organizing and planning community service activities. She also

serves as Vice President of the National Honor Society and an executive board member for the Multicultural Club. She has also organized a fundraising event for the American Heritage Assembly, where the proceeds went to helping homeless children.

In addition to all these commitments and responsibilities, Bustos also finds time to volunteer as a camp counselor for first graders at a summer camp, volunteer at a local hospital and tutor students in math, science and Spanish.

RMHC began its support of scholarship programs in 1985 by committing \$50,000 towards the first scholarships awarded through the Hispanic American Commitment to Educational Resources (HACER) program. In 2001, the program began with the RMHC/ASIA scholarship.

"This is RMHC-NYTSA's 9th year of providing scholarships to Asia Americans who demonstrated extraordinary academic accomplishments, leadership and community service. I am extremely proud of their achievements despite their challenging family and financial circumstances. I wish them all the best as they pursue their higher education," McCoy added. ■

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