

# Remembering Fil-Am Joseph Iletto, a victim of hate crime

*Elected officials & community members gather with August '99 victims and families*

by CYNTHIA DE CASTRO  
AJPress

LAST Monday, Aug. 10 marked the 10th year anniversary of the brutal and senseless hate crime spree that killed Joseph Santos Iletto, a Filipino-American postal worker, and wounded five people at the North Valley Jewish Community Center. To remember Iletto's death and reflect on how far our community has come and what has been done to address the problem of hate crimes in the past decade, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center organized the 10th Annual Commemorative Event in its community room along Wilshire Blvd in Los Angeles from 9:30am - 1pm, Monday, August 10. Leading elected officials and community members joined the press conference and memorial service, which paid tribute to Iletto and the other victims and their families.

On August 10, 1999, white supremacist Buford O. Furrow, Jr. walked into the lobby

of the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, California and opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon, unloading 70 shots into the complex and wounding three small boys, 6 yr old Joshua Stepakoff, James Sidell, also 6, Benjamin Kadish, 5 yrs old, 16-year-old camp counselor Mindy Finkelstein, and 68-year-old receptionist Isabelle Shalometh. Minutes later, Furrow murdered postal worker Joseph Santos Iletto in Chatsworth, a few miles away from the center. Joseph had just delivered mail to a home and was returning to his postal truck when Furrow asked him to mail a letter for him. As Iletto agreed, Furrow pulled out a Glock 9mm handgun and shot Iletto nine times.

Just released from prison three months before the attack, Furrow was on probation when he bought buy five assault rifles, two pistols, 6,000 rounds of ammunition and a flak jacket. He drove from Tacoma, Washington

on Aug 7 with the express purpose of "killing Jews." After the rampage in LA County, Furrow went to Las Vegas, where he surrendered. He told police he had sought to kill Jews as a "wake up call to America" and had fatally shot Iletto because he was a man of color working for the federal government. He is now at a federal penitentiary, serving two life sentences plus 100 years without the possibility of parole. His guilty plea—to murder and firearm charges—and his history of mental illness persuaded federal prosecutors to forego the death penalty.

The mother of Joseph, Lilian Iletto, her son, Ishmael, and his wife, Deanna, gathered with three of the survivors of that hate crime spree Monday to remember that fateful morning and discuss how their lives have changed in the past decade.

"If only I knew that my phone conversation was going to be the last one with Joseph, I would not have ended our conversation so

quickly, but (told) him that I'm so proud of him and he meant so much to me, that I love him very much," Iletto's mother, Lilian, said. "And I miss him so much. I now only have my memories of my son."

Lilian told the *Asian Journal* that what made Joseph's murder extra hard was the fact that just two months before his death, her own husband, Joseph's father, Dal Iletto, died suddenly of a heart attack. "I was depending so much on Joseph after his father died. *Panganay kasi siya* and he took good care of me and his siblings. But he was called home early by God, so who am I to say anything? We're all going to die anyway. I just leave it to God."

"I hope they remember my son, not just as a victim of a hate crime but by what his name stands for. We have made an acronym for him—written by my niece, Victoria Martocci: Join Our Struggle, Educate, Prevent Hate Instill Love Equality and Tolerance for Others," Lilian stressed.

"It still hurts a lot and it seems like it just happened yesterday," said Ishmael Iletto. "We thank APALC and all those who have been by our side these past years. We highlight the fact that my brother was Filipino-American because he was killed because of the color of his skin. It's vital in our society to address the issue of hate crimes because what good is it even if we have the best economic and political systems if we hate each other?"

Speaking to the family of Joseph Iletto, Stewart Kwoh, Executive Director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, said, "We know that your loss will never be forgotten, but your contribution to harmony and peace will always be remembered. We thank you for your courage and partnership."

Congresswoman Judy Chu thanked the families of the victims and the survivors who have become sources of inspiration to the country. "That horrific situation has brought out their great courage. We are not powerless in fighting hate crimes in our country. It is important that we remember Iletto and what happened to inspire us."

City Attorney Carmen Trutanich said, "As we mark the 10th anniversary since the tragedy that befell Joseph Iletto, his family and every good and decent resident of this City, we do so with sadness at the life lost but also our shared commitment to preventing such tragedy in the future. I have every intention of working closely with other local elected and law enforcement officials to do everything in our power to put an end to hate



Ishmael Iletto



Lilian Iletto

crimes." Joshua Stepakoff, then 6 years old, was shot twice that fateful day. One bullet hit him in the back, just missing his spine. The other tore through his leg. "I am often asked how the shooting affected me and how it made me feel about being Jewish, since Furrow had said he was sending a message—a wake-up call to America saying to kill Jews. He was trying to spread his message of hate, but instead what I received were messages of love and support from people across the country," says Joshua. "May we never forget that day and may we continue to fight for a better America," he added.

Mindy Finkelstein, the teenage camp counselor at the North Valley Jewish Community Center, described what she could never forget. "It's been ten years since I was shot simply because I was Jewish. It has given me new purpose in life. I will not let one moment determine the rest of my life. I'm not a victim; I am a survivor. I will speak out for others like Joseph Iletto who can't speak for himself. As survivors, we are here to represent those who cannot speak for themselves. We are against gun violence," said Mindy.

This summer, Finkelstein and Stepakoff have been working with Women Against Gun Violence and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence to plan an Oct. 4 fundraising event called *Victory Over Violence*. It will feature a 10K run and 5K walk/run at Cal State Northridge. "I still have nightmares," said Ben Kadish, the youngest victim who was then 5 years old. He admitted to have had recurring dreams in which the killer is free and coming for him again. "I still have emotional and physical scars that will never go away."

Fil-Am community activist

Prosy Abarquez-Delacruz, who has actively supported the cause of the Iletto family for the past ten years, said that Joseph's family demonstrated to us what it is to love. "Joseph's family, instead of reacting with vengeance, or feeling embittered by his death, opened up their hearts filled with pain, and gave more love to the children of the North Valley Jewish Community Center, who also found themselves at the crossfire of the overflowing hatred from Buford Furrow. Instead of isolating themselves, they reached out to the communities in Los Angeles and then, outside of California to speak about tolerance, to demonstrate in no uncertain terms what it is to truly love and care for others from the depths of one's heart. Joseph Santos Iletto's death has become a pathway for us to live as better Angelenos," Prosy said. "Joseph, your death was not in vain! To our community, you lighted a path that steps into the breach, bridges gaps so we may have more understanding for one another," Prosy tearfully said as she handed over to the Iletto family a special scrapbook prepared by the APALC containing highlights of the past decade.

The brutal and senseless hate crime ten years ago forever linked the Jewish and the Filipino American communities. While it shocked Californians, it also reminds us that hatred and intolerance due to race, color or beliefs remain a deeply rooted problem in America. APALC said in a statement released during the event says, "On this tenth anniversary of the death of Joseph Iletto, we urge lawmakers to do the right thing and pass a thoughtfully-crafted, effective hate crimes bill in memory of those whom we have already lost so that we may stem the tide of further hate violence." ■

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## USPS facilities face possible...

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Vice President Jordan Small told a congressional subcommittee that local managers will study activities of approximately 3,200 stations and branches across the country, considering factors such as customer access, service standards, cost savings, impact on employees, environmental impact, real estate values and long-term Postal Service needs. No changes are expected before the end of the current fiscal year on Sept. 30.

The AP article quoted Small as saying, "We anticipate that out of these 3,200 stations and branches (being reviewed), under 1,000 offices could be considered as viable candidates to study further for closing."

**Pinoys' favorite workplace**  
As far back as the early 1920's, many Filipino immigrants in America sought employment at the US Post Office. According to Barbara Posadas who wrote Filipino Americans in Chicago, beginning in the 1920-1930 period, "most Filipinos in Chicago worked at a variety of jobs categorized as service employment. The most secure sources of employment were with the United States post office as clerks sorting the mail..."

What has been true in Chicago has generally been true across America. Because of the relatively easier job, the good pay and employment benefits and the security of tenure, the US Post Office has been a favorite workplace of many Pinoys. All that may soon change.

With this sad news, many Filipinos are sure to be affected. The big number of Fil-Ams working in the Post Office are attested by the fact that they have formed many associations in the country such as the FilAm Postal Employees Association of America, the Filipino American Association of Postal Employees, the Filipino Association of LA Post Office Employees, the FilAm



Postal Employees Association of Pasadena, of San Francisco, of Palatine & Northwest Suburbs, of Stockton, of the Midwest, of Santa Clara County etc.

**Studying the situation**  
In a statement made to the *Asian Journal* by James Wigdel from Public Affairs at the USPS San Francisco District, he said that they are not closing post offices yet, "but are studying for possible consolidations in some areas." He also said that nothing has been decided and that everything is just a study at this point. He added that they are "taking into consideration some large urban areas such as the City of San Francisco, which has 41 postal offices and they are looking at three post offices," possibly, for a consolidation.

Richard Maher, Spokesperson for USPS throughout Southern California echoed almost the same details, adding that they are not closing major post offices and are doing studies for the possibility of consolidating stations and branches. He also emphasized that they will be transparent in their actions and will ensure that the public be notified and communities be made aware of any new developments.

With regards to the layoffs, Maher said that in the event of a consolidation, they will

be working to re-assign their employees, possibly to another facility or under a different job position.

Because of USPS' financial situation, Maher said that they have offered some of their employees early retirement and that they are looking to fill up vacancies left by retirees with their current employees.

**Volume decline**  
Aside from the recession which has reduced advertising mail, the Postal Service has been hurt by the switch of business to the Internet, and last year's high gas prices which impacted their daily deliveries. In 2008, the volume of mail dropped to 9.5 billion pieces for a total of 203 billion pieces. This year, it is expected to further fall by 28 billion pieces to a total of 175 billion pieces.

According to the AP report, Congress is considering a bill to change the way the post office funds its retiree health benefits over the next two years that could save \$2 billion annually. In addition, Postmaster General John Potter has asked Congress for permission to reduce mail deliveries from six days a week to five. While Congress votes money for free mail delivery for the blind and to offer reduced rates to charities, the post office does not receive taxpayer funds for its operations. (AJPress)