

The FACLA Story (The Narrative that a Fil-Am Newspaper Refused to Publish) - MabuhayRadio

Written by Rene Villaroman

Wednesday, 30 July 2008 12:42 - Last Updated Wednesday, 30 July 2008 13:00

For an organization that was born in the 1930s, the Filipino American Community of Los Angeles (FACLA) is probably the least known in America. When I embarked on this assignment to write a "history" of the FACLA, I balked at the idea of chronicling an organization whose reputation for secrecy, at least during the last 10 to 15 years, had been an ill-concealed secret. On Friday, I met with Bobby Reyes, founder of the MabuhayRadio.com and a prolific journalist and FACLA's serving Secretary-General. During that brief meeting, he showed me an odd dozen framed photographs of past FACLA presidents that were arrayed on one side of the FACLA Hall. It was a symbolic introduction to an incomplete and disjointed history of one of the oldest and existing Filipino associations in America.

When Sid Galace, the FACLA's office manager, arrived, I asked him if he had at least an old souvenir program in his office, and he summarily dismissed our request with a "Sorry, we do not have records." It was very disconcerting that the FACLA did not have any form of written historical record in its office. As I widened my search for records, I bumped into Jocelyn Geaga-Rosenthal, owner of "Remy's on Temple" Gallery. Mrs. Rosenthal was on her way to a meeting with the other officers of the Historic Filipinotown Neighborhood Council. She told me that her family was in possession of some photos from the 1970s, when her mother, Remedios Geaga, was president of FACLA.

Rene Villaroman is a freelance writer, an editor and a photojournalist. He is now the chairman and CEO of the Photo-Reporters Guild, Inc. of Los Angeles, California. This article may also see print in the www.photo-reporters.org that Mr. Villaroman edits.

My encounter with Mrs. Rosenthal provided a ray of hope that this article would take some form of shape. Maybe not a complete and definitive story, but a credible reconstruction of its checkered history that's based on scarce fragments of information. The desperation that was slowly creeping in was momentarily defeated by Mrs. Rosenthal's offer to help. I have always thought that the Geagas were judicious keepers of family mementos and records. Jonathan, Mrs. Rosenthal's older son, had told me a month ago that his grandmother's house in Los

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Angeles was a repository of art pieces, antique furniture and religious iconography. So it was a given that Mrs. Rosenthal would also safeguard and preserve records of her mother's FACLA presidency.

In the meantime, my friendship and brief collaboration with Bobby Reyes on some media projects were beginning to pay its dividends. Unknown to me, Bobby had embarked on a project to put the FACLA's history in its own website or in a book, and he told me, he had included me in a list of writers that he would invite to help him annotate the contents of the book.

Another friend and colleague, community journalist Larry Pelayo, would be also included as editor, and, in a corollary fashion, had been doing his part of recalling some of favorable as well as the unsavory chapters in the history of FACLA. In a note that he sent to me on Sunday afternoon, Larry said in part: "As they say, history both contains the good and the bad side of the coin . . . In the case of FACLA, the good side outshines the bad side . . . but we cannot avoid looking on what happened in the past . . ."

This Sunday morning, Bobby sent me a four-page brief of the post-war history of FACLA. Bobby wrote: "From what I gathered from the manongs of old – like the late Fred Aglipay and some Leyte-Samar Association founders like Martin Balbuena, who had passed away too – the FACLA's founding could be traced to the late 1930s when the Filipino pioneers used to meet at a small Filipino restaurant on San Pedro St. (now part of Little Tokyo)."

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Editor's Note: This article was supposed to be published today by a Filipino-American community newspaper in Los Angeles. But the article was "killed," for supposedly containing controversial, if not libelous, contents. Since the www.mabuhayradio.com has no fear of publishing articles that it believes to be relevant to the community, its editors and staff are proud to publish Mr. Villaroman's piece. This editor will gladly join Mr. Villaroman as a codefendant in case a libel case is filed because of the publication of this article.

The venerable historian, Ka Hector Santos, mentioned also that the forerunner of the now Historic Filipinotown actually started in a restaurant at the corner of Figueroa St., at the corner of Temple St, and that led him to remark that the present Historic Filipinotown is "neither historic nor Filipino," as Latinos compose nearly 70 per cent of the area's population and non-Filipinos own almost 90 per cent of the properties.

According to Reyes' research, the FACLA was officially registered with the State of California on April 26, 1945, and from thereon, it was essentially run by Fil-Ams of Ilocano heritage, with controversies marking many of its elections of officers and directors. Bobby's research also uncovered that FACLA does not have a complete written record of its past presidents and its members. And the membership list includes only those that registered for the 2002 and 2005 elections.

In the mid-1980s, I distinctly remember a particularly entertaining chapter of FACLA when the candidacy of Meng Gatus, a Kapanpangan, was questioned because, allegedly, he was not an American citizen or even a legal immigrant. Suits and counter suits were filed, but Gatus eventually emerged as victor. At around 1999, another controversy erupted when prominent Immigration lawyer Michael Gurfinkel donated a huge steel welcome arch to the FACLA headquarters, but that brouhaha only embellished Mr. Gurfinkel's already sterling reputation as an immigration lawyer among his growing list of Filipino clients.

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Among the past FACLA presidents, Bobby wrote, it was Ben Manibog, "who served according to anecdotal sources, for seven straight one-year terms and who inaugurated the present FACLA Social Hall in 1965." There is also the photograph (hanging in the FACLA Hall) of Mrs. Remedios Geaga, who served as President from 1974 to 1977, a period that coincided with the mayoralty of the beloved Tom Bradley. Mrs. Geaga was said to be one of the best presidents the FACLA ever had.

More Editor's Notes: Writer and photojournalist Larry Pelayo tried to write an exposé on the \$45,000 grant for an anti-tobacco smoking educational campaign that the FACLA received from a government agency in 1999. The FACLA officers did not spend the money for its intended purposes and did not comply with the mandatory reportorial requirements to account for its use. Again, the FACLA was blacklisted by the government office that gave the grant.

Larry Pelayo had informed me that he had suggested to the incumbent President, Dr. Jose Baldonado, that apart from an ongoing project to install a Dr. Jose Rizal monument in the FACLA's courtyard, that the following topics be included in writing the history of FACLA: the FACLAGate scandal, the Drug Addiction Fund, which Pelayo had tried to serialize in *Diyaryo Pilipino*, but was "killed" because the then caretaker, Dr. Veronico Agatep, allegedly refused to allow him access to County records; the suspension of government funding for FACLA's food-and-nutrition project because funds were allegedly pocketed by some FACLA officers; and the padlocking of the FACLA Hall due to an alleged election scandal (in 1996).

"Since I became a member of FACLA at the time of Manolo Madamba's presidency, I suggested for its executive officers to start documenting the history of the organization but to no avail," Reyes said. "And worse, after Mrs. (Aurora Madamba) Dotimas suffered a stroke that paralyzed her, the FACLA records (incomplete as they were at that time) simply vanished." Reyes wrote.

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"I was an inactive member of FACLA, as I said that a member of the Filipino-American media could only report about its activities from the outside and not being part of its management or Board of Directors," Reyes said. "I did follow my belief until its court-appointed receiver, Dr. Veronico Agatep, invited the Media Breakfast Club (MBC) that I founded to move its Wednesday morning meetings to the FACLA (Hall) sometime in 2000.

In 2001, Dr. Agatep was replaced as receiver by Mrs. Susan Maquindang-Dilkes, and she oversaw the court-mandated election in June 2002, which was won by the slate headed by Dr. Baldonado. "I was one of the campaign managers of the Baldonado-led candidates in the 2002 and 2005 elections," Reyes recalls. "My wife, Ceny, was a winning candidate for the Board of Directors in the 2005 elections, as member of the Baldonado slate," Reyes added.

The 2002 elections marked the introduction of a Parliamentary-style government for the FACLA. The members elected a 15-person board and the directors would then elect from among themselves the executive officers. Both the 2002 and 2005 elections were non-controversial and there was not even a single election protest.

In February 2008, Reyes' wife, Ceny, resigned from the Board of the FACLA because of a conflict with her work schedule, and Reyes was elected by the Board to take over her position, and he was also elected Secretary General. Reyes' election in February has afforded him a ten-month window of opportunity to lay down the vision and direction for a new set of directors that will be elected in the next election slated November 16, 2008.

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"In my search for FACLA records and copies of documents, I asked friends and even the children of the past presidents to help," reported Reyes. "But not much help is coming for reasons that I do not understand," Reyes said. "Certainly, coming up with a book about the FACLA will tell also the history the Filipinos in Los Angeles from the 1940s," Reyes said, visibly exasperated by the experience.

The creation in 2002 of the Historic Filipinotown seems to have awoken the sense of history of the present FACLA leadership, and there is hope that the colorful history of this organization would be reconstructed and rewritten to accurately reflect its moments of glory and its controversial past. # # #

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