

Written by Bobby M. Reyes

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Very-few Filipino and Filipino-American community leaders really know what Manny Ilagan did as a Filipino tourism officer in Los Angeles. Now that he has left the government service, permit me to tell you some of my personal experiences with our honoree in his coming-out party tonight.

I first met Manny Ilagan when I was known as the "Numero Uno" critic of the Philippine Department of Tourism. When he was first hired as a staff member of the Philippine Tourism Office in Los Angeles, his supervisors probably told him of my celebrated clashes with several Secretaries of the Department of Tourism. Manny probably heard of how I made fun of then-Secretary Vince Carlos's "Missed Universe" pageant in Manila in 1994. Yes, "MissED" (in quotation mark, "past tense") Universe of Opportunities. I made fun also of Sec. Dick Gordon's "WOW Philippines" Campaign that I dubbed the "Waste Of Wesources." But to my surprise, Mr. Ilagan treated me nicely as a fellow Bedan alumnus when we were introduced to each other. Mr. Ilagan actually befriended me, instead of treating me as an adversary or as an enemy, as his peers in the tourism office used to do.

One of my colleagues, fellow journalist Mar G. de Vera, noticed Mr. Ilagan's friendly attitude. And Mar said that Mr. Ilagan was just probably doing the Sicilian motto: "Keep your friends close and your enemies, closer," as Don Vito Corleone said in the movie.

Thus Mr. Ilagan and I became friends, beginning with reunions of the San Beda Alumni Association of Southern California and other community events. He eventually persuaded his then-boss, Tourism Director Annie Cuevas, to treat me also as a friend. Mr. Ilagan started to invite me to tourism events that his office sponsored. What a remarkable change as under the leadership of then-Secretary Gemma Cruz Araneta, the tourism office in Los Angeles used to hire at \$100 per hour per man off-duty police officers to make sure that I would not gate-crash DOT functions.

In 2006 when I was elected the Kalayaan Philippine Independence chairman, I sought of course the assistance of Director Cuevas and Deputy Director Ilagan. They gladly did help. I requested also that Manny Ilagan join the Core Group that was to organize the first-ever Filipino-American Community Night at a Major-League Baseball Stadium. With Mr. Ilagan on board, we pulled off -- with a shoe-string budget -- the historic event where then Acting Philippine Ambassador to the United States, His Excellency Willy Gaa, threw the ceremonial first pitch on July 24, 2006, at Dodgers Stadium.

Three years later, I took up the cudgels for Director Cuevas, Vice Consul Charmaine Chua and Manny Ilagan when a bogus Filipino-American "journalist" -- and also a "fake lawyer" at that -- attacked without any basis and without interviewing them first as "do-nothing" Filipino diplomats in Los Angeles. The crazy critic alleged unkindly that the three did nothing but undertake junkets. This led another wannabe journalist to label me as the "new attack dog of the Philippine Consulate General." I told then-Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon -- after she thanked me for my unsolicited defense of the trio of excellent Filipino public servants -- that I was just doing the right objective thing for friends. After all, what

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are friends for?

Due to time constraints, I have to cut off this narrative of Manny Ilagan as a Filipino tourism officer and a gentleman at that. I will not have time to tell you what he and I did in several conventions in Las Vegas. Conventions like the Consumer Electronics Show and the World of Concrete Trade Show. After all, what happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas.

To fellow Bedan Manny Ilagan, good luck in your new career, whatever it will be. But as promised when and if I become the governor of Sorsogon Province, I will hire you and Ms. Annie Cuevas-Lim as our "Sorsogon Economic Republic of the Philippines" tourism executives for North America. And thus, Manny Ilagan will have a great comeback in the field of tourism. Let's now plan for a "Welcoming Party" for Mr. Ilagan sometime in 2017 or even as early as July next year. # # #

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