

Written by

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The News UpFront: (TOP STORY) as of Tuesday, September 22, 2009

How people view the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) is critical to the understanding of what it is and what its officers do. The widespread belief is that NaFFAA is an all-volunteer organization serving and advocating for the Filipino community, advancing its interests and protecting its concerns. But when huge sums of grant monies flow out to the hands of some of these volunteers, the idea of servant leadership takes a hollow ring. The shape and color of community service change instantly because of expectation of rewards or a promise to reap financial benefits. Is NaFFAA a piggy bank, as some individuals think it is, or is it the vaunted guardian of Filipino interests? NaFFAA hid for seven years the big secret that three of its officials were handsomely paid. The cover-up was high up the food chain. Are we going to wait another seven years to know there are more skeletons in the NaFFAA closet?

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WIDESPREAD COVER-UP?

Officials Trash Probe of NaFFAA

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Due to Fears of Finding More 'Skeletons'

By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ

The author is a member of the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) and the Asian-American Journalists Association (AAJA)

S AN DIEGO – Fears that more "skeletons" might be unearthed from the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) and its officials seemed to have prompted officers loyal to incumbent leaders to overturn and trash the proposal to create a fact-finding board.

A long-held secret had just been unveiled -- that top-ranked officials had been the recipients

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of tens of thousands of monies -- and any investigation within could further erode faith in the organization trying to position itself as the voice of Filipinos in America.

Without directly saying NaFFAA shouldn't be looked into, officials found a shrewd way of going around it by coming up with a declaration -- the so-called Aug. 27 Manifesto -- that essentially rejected the inquiry while backing NaFFAA chair Greg Macabenta and flushing out his loyalists.

But instead of rallying support, the manifesto, which had only 97 signatories initially, caused more division than it intended and bred hostility among those who knew very little about NaFFAA's financial situation and those who are blindly loyal to their sweet-talking officers who have been less candid with their activities.

The manifesto itself was a tacit admission that NaFFAA is seriously in trouble, not only because of dwindling membership and shrinking corporate and public support, but due as well to grave accusations of wrongdoing at the very top.

That means the loss of public trust, an erosion of confidence and doubts on whether Macabenta and his group could lead by example.

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Based on this score alone, NaFFAA should be investigated and the air cleared even if it looks embarrassing for the incumbents led by Macabenta who are under a cloud, and his predecessors, namely, Alex Esclamado, Loida Nicolas Lewis and Alma Q. Kern.

The roles of Lewis and Kern have been largely undefined in the evolving NaFFAA controversy. But for Esclamado, his wife Lourdes M. Esclamado, and Macabenta, financial documents unsealed only last month indicated they received huge sums of monies from NaFFAA. Those are enough to cast doubts on their integrity.

For seven years, nobody outside NaFFAA's elite circle knew that at least one hundred thousand dollars had changed hands -- from the NaFFAA treasury to the couple Alex and Lourdes Esclamado, founding NaFFAA chair and assistant national treasurer, respectively, and to Macabenta.

That these three individuals had been the recipients of NaFFAA monies had been a closely-guarded secret. And the only plausible reason to hide it was that, publicly bared during its beginning years, it would undermine their concern for the community, which, as it turns out now, was all feigned.

They may be driven by a willingness to serve the community but the fact is that the rewards for

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doing so are quite handsome. The benefits easily outweigh the initial hardships of community organizing.

With all the donations pouring in from corporate, institutional and individual donors, NaFFAA is a rich financial wellspring. For some people, perhaps it's a small piggy bank where money is available in times of need.

This thought is easily confirmed by the seemingly-innocuous statement from Lorna Dietz, the inconsequential chatterbox who is not Macabenta's wife but who nonetheless knew more than a wife should know given that she's just Macabenta's advertising solicitor.

Dietz had stated that the Macabenta-owned Filipinas magazine would not have financial problems if it's true that Wells Fargo donated \$300,000 to NaFFAA.

Well, the truth is that Wells Fargo did. The bank and the foundation with the same name had given NaFFAA a total of \$300,000!

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Why would Macabenta not deny that he benefitted from the Wells Fargo donation? Why did Dietz talk about it as if she's the owner (or one of the new owners) of *Filipinas* magazine? Why did she link a donation to a public charity with Macabenta's private enterprise?

A Question of Honor for the Filipino-American Community

The stakes are high for Macabenta and his team, and higher still for the Filipino community which NaFFAA purports to represent.

Without the clarity of a "Caesar's wife" (i.e., above suspicion), Macabenta's moves would always be suspect. His three business enterprises -- Minority Media Services Inc., *Filipinas* magazine and *Ang Panahon* newspaper -- stand likely to suffer from allegations of wrongdoing.

And the published statement of journalist Bobby Reyes, his arch critic, that Macabenta is like a "lagareng hapon" (Japanese chainsaw) would be hard to vanish.

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For the Filipino community, it's a question of honor.

The "culture of corruption" appended to every Filipino would surely get a boost, what with a collection of kleptocrats in the highest echelons of government in the homeland, namely Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, Joseph Estrada, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and husband Jose Miguel Arroyo.

And it doesn't help either that we have kleptocrats in the micro level in San Diego's Council of Philippine American Organizations (COPAO) where \$27,000 disappeared during the term of another NaFFAA official.

Now, it's NaFFAA in the entire United States? # # #

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