

Written by

Tuesday, 21 December 2010 14:30 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 December 2010 18:03

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

(© *Journal Group Link International*)

The President says, “Joseph Fernandez had lived the American dream and was committed to protecting it for his fellow citizens.”

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CHICAGO (*jGLi*) -- President Barack Obama mourned the death of a Filipino-American lawyer Joseph M. Fernandez, who died after a brief illness last Saturday, Dec. 18, at the Meriam Hospital in Providence City, Rhode Island, at the age of 46.

“Hindi nga kami makapaniwala na namatay agad siya.” (We cannot believe that he died suddenly), according to Fernandez’ grieving aunt, Estrella Fernandez Ramos, in a phone interview with this reporter when reached at Fernandez’ residence in Providence Tuesday (Dec. 21).

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According to a press release on his obituary provided this reporter by Fernandez' brother-in-law, Anthony Gopal, the cause of Mr. Fernandez' death was a "rare and aggressive autoimmune disease that attacked his lungs." Mr. Gopal said, "His health declined over a couple months, with a rapid decline in the last week or two."

Fernandez, a former Providence City solicitor, was reportedly suffering from pneumonia when he died suddenly.

He was the son of the late Dr. Oscar Villalon Fernandez, a pathologist, and Concepcion Ochoco Fernandez, a pharmacist, both of Dagupan, Pangasinan in the Philippines.

Mrs. Ramos said just yesterday President Barack Obama called up the Fernandez family and talked to Fernandez' wife, Emily Maranjian, a native American of Armenian descent, and their twin daughters, Phoebe, and Coco, both eight years old, to condole with them.

The Statement of President Obama

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Both Joseph and his wife Emily were classmates of President Obama at the Harvard University law school.

In a statement, President Obama said, "I was shocked and saddened to learn today of the passing of my friend and colleague Joe Fernandez. From our time together in law school to his work as a dedicated public servant in

Providence

, I knew Joe as someone who had lived the American dream and was committed to protecting it for his fellow citizens. He will be deeply missed. My thoughts and prayers are with Joe's wife, Emily, and two young daughters in these most trying of times."

Mrs. Ramos, a resident of San Francisco, California, said Joe, who was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania

, could not speak Filipino but he understands it and could carry a conversation as he speaks in English.

She said when Joe was still in high school, he stayed in the Philippines for half a semester and considered attending school there. But he changed his mind and continued his schooling in the U.S.

"Pero umuwi siya sa Filipinas for a family reunion bawat tatlong taon." (But he went home to the

Philippines

every three years to attend their family reunion.)

Jon Melegrito and Bing Branigin, spokespersons of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations, broke the news of Fernandez's death to the Filipino community in a press release, saying "A sad day in Providence. And a sad one for the Filipino American community."

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A Message from New NaFFAA Chair Navarra

Quoting NaFFAA National Chairman Eduardo Navarra, Melegrito and Branigin said, "We join the many friends, admirers, supporters and family of former Providence City Solicitor Joe Fernandez who are feeling a profound sense of loss at his unexpected passing.

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Former NaFFAA Executive Director Armando "Doy" Heredia described Fernandez as a stalwart of the Fil-Am community in New England, saying, "He did many pro-bono work or referrals for cases involving Fil-Ams, notably the case of an overseas contract worker who was abused by her employer. A role model for young Filipinos, Joe was our NaFFAA youth leader for the Eastern Region for many years."

Fernandez attended Phillips Exeter Academy, received his Bachelor's Degree in American Civilization from Brown University, and his Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School

. Most recently, Fernandez waged an unsuccessful but spirited campaign for the Democratic nomination for Rhode Island Attorney General.

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“I would have been the first Filipino Attorney General in the entire United States had I made it,” Mrs. Ramos recalled the words of her nephew.

From January 2003 until September 2009, Joe served as the Providence City Solicitor, where he quickly earned a reputation for rooting out corruption, vigorously prosecuting crime, protecting taxpayers, and making the city work for regular citizens. Prior to heading the City’s law office, Joe spent six years in New York City litigating complex commercial cases, and five years serving the Rhode Island business community as a lawyer in private practice.

In 2007 and 2008, Joe co-chaired the Rhode Island presidential campaign of his law school classmate, then-Sen. Barack Obama, and served as a member of the Obama for America
, New England Steering Committee.

Joe was actively engaged in the Rhode Island nonprofit community and served on the boards of several community organizations including Trinity Repertory Company, the
Community College
of
Rhode Island Foundation
, FirstWorks, and Crossroads Rhode Island.

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In addition to his mother, his wife and his beloved children, Joe is survived by his siblings, David of Singapore, Thomas of Cincinnati, OH, and Susan of San Jose, CA.

The Funeral Service will be held Thursday at 11:00 a.m. at Central Congregational Church, 296 Angell St.

,
Providence

. Calling hours are Wednesday 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the Monahan Drabble Sherman Funeral Home, 230 Waterman St.,

Providence

. Donations may be made to The Coco and Phoebe College Fund, c/o
286 Doyle Ave

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Providence

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. Condolences may be left at the "Remembering Joe Fernandez '85" Facebook page. # # #

Editor's Note: To contact the author, please e-mail him at: (lariosa_jos@sbcglobal.net)