

Written by
Saturday, 21 April 2012 12:44 -

"For as long as I am fighting for what is right, I fear nobody." That quotation was from a concerned citizen of San Diego

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California
, who lived to the fullest in pursuit of the ideals of a corrupt-free community. Vina M. Phelps was a trusted friend, a journalist of the old order who fashioned images from words. She was a whistle-blower, the person who brought out the bad side of the Filipino community in hopes of uplifting Filipinos in San Diego

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California

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The San Diego Whistle-Blower Who Would Not Give up

By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ

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{xtypo_quote} The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. – Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)
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TORONTO - Vina M. Phelps was an unwavering concerned citizen who weathered the insults and endured being ostracized while she took it upon herself to correct the glaring wrongs in San Diego's Filipino community.

She knew the essentials of public service, having been a public servant herself to a diverse constituency, not just Filipinos.

Fresh from retirement as San Diego County employee, she found time to volunteer and looked for how she could spend precious hours serving the community. That was about the time she joined the Council of Philippine American Organizations (COPAO).

Her entry was perhaps preordained. Whether one believes in those things or not, those times saw the convergence of events where Vina would play a significant role. The community is richer for what she did.

As she warmed herself in, she began to notice things, questioning the propriety of official inaction and official acts that included allocating monies for some questionable projects.

It was her upbringing, she told me a number of times, that forced her inquisitiveness. Her parents raised her and her siblings to do what is right, regardless of the consequences.

"For as long as I am fighting for what is right, I fear nobody," she told me in one interview in March 2008.

That was her rule, repeatedly stated for emphasis during times she would unload herself in informal talks. It was also her guiding principle when she joined COPAO.

And always - she stressed her parents telling them - always speak the truth. Be honest. Be truthful. Be kind. And when the going gets rough, stand your ground!

It was this personal mantra that brought me into Vina and her husband Al's confidence. She had taken a liking for my expository writings in my paper, the now inactive Philippine Village Voice.

On a number of occasions, I would pay them a visit at their home in the same San Diego district where I lived. There I would learn that Vina also wrote in her heydays for *The Manila Chronicle*, the Lopez-owned newspaper that launched my journalism career starting as a

police reporter.

Her deep understanding of the works of a journalist was a kind of connection that developed into a constant sharing of information and insights. My social visits would turn into a three-way discussion of the current issues in the community, with Al also giving his own perspectives.

Ms. Vina was by her lonesome as she put up a spirited fight against the cheats in the community's umbrella organization, COPAO (Council of Philippine American Organizations), where money simply disappeared and officials kept mum about where it went.

Vina was the community's whistle blower, a fearless and staunch critic of many a wrongdoer who administered COPAO as if it were their personal property.

In 2008 for example, Vina went to extra lengths to let the Board of Supervisors know the sad state COPAO was in.

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She argued that "If COPAO can let go of \$27,000 that only means that COPAO does not need any grant from the County of San Diego or from any charitable institution or benefactor."

She was correct. The following years after that, the Board of Supervisors cut its annual grants to COPAO. To this day, the \$27,000 remains missing and unaccounted for.

Last Wednesday, April 19, 2012, Vina passed away in San Diego, according to a family friend. She had been struggling against cancer in the past three years. # # #

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