

The News UpFront: (TOP STORY) as of Wednesday, December 12, 2007

The Filipino community celebrated a mute stretch of highway but ignored the repository of learning that could speak eloquently of us. The same community continues to demean our national hero but patronizes the crooks in our midst. Some of life's absurdities they are, only in San Diego's Filipino community.

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BREAKING NEWS - Commentary

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PREROGATIVE

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Life's Absurdities □ □ □

Life is full of infinite absurdities, which, strangely enough, do not even need to appear plausible, because they are true. -- Luigi Pirandello

By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ

The author is a member of the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), Asian American

Journalists Association (AAJA) and National Press Club of the Philippines-USA.

SAN DIEGO - I had a long late lunch with webcaster and internet entrepreneur Robert Posadas this week at one of National City's Chinese restaurants. Over the course of two hours, we discussed the many possibilities that the internet technology could bring in remaking our lives.

Full and feeling bloated we decided to go to the sprawling National City Library on National City Blvd., close to City Hall. Six months earlier, in May, that library chalked up some historical milestone with the visit by former President Fidel V. Ramos and his wife, Amelita.

I've been there many times, mostly to pass the hours waiting for news coverage. The last was about three weeks ago when I dropped by to take a look at the rich array of out-of-circulation books being sold by volunteers for no more than \$1.50 apiece.

Within 30 minutes of my arrival, I had plucked 10 of what I thought were the best books, the cheapest books in fact, from that part of town.

Who would argue with a hardbound, three-inch thick book of poetry, the best collection I've ever seen? Who would hesitate to pay \$1.50 for the historical and biographical sketches of Generals Douglas MacArthur and Dwight Eisenhower, and President Harry S. Truman, specially if mention is made about their exploits in the Philippines?

The three books might as well have been classified as "Philippine collection" as they deal with Philippine history during the American colonial years and right after the Second World War.

It's unbelievable, for me at least, that these kinds of books are being sold at bargain prices while the library's "Philippine collection" suffers from a dire lack of reading materials -- I purposely didn't say books because there's practically none.

Perhaps volunteers from Filipino organizations could spend time browsing through the hundreds of books in the pile and select those which are relevant to the Filipino community like the books I found and bought.

President Ramos' visit had occasioned the creation of a "Philippine collection" on the library's first floor. When he came in May, the usual kodak-moment-loving leaders of the Filipino community made sure their presence was recorded for posterity together with either the ex-president or his wife.

Today when we went in, I asked Robert to give me his impression about what's officially marked as "Philippine collection", which is located on the right-hand side as one enters the library.

Hardly a second passed, and he uttered "pathetic" and scratched his head.

Indeed, the single two-deck steel shelf looked beggarly in its emptiness. I counted 18 books in the meter-long shelf and I thought it would look better without them for that makes certain that books are not available.

During my earlier visit I asked one of the librarians if there were more books about the Philippines in some parts of the library. She said that was it in the "Philippine collection". She explained however, that some of the books might have been borrowed. Another librarian told me it's been always "that way" (meaning, less than 20 books in the collection).

Considering that 17 percent of National City's 55,000 population are Filipinos, the number of books in that "Philippine collection" would be so negligible. But that is not the point of this article. One reason President Ramos chose National City to launch his book and donate some volumes is because of the Filipino presence there.

The city is also home to many Filipino-owned business establishments and community organizations, the most notable of which is the Council of Philippine American Organizations

(COPAO).

I hate to think that the many anomalies that afflicted COPAO, including the disappearance of \$27,000, the check forgeries and the misrepresentation by an officer during the term of Aurora Cudal, have also begun to rub on the soul of the Filipino community.

We are all struggling to get mainstream recognition as a people and as part of the whole social and political fabric yet we do very little, if anything at all, to win and deserve such acknowledgement.

If the number of books in the National City library's Philippine collection could be taken as an indicator of how little we value ourselves in these parts, then we can not hope to be at par with the other ethnic communities around us.

We could be perceived as lacking grey matter up there in between the ears. That's already happening with the inexplicable interest to engage in the newspaper business by some unlettered souls trying to redeem their soiled reputation.

Also take into consideration how we demean ourselves by simply looking at the 24/7 sentry that guards Seafood City fishmarket, also in National City. The bust there is no other than that of Jose Rizal, the national hero of the Philippines who is also called the "pride of the Malayan race".

Note how the community through COPAO has reduced him to insignificance!

Until now, I'm still grappling with the question of relevance. Was Rizal ever a fisherman or was he some kind of a "fishwife", a person, not necessarily a man, who engages in gossip and spreading rumors about other people? I know those kinds lodged in COPAO but was he?

If there's anything that easily identifies Jose Rizal, it's his books, the [Noli Me Tangere](#) and its companion volume, [El Filibusterismo](#).

Those novels give us the very soul and identity as a people. We don't have to advertise ourselves to say we're this and that; the books will speak for us.

However, neither of these two volumes was in the "Philippine collection" and I don't blame National City or its librarians, either. The city government has been gracious in having a Filipino section and that's quite an admission of our role in the city.

I believe it is our duty to ask for their inclusion. If not, our community organizations should re-allocate some of their monies from weekend parties to the procurement of more books. That brings me to another point.

In October, despite huge money problems, COPAO spent \$4,000 for a sign marking a segment of State Route 54 in South San Diego as "Filipino-American Highway". There is no doubt that the traffic marker will create "visibility" for Filipinos as thousands of motorists pass that route everyday.

Four thousand dollars could have filled the empty book shelf in National City's library to the brim. The number of books that the amount of money can buy is priceless considering that other ethnic groups might be interested to know us from way back.

But how does one visualize a generic "Filipino-American" immortalized in a highway sign?

The most visible "Filipino-American" in San Diego is COPAO and that's not even a person. It's an organization enmeshed in all kinds of scandals. Don't we invite more attention to what ails us?

One high-profile "Filipino-American" was a lawyer and former member of the

National City Council who mulcted his clients of thousands of monies. He had been forced to resign his position and his law practice. And for a time people thought he was a good role model.

Another "Filipino-American" who refused to go away from the community's consciousness is a honorary who clams up whenever the issue of the missing \$27,000 comes up. And being a fake "Dr.", that's the worst representation that could happen for a Filipino American.

Still another "Filipino-American" is a shameless two-timer. Well, I leave that to everyone's interpretation, though literally, the person was a two-timer, as in two runs, two losses.

You see, it's not easy to envisage a Filipino American without having to refer to those people.

The dearth of books, Jose Rizal's second demise, the stretch of highway, the publicity-seeking role players, the financial anomalies, the deception -- the list is endless.

But we don't care so long as a sign, paid for by COPAO, validates our presence . . . in a highway? And that's no highway robbery.

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