



“WHILE I WAS WITH THE ‘MANO PO 6’ stars in Beijing, I saw hundreds of Filipinos who followed Sharon Cuneta everywhere we went. I wish I could give them work in the Philippines so they didn’t have to leave.”

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Editor Gerry Lirio

Something for ‘Ondoy’ victims
CALIFORNIA-BASED FILIPINOS LED BY lawyer Morel Callueng donated Monday \$5,000 to the families devastated by Tropical Storm “Ondoy” coursed through the UP Alumni led by its president Fred Pascual and Girlie Antonio.

This section is dedicated to Filipinos overseas toiling on land and at sea, in factories, in construction sites and in the homes of the world to secure a better life for their families. These are their stories.

N. Vizcaya high school graduates relive good old days in Toronto

By Sylvia E. Pinca
Contributor

WHAT IS A RE-union? It is a gathering of people who have been separated for some time. With the Philippine diaspora, reunions have become a staple of Filipino life. We like reuniting with family or friends of our youth. The older we get, the more we want to be in touch with people we knew when we were young.

Ralph Waldo Emerson offers a reason for our wanting to reunite with friends of yore. “It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.”

A grand reunion of schoolmates from the Saint Mary’s University of Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, High School Class ’61, is going to be held in downtown Toronto next year.

As events held in foreign countries are planned way ahead of time, the man on top of the reunion is devising ways and means to get the message to the most number of SMU graduates: Wilfred Fabroa, president of the SMU Alumni Association in Toronto, has in fact launched a campaign in the Internet using the website www.smutoronto.com to get across their SMU schoolmates from all over the world.

Gang of four

This is not the first time an SMU reunion will happen as homecomings have been held in the Philippines and the United States in the past many years, but as far as Wilfred is concerned, this is the first reunion in Canada, and it has to be grand.

“During the SMU reunion in Las Vegas in 2008,” Wilfred said, “some 300 schoolmates attended and everyone there thought it would be good to have another reunion in 2010 as there were a lot of seniors who attended and they said it would be good to meet again while everyone is still capable of physically moving around.”

Having discussed with SMU Alumni Toronto beforehand the possibility of holding the next reunion where some of them now live, Wilfred offered to host the next one in Toronto. It will be held on July 31 to Aug. 1, 2010 at the Chelsea Hotel in downtown Toronto.

“I knew this would be a monumental task,” he said. “But I was



A GOOD TIME TO TALK ABOUT THE OLD TIMES
They were classmates at the St. Mary’s University in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Class 1961. Letty Gurat-Europa, Delano Europa, Wilfred Fabroa and Melchor Ambatali Jr. found each other in Canada after so many years. Now, they’re working hard to raise funds and prepare for a grand batch reunion in Toronto.

confident enough that

I could get enough support from the SMU people now living in Toronto. I have four classmates in Toronto I can depend on to help me raise funds and organize the event.”

Canadians call him Wilf, but among his Filipino friends, Wilfred is simply Fred.

In Canada, Wilfred worked for the longest time as supervisor for the Printing and Desktop Publishing in the Ontario Legislative Assembly. He retired in March 2000.

He reinvented himself later and got involved with things he had long wanted to do. One of these was organizing the SMU Alumni Association in 2002. He got it operational in 2003.

The way we were

Among his batch mates now based in Toronto were Delano Europa, justice of the peace in Ontario, and his wife Letty Gurat-Europa, a retired nurse. Letty worked as a nurse in Canada for 40 years. And then there is Melchor Ambatali Jr., an engineer who has also lived in Canada for decades.

Although they have so much work to do, the four don’t let anything get in the way of enjoying their encounters. These four classmates just love being together because they feel young

and they can talk about the good old days. They were close friends even as children.

Wilfred, Del and Melchor were together as boy scouts in 1957. The three did a semaphore, a visual signaling during a camporee or a gathering of local boy scouts in the nearby Bambang town. They held flags in each of their hands and directed traffic. They are all senior citizens now but no matter, they still long for each other’s company.

Reason for every season

Saint Mary’s University is located in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya and was established in the 1920s. It is one of the best universities in the Cagayan Valley, having graduated a lot of successful professionals who can be found all over the world. For decades, this Catholic institution has been run by Belgian and Filipino CICM priests and Franciscan nuns.

Wilfred, now an IT expert in Canada, remembers the old hometown where everybody practically knew everybody: Bayombong was a quaint university town where people indulged in cultural and intellectual pursuits. Trade and commerce were done in the adjacent town of Solano, around 10 minutes away by car.

His siblings called Wilfred “manong,” he being the eldest among 10 brothers and sisters who all went to St. Mary’s University. He used to walk to school as he and his family lived in a nearby area called Salvacion, which was a few steps away from the house of the Europas near the town plaza. Melchor and Letty lived at the opposite end but still within walking distance.

Today, their homes in Toronto are farther apart, but Wilfred and Melchor frequently drive to Del and Letty’s house, or vice versa, to work on the reunion preparations, or for whatever reason. They have always found a good reason to be together.

Where are they now?

After 43 years and in their sixties, they are still at it and are now giving signals and directions for the grand reunion in Toronto. Oh, how sweet it is to be loved by one’s classmates. The four are the objects of affection of their schoolmates who want to see them there.

Didn’t Barbra Streisand say it well? “Memories light the corner of my mind; misty warm and color memories of the way we were...”

So the members of SMU Batch ’61 recall stories and reminisce

about their teachers and schoolmates, both the good and the bad, as well as the events outside their school.

They remember Lalaine Bennett, the first Miss Philippines to win the third place in the Miss Universe Pageant way back in the ’70s.

They remember a strict but very competent principal, Sister Columba, who molded many young minds. They remember their affable physical education teacher and choir leader, Ester Garlitos, who aptly represented what was good and beautiful in the small hometown.

They remember classmate Carlito Abad, a civil engineering graduate who has become a Canadian billionaire.

They remember all the successful professionals, lawyers, engineers, doctors and nurses who have made their mark elsewhere in the world. They even remember a mentally-retarded classmate who became a thief and another one who, in later years, murdered a policeman.

To explain the lure and enigma of class reunions, Del Europa, the writer in this group of four, quotes Alfred Lord Tennyson’s famous line “I am part of all I have met” and Thomas Carlyle’s “a mysterious bond of brotherhood makes all men

one.” The four have tested these ideas and proved them to be true.

Back to Streisand’s immortal song: “Can it be that it was all so simple then? Or has time rewritten every line?” There was so much laughter in their youth but what if time has erased the fine features, and their classmates have turned gray and wrinkled and bald?

Can they make it?

Said Del: “One will have to suspend disbelief when he or she sees a classmate whose image of him or her was that which was nurtured in the mind years ago, but who turns out differently. You suddenly come out of step and you failed to keep track miserably. The feeling of dread or trepidation may be mutual and consequently, you pray in unison: There but for the grace of God go I.”

Will their classmates make it to the Toronto reunion?

For Wilfred, that’s hard work and, with Streisand’s “Memories” still in his mind, he ponders: “If we had the chance to do it all again, tell me, would we? Could we?” He and his classmates have a unanimous answer to that query: Yes, they will do it again. And they will make it a grand and fun reunion.

Too many unemployed Filipino-Americans

THE UNEMPLOYMENT rate in the United States rose to 10.2 percent last month, the highest recorded since April 2003. There are now 15.7 million unemployed based on a US Department of Labor report.

Filipino-Americans are not spared from this unemployment crisis. They find themselves dependent on an unemployment insurance and other government assistance until they find a job.

No-work insurance

Each state has its own law in providing for unemployment insurance.

In California, the Employment Development Department is the government agency that handles the claims for unemployment insurance benefits.

This insurance program is applicable to workers, including lawful permanent residents, who lose their job

through no fault of their own. To be eligible, they have to be available, ready and willing to accept work anytime.

The minimum weekly unemployment insurance check is \$70 and the maximum fee is \$450.

Many Filipinos avail of this program, but this unemployment benefit lasts only for one year. It is expected that after a year, the unemployed beneficiary of this program would be fully employed. But this is not always the case. A significant number is still unemployed after a year, despite diligent efforts to look for a job.

Stimulus funds

For those who have exhausted their unemployment benefits and are still unemployed, the US Congress has passed legislation extending their benefits to another 14 weeks. This legislation was enacted this month.

The Obama administration has also authorized \$787 billion as a stimulus fund in February



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2009 to support the creation of jobs in different industries, among other purposes.

San Francisco has utilized this federal fund to assist its unemployed residents. There is a “Jobs Now!” program which aims to get jobs for its 1,000 participants between May 2009 and September 2010. Run by the San Francisco Human Services Agency, this is only available to low-income families, more specifically, for parents who have at least one minor child. It does not only place jobs to eligible unemployed individuals, but also benefits local employers by subsidizing 100 percent of workers’ wages until September 30, 2010.

There are other US cities with similar programs using federal stimulus funds. We do not know the number of Filipinos who are eligible to participate in these.

Availability of information

Finding resources to assist a Filipino immigrant in the US may be a challenging task. There is very limited available information on the issue of employment resources. Watching the national news on mainstream TV channels or being updated by printed news dailies may be the only way to obtain much needed information on resources.

In the past weeks, especially with the recent Pacquiao victory in Las Vegas, for most Filipinos in the US, the more exciting news is his alleged illicit love affair with a young Filipino actress.

Residents who lost their jobs and found themselves as stay-at-home parents easily get hooked to the daily Filipino soap operas shown on cable Fil-

ipino channels.

When US Congress last week extended the 12-month unemployment insurance benefits, how many of the affected Filipinos were aware of this extension?

As a vulnerable unemployed population increases and with a lack of culturally specific outreach programs to the Filipinos, the number of scam victims also arises. There are offers for assistance in filling up unemployment benefits online that are not authorized by the government agency. Many unemployed get ripped off by some unscrupulous scammers.

Undocumented immigrant

The unemployed undocumented can’t avail of government benefits.

While they may have paid taxes and contributed through their wages to the unemployment insurance program, the undocumented are excluded because of their status.

They are instead dependent

on the support of relatives. They may consider returning to the Philippines, though this option is not usually chosen for economic reasons.

Interestingly, there is reverse foreign remittance to the US from the Philippines by their relatives or friends who are willing to assist them. This may not be a common occurrence but we have seen this happen to an increasing number of unemployed Filipinos.

As Filipinos are known for their resiliency in times of crisis, the difficulties of this unemployment situation in the US remain a big challenge.

No one really knows what to expect in the coming months. What persists is our formidable faith and hope that the economic situation will soon get better.

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