



Filipinos are Beautiful People

Fil-Am Young Leaders Summit Recap

By Kit Zulueta

"There isn't enough time to cover everything" or "please extend it into a two-day workshop" were engaged reactions received during the Fil-Am Young Leaders Summit held at the FilCom Center in Waipahu, Hawaii last May 3, 2014.

The Summit went by quickly, notwithstanding the facilitation of four breakout sessions with "loaded" topics on civic engagement, arts and culture, Filipino talent & economy, and education. The main objective of the Summit was to provide a forum for the discussion and exchange of ideas to come up with solutions on how to advance the priorities of the Filipino-American community. This objective was certainly met, as the Summit was bursting at the seams with comments and ideas!

More than 200 guests of all ages attended the Summit to bond with fellow Fil-Ams and to share their thoughts and experiences growing up as Fil-Ams. Some flew all the way from the East Coast to Hawaii, and some from neighboring islands. A collective panel of local young leaders participated heavily, setting some records straight and offered solutions as well as resources for Hawaii's unique challenges.

As I envisioned it from the beginning, the ballroom became a room full of high-energy dynamos offering opinions and ideas that evolved exponentially into greater value, and of lifetime friends who have never interacted in a similar forum before rediscovering each other.

Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose Cuisia, an extremely busy man, stayed for the entire duration of the event to listen, to observe, and to participate in the discussions. It was a huge honor to have him "hang-out" with everyone, and clearly demonstrated how serious he was in community-building with our young leaders.

Cuisia said in his remarks, "If only Filipinos would be organized and unified, we could be the most influential ethnic group in the United States."

"Unity" had started to become a taboo word in the Filipino community. Very few wanted to offer to try and develop "unity", and risk the stigma of being unfortunately labeled as naïve and ambitious. Hence, the clamor for "unity" became purposely ignored, until it slowly disappeared. With the Summit, the fire of hope for being united was somehow rekindled.

Guest speaker Tony Olaes, chairperson of Gawad Kalinga, US, set the tone of the event sharing three quotes. First, he said that "genius is in the inquiry." He encouraged everyone to ask questions, to challenge each other and to never stop learning. Second was "if you were to imagine 'perfect', what would it look like?" He encouraged all the delegates to think BIG, and to dream BIG. Only when we seek for perfection can we come close to it, he said. Lastly, in three simple words, he encapsulated his message with "anything is possible."

The Summit became an opportunity to join hands in creating actions to give back to the community. It was a chance to learn and to strengthen one's roots – as Olaes says, "a plant with no roots could never grow."



The Summit became more than the usual self-searching “who am I?” as a Filipino. There was that sense of pride and understanding that no matter where our people built a home in the world, the beauty of the Philippines and the beauty of Filipinos will always be in that home and in their hearts. After all, Filipinos are beautiful people, no matter where they are transplanted. Nowhere was this felt more than in the Summit, in the company of ‘kababayans’ in the US sharing the same passions and sentiments.

In Hawaii, these “beautiful” Filipinos comprise the largest ethnic group. I feel that Hawaii’s isolation in the middle of the Pacific allowed us Filipinos to come closer together as a community, manifested by the impressive and active Filipino organizations, such as the Filipino Community Center in Waipahu. Summit delegates from the mainland were blown away with admiration with the facility.

Our track record as a Filipino community in Hawaii was described as far more advanced than our mainland counterparts. Is it really? Regardless of advances in technology, our isolation can also result in lack of affiliation to the global Fil-Am community. It’s not that we’re indifferent, sometimes it’s a matter of “out of sight, out of mind.”

That’s why I thought it was great that the Summit was held in Hawaii. The benefits that the Filipino Community in Hawaii reaped were more than just learning from each other. It opened our doors to the greater USA and the world, giving us a chance to show-off how unique we are in Hawaii. It also fostered in us the realization of the amount of work we need to do to stay aligned with our global community.

Rovaira Dasig, lunch speaker, shared a personal story about her grandmother, her mom and herself, three strong women embarking on a journey in search of the American Dream. She shared the 360-degree twist of that journey - just when she was supposed to have ‘found’ the American Dream, Dasig decided to leave her comfortable, promising life as a bright student in the U.S. and moved back to the motherland, for keeps.

Dasig shared that it was not easy at all. But she said that it wasn't until she moved to the Philippines that she really started to understand her "Filipino-ness." It was a bold move but it was something she felt she needed to do.

There is a population of Filipino-Americans who are now deciding to return to the Philippines. Perhaps not all of these Fil-Ams will follow the same path as Dasig, but it became increasingly clear in the various presentations in the Summit that even a short visit to the motherland in search for one's roots will make all the difference in being 'Filipino.'

"Halika, anak, maupo ka. Kumain ka na ba?"

The beauty of the Philippines is in the people.

Cuisia challenged the Summit delegates to run for Office and take active roles in the community. Some delegates and reactors who already ran for office shared their experiences. There was a discussion on how our population continues to increase yet we're still lacking representation in politics, media and business.



Panelists challenged the audience to describe the Filipino culture – proof of its diversity was that there was no common answer. Our culture is so diverse that it's hard to come up with a single, common description. And maybe we don't need a single, common description. Our stories, differing in various ways, yet all the same, would suffice. We just need to understand that we are all rooted in the Philippines, that we are all family.



Then there was a discussion on how the Philippines is now the bright spot in Asia. Charts indicate a booming economic trend and Filipinos are gaining top recognition in a diverse set of professional fields. There was a question raised starting with "If you had all the resources in the world..."

Talking about resources, let's remember the fact that there are four million Fil-Ams in the United States. That's figuratively four million votes to get someone elected in office, or to have someone win the next American Idol. What a powerful force - but sadly untapped.

Then there was a discussion on utilizing education as a vehicle to connect the U.S. and the Philippines. Participants determined what tools were present and available for the community like fundraisers, educational workshops, and existing organizations that offer a variety of services. Ultimately, it was the discussion on how to continue the dialogue that left an impact.



Everyone understood the value of the Summit, but in all candor, resources are not always proportional to our enthusiasm. As young leaders, the reality of it is, we are all still struggling ourselves to make a living and find our circles of influence in the community.

Despite all the realities of life in the US that we need to contend with, we must acknowledge that it is certainly our time to lead and that we are the 'hope of the Motherland.' While we are already taking strides in that direction, we must not let the motivation and the enthusiasm developed in the Summit die. It is when

we start doubting ourselves that we return to zero. Hey guys, when the realities of life start hitting us hard again, remember now, anything is possible! Think of the Summit and let it fire us up again!

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Photos of the Summit? Visit www.fylsummit.com.

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