

Home on a Mission of Love *Christina Alpad 2-18-18 The Sunday Times Magazine* *Filipino-American Law Enforcement Officers Association*

One too many times, law enforcers are portrayed in movies and television as intimidating figures albeit sworn protectors of the community. While a commanding stance, body type and attitude are arguably useful in warding off the “bad guys,” the public often forgets that underneath the uniform, badges and perpetually folded arms are hearts that beat for others — family, friends and even strangers — for helping those in need after all is the very essence of their service.



*Retracing their roots. The 11-strong members of the San-Francisco based Filipino-American Law Enforcement Officers Association (Front row, from left) **Robert Nishiyama, Eric Quema, Joey Mercado and Lawrence Lagarejos;** (Middle row) **Matthew Leong, Robert Padrones and Peter Kent de Jesus;** (Back row) **Randy Caturay, Francis Feliciano, Pierre Vida and Ferdinand Dimapasoc** John Micah Sebastian*

For the 11-strongman members of the Filipino-American Law Enforcement Officers Association (FALEO) — a fraternal association comprised of law enforcement personnel from various local, state and federal agencies in the United States — their hearts go out to their country of origin, the Philippines, where The Sunday Times Magazine met them and saw their mission of love in action.

Taking a break from their hectic two-week outreach program in the country, the officers, some active in and others retired from service, sat down for this interview eager to share stories of hope, dreams realized and the joy of giving back.



One of the major projects of the organization and the Philippine Exchange Training (PET) is conducting bike patrol training and precision riding for PNP officers

Like every other Filipino family, the parents of these United States police officers dreamt of a brighter future for their children. They are among the millions of Filipinos, who since the time of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's landing in Leyte, have chased after the proverbial American dream.

A pair of these dreamers were Lt. Eric Quema's parents, who as singletons traveled to the US to study, crossed paths and fell in love. When Quema was born, his parents' visa expired and they made the difficult decision to leave him behind with a foster family, believing he was better off in the land of opportunity.

"I grew up there not really knowing my parents or my heritage until I reached the age of nine and was sent back to the Philippines to live with them," the officer recalled.

Culture shock hit the young Quema hard — from using tabo in the bathroom, lizards falling from the ceiling and backyard cockfighting — for a good three years, until he learned to love and live at home.

Eventually, Quema moved back to the States and has lived there ever since.

Lt. Randy Caturay on the other hand had his life start out in reverse. Unlike Quema who was born an American, this would-be-policeman was born and raised in Pasig City. At age six, his family migrated to Canada, and after a few more years in 1972, made a final move to California's famed Bay Area.



The PET program also teaches PNP officers first aid and other life-saving medical intervention

“If Lt. Quema had culture shock seeing the Philippines for the first time, I was lucky to see so many Filipinos in the Bay Area when I moved there as a kid. I didn’t know coming from Canada at that time that there could be that many Filipinos outside the Philippines to actually make up a large community. That’s where I spent the majority of my life, and around fellow Filipinos,” Caturay recalled.

As fate would have it, Quema and Caturay both pursued careers in law enforcement, meeting each other in 1999 while serving in San Francisco Police Department (SFPD).

Now good friends and colleagues, these Filipino-Americans describe their meeting as serendipitous because it came at a time when they both felt a strong sense of gratitude toward their parents for giving up the life they knew for their children’s future. Gainfully employed, not just in any job but as highly respected servicemen in the United States, they found common ground in the need to give back to the Philippines, and especially to those who unlike them have little opportunity in life.



“Eric was the first officer and Filipino I met in my career. We kicked around this idea of doing something for the Philippines, outside the exchange trainings with other countries we were already doing in our department,” narrated Caturay.

“Eventually, we sought the help of other Filipinos officers we met along the way, and with Rey Ibay, Dominic Yin, Harry Soulette and Cliff Java, it took us about a good year until we had a stroke of luck in seeing our plan through.”

According to Caturay, a police officer from the Philippines was assigned to SFPD under the exchange training program, who helped connect their group of Filipino-American police with the Philippine National Police (PNP). From there, the six officers strengthened their ties with their Philippine counterpart and started giving back in 2000 with a very specific program with and for Filipino servicemen. Called the Philippine Exchange Training (PET) team under the SFPD, the group first identified ways in which they can directly help the Filipino police.



Signing a formal Memorandum of Agreement with PNP, the primary mission of PET is to present, discuss and share best practices and current trends in policing with members of the Filipino police force with the aim of better serving their respective communities.

According to Quema, PET is completely funded by team members who collect, solicit, purchase and deliver boxes of material donations to police stations, schools and neighborhood groups in the Philippines. And since their first outreach, the project has grown to be a comprehensive exchange training program that enjoys the support of key business groups and the Philippine Congress, besides their donors in the US.

To date, more than \$100,000-worth of goods and materials have been donated or expended during the course of this program.

Founding FALEO

While pouring their efforts into the PET project, the group eventually felt they could do more, not just for members of the PNP and their beneficiary communities, but also for fellow Filipino-Americans in their field.



Besides training Filipino counterpart, FALEO members go the extra mile to bring various donations to public schools and communities in far-flung areas around the country

“Back in 1980, when I became an SFPD officer, the only ethnic fraternal organization was the San Francisco Asian Police Officers Association. Mostly composed of Chinese officers, it did not really further the goals, encourage nor assist Filipinos in getting promoted,” Quema related.



As such, Quema and other Fil-Am officers decided to found a fraternal organization of their own to easily identify with their culture, reach out to help the Filipino community in the vast San Francisco Bay Area, encourage and aid in the promotion of fellow Fil-Am officers, and establish networking and unity rather than division.

“The unfortunate death of our very first Fil-Am SFPD officer Nick Birco in 2007 was the impetus that finally pushed us to form our own Fil-Am group,” Quema remembered a valued colleague.

That same year, Quema, Caturay, SFPD Roel Dilag, Daly City Cliff Valdehuesa and Daly City PD Association's Teresa Ferrer met for the first time in what was to become many formal gatherings to discuss the establishment of the Filipino-American Law Enforcement Officers Association (FALEO).

“Our first call to meet at SFPD Ingleside Station drew an incredible crowd composed of law enforcers from various agencies, and it kept growing from there until FALEO was born in 2008,” Quema related with a hint of pride. Since then, the association has proven to be a dedicated and tireless force in fulfilling their objectives, among them collaborating with the Philippine Consulate to give Fil-Am communities personal safety and domestic violence workshops; raising funds to aid victims of typhoons and other calamities in the Philippines; giving out annual scholarship awards to aspiring criminology students in US regardless of race; and honoring those who make a difference in their communities with humanitarian awards.

Among FALEO's fund raising activities are organizing pistol shoot contests at charities and an annual dinner-for-a-cause for the scholarship fund.

Not abandoning what they started out at SFPD, FALEOs Training and Education division has also adopted the PET program.

Today, PET enjoys the help of volunteers from the police departments of Los Angeles, New York Police, San Diego, Turlock, as well as the Bay Area Rapid Transit Police Department, the California State Department of Justice and the Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, among many others.

One of them was Lawrence Lagarejos, a New Yorker who traces his roots to the Philippines, Samoa and Puerto Rico, and is now Vice President of FALEO.

"I first heard about PET when it was only limited to the SFPD. By 2010 I heard that Lt. Eric opened it up to other agencies outside the Bay Area so I immediately joined the team. I saw it as a great opportunity to help people here in the Philippines and I've been coming over ever since. This year is my ninth tour to date," he said with pride.

Special Agent Lagarejos was law enforcer under the US Department of Justice-Immigration and Naturalization, and worked in the service for 34 years before finally retiring in 2016.

"Give and take"

As the work of FALEO and PET grew in membership and reputation, volunteers outside the police force also started knocking at their door. As such, in 2011 Theresa Mostasisa, a registered nurse, educator and professor, became the first civilian instructor specializing in Basic Life Support to join the team.



Most members look forward to interacting with children in public schools to inspire them to reach for their dreams; thumbs up for a job well-done

Her expertise, combined with those of the law enforces, allowed them to design a new set of presentations and lectures, including fresh ideas on fund-raising for their Philippine outreach.

"Out of donations and our own pockets, we would collect or buy new and reusable second-hand items for donation during our tours to the Philippines," said Quema.

And as their team and ideas grow, so do their hearts for their Philippine mission.

"Every trip is very heartwarming and fulfilling. We all have a job that's really difficult back in the US, but when we see what the PNP has to do here — the same job as ours but with less resources — our hearts really go out to them," shared Lagrejos.

"We realize the things we take for granted — the pieces of equipment given the minute we come out of the academy, the local police don't get that here but they go on as we do and run in to the same dangers. So, it is really a big deal for us when we can help them in any way possible."

Happily, the members of FALEO's PET team further related they aren't the only ones who get to teach their counterparts in the Philippines; they also learn from the PNP.

“The PNP is ahead of us in terms of community policing — they have the barangay concept so there’s actually a lot that we can pick from them. I’d say the relationship that we have is give and take — we learn from them and, hopefully, they learn from us too,” Lagarejos smiled.

Homecoming

For the members of FALEO who take time and effort to implement their projects in the Philippines, the annual program proves to be an enriching experience not only as law enforcers but more as Filipinos.

“I was born in Sampaloc but left for US when I was 10 years old and I never looked back. Our parents pretty much told us to keep moving forward,” Lt. Joey Mercado of the Turlock Police Department, who has been a law enforcer for 24 years, told The Sunday Times Magazine.

“It just felt like there was something amiss in my life so I went looking for something worthwhile to do, as well as connect me with my Filipino roots. FALEO did that all for me. When I joined them in 2015, I found a non-profit organization that truly cares about the Philippine culture. Of course, I enjoy learning from the PNP with our exchange program but I’d have to say that the part I enjoy the most is giving back to the community in the Philippines. It was my first time that year to see the Philippines again after 38 years.”

Talking animatedly about his visits to public schools and hospitals during the outreach, he added, “FALEO became more of a calling for me — it brought me back full circle to my culture and in that sense, I have come home.”

SFPD Officer Robert Padrones who was born in Quezon City before his family migrated to the Golden State shares Mercado’s sentiments.

He related, “The first time I ever came back to the Philippines again was last year when I was invited by Eric to join them. I entered SFPD as a patrol officer in 1995 and was promoted as sergeant in 2005. Along the way I heard about Eric and his program — nothing but good things, really — and when he invited me, I jumped at the opportunity right away and I have to say it was the most gratifying experience I have ever had. That’s why I am back.”

Besides enjoying training with the PNP, he feels most moved when they bring donations to schoolchildren.

“While it’s unfortunate that my father wasn’t around to see me become a police officer — he passed away in 1987 — I know he’s up there looking down on me, smiling at what I am doing now,” Padrones intimated.

True fraternal organization

While FALEO began as a fraternal association for Filipino-Americans, they have already opened their doors to others races and ethnicity.

“Over the years, we have come to recognize the fact that a true fraternal organization keeps opens its doors to everybody or anybody who has the following: one, a good reputation in law enforcement; two, a good heart; and three, anybody who is willing to commit themselves to the mission of FALEO. Since then, we have opened our doors to any officer of any agency, rank and ethnicity,” Quema explained to The Sunday Times Magazine. He then introduced two non-Filipino FALEO members who came to join this year’s PET program in the Philippines.



The first was Robert Nishiyama, a former task force commander of California State's Department of Justice who recalled, "When I was first invited to the group, I said, I'll come by and watch. I had every intention of not coming back — that was eight years ago, and I've been with the program ever since," chuckled the Japanese-American. Today, Nishiyama sits in the board of directors and proudly says that he may be Japanese but he is Filipino by heart.

"Your culture, your people, the friendliness of everyone, the good hearts — these are all the things I strive and love to be. To be Filipino, in my eyes, is a wonderful thing so if I can be a part of it, I'll do it," he enthused.

Chinese-American SFPD's Matthew Leong, meanwhile shared, "FALEO has welcomed me with open arms — they welcome everybody and anybody as long as their hearts are in the right place."

And with that, Quema needed no further proof in summing up the work that FALEO does, no matter how difficult and challenging, be it in the Philippines or for and with Filipino-Americans in the United States.

"This is a labor of love," he ended.

Testimonies

More members of this year's delegation from the Filipino-American Law Enforcement Officers Association (FALEO) and Philippine Exchange Training (PET) team share experiences of giving back and coming home to their roots.

San Francisco PD Officer Francis Feliciano, Sr.

"In 2010, I was invited by Lieutenant Eric Quema to join the group and I fell in love with it the organization. That year was both a great and a bad year for me — great because I was invited to be part of this wonderful program, but bad because I lost my dad also in 2010. Still I'm thankful, the team became a way for me to come home, see my dad and spend some time with him after so many before he passed away four months later."

Feliciano is originally from Morong, Rizal and migrated to the United States when he was just eight years old.

Inspired by the work of FALEO, he went beyond volunteering in 2011 and started a scholarship program out of his own pocket for deserving students in Philippine public schools, which FALEO has now established as a continuing project.

San Francisco PD Retired-Officer Ferdinand Dimapasoc

"I was born in the rural town of San Pascual, Batangas, and lived in a simple bamboo house with no running water or electricity before moving to San Francisco at seven years old. Being here, it gives me a sense of gratitude and appreciation to serve with my brothers in the police force. It warms my heart that I am able to give back to my motherland and the PNP. From here on, I can say I will continue to do this"

Immediately after graduating from high school in the US, Dimapasoc served as a man in uniform, first with the Marine Corp, the Sheriff's Department and finally as police officer. He retired from the police force in 2017.

San Jose PD Retired-Officer Pierre Oliver Vida

"When Lt. Quema first invited me to do PET in 2010, I was not fully into it yet. Finally this year, I decided to join them. It's a great program and I'd say it's very well balanced. In doing police work, sometimes you get a little bit calloused due to the things that you see, which are not the greatest, so PET gives us a nice outlet away from the difficult demands of our jobs."

Born in Parañaque, the young Vida moved to the Bay Area in California with his family in 1982. He entered law enforcement in 1995 first as a reserved officer and eventually as a full-fledged police officer.

San Francisco PD Officer Peter Kent de Jesus

"Because I was born and raised here in Manila, the experience of doing PET in my city feels greater. Now, I have my supportive wife and our two kids here with me and joining the outreach activities of PET, like giving school supplies to other children. The appreciation we get from the beneficiaries gives our family incomparable joy."

Working in law enforcement for 12 years now, de Jesus has always dreamt of becoming a policeman. So when his family migrated to US, then 16-year-old de Jesus already knew the path he wanted to pursue and is proud to be San Francisco police officer.