

President Aquino poses with Rodolfo 'Dolphy' Vera Quizon and his partner Zsa-Zsa Padilla after conferring on the 'King of Comedy' the Grand Collar Order of the Golden Heart award at Malacañang yesterday. WILLY PEREZ

MANILA, Philippines - An award for "national arthritis" is far better than that of a national artist. Take it from 82-year-old Comedy King Dolphy, who was not given the prestigious award following vehement objections from several sectors, but nonetheless became a recipient of the rare "Grand Collar Order of the Golden Heart" award.

"I am not thinking about the national artist award, this is okay with me. I would not mind whether they give me an award or not, I think so many people are against it. I guess it would be better if they just give me a national arthritis (award)," he said, eliciting laughter from reporters who interviewed him at the Rizal Hall at Malacañang.

Dolphy, Rodolfo Vera Quizon in real life, is the second recipient of the award after blind US author Hellen Keller in 1955. The award was established by the late President Ramon Magsaysay in 1954, who, like Mr. Aquino, was also a very popular chief executive.

In an impromptu acceptance speech, Dolphy joked: "I'll treasure this award until my memorial park. Thank you very much. It certainly warms my heart, together with that of my family, friends and supporters."

While waiting for a photo opportunity with the President, the veteran comedian and acknowledged playboy cracked jokes about his extended families.

I have so many children. There are seven others in the US. And I also have children who are in Australia," he said.

There was a long lull, around 15 minutes, after Mr. Aquino administered the oath to several of

his appointed officials, as Quizon's wife, singer-actress Zsa-Zsa Padilla, let the President wait, while Quizon was at the holding room.

The President went to the holding room to fetch Dolphy, and after a few minutes the comedian came out with Zsa-Zsa and sons Epi and Vandolph, among others.

The veteran comedian also volunteered to reporters how he was amazed by the kindness of Mr. Aquino, that even if he endorsed the candidacy of his rival Sen. Manny Villar in the May 10 presidential elections, he still gave him an award.

"The conferment is in recognition of the life achievement of Mr. Quizon, both in terms of his show business career where his comedy has brought joy to millions and his well-known philanthropy and encouragement of charitable and good causes," presidential deputy spokes-person Abigail Valte said.

This includes the Dolphy-Aid para sa Pinoy Foundation, which gives scholarships to children of overseas Filipino workers.

The award gives official recognition to Filipinos or foreigners "who have rendered distinguished services or given noteworthy monetary or other material aid, encouragement to the campaign for the amelioration and improvement of the moral, social and economic conditions of the Filipino masses and for volunteerism in the service of the Filipino masses."

Also yesterday, actor Richard Gomez was sworn in as treasurer of the Congressional Spouses Foundation, along with Quezon City Vice Mayor Joy Belmonte, who stood as president and chair of the organization, being the daughter of Speaker Feliciano Belmonte Jr., a widower.

Gomez is the husband of Leyte Rep. Lucy Torres, an actress-model.