

Fil-Ams honored at TOFA 2017

Written by marilyn abalos

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Group photo. □ (Photo courtesy of TOFA)

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Noteworthy Filipino-Americans were honored at the 7th The Outstanding Filipinos in America (TOFA) Awards at the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York on Oct. 28, 2017.

Fil-Ams from around the country were recognized for their contributions in various fields of excellence in the United States.

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“The roster of TOFA awardees, as Consul General Tess Dizon-De Vega has pointed out, reads like an honor roll of Filipino-American and Filipino achievers,” said Elton Lugay, founder and producer of TOFA.

“I wholeheartedly agree and, every year, the discovery of more and more outstanding Fil-Ams across diverse fields, makes every step in this journey worthwhile,” he said

“I consider TOFA to be one of my life’s biggest blessings, knowing that TOFA awardees inspire Filipinos all over the world with their positive contribution to the community’s rich heritage.”

Fifteen awardees from California, Nevada, Arizona to New York, New Jersey and Washington, D.C. received tributes for their work in the fields of community service & advocacy, arts & culture, women empowerment, senior welfare & advocacy, business & entrepreneurship, healthcare, sports, fashion & style, research & technology, youth, media & publishing, entertainment, courage of conviction, public service & politics and heritage.

The awardees for 2017 were the Honorable Rob Bonta, Bing Branigin, Jon Jon Briones, Sylvia Buhian, Cris Comerford, Jessica Cox, Dr. Noel Fajardo, Rocky Gathercola, Ana Julaton, Filbert Kung, Christina Laskowski, Hazel Sanchez, Sir Francis Sison, Jason Tengo and Amable Yalong.

“I came to know that in many ways it was a crime to be Filipino in California...I feel like a criminal running away from a crime I did not commit. And this crime is that I am a Filipino in America,” Awardee in Sports Ana Julaton cited Carlos Bulosan in her acceptance speech.

“If Carlos Bulosan was here,” the champion boxer and martial artist said, “he would be proud to see the strength of the Filipinos in America. Our Philippine history and culture is in constant connection with our first generation Filipino-Americans. As a community, we have preserved our heritage through adversity and will continue our awareness of what it means to be Filipino...My success has thrived upon standing on the shoulders of the Pinays and Pinoys who came before me. It is our mission to continue to hold hands and unite as a community to pass on this strong foundation to future generations.”

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Indeed the evening was a proud parade of the best of Filipinos in America on center stage.

Testimonies of significant contributions to American society were highlighted.

Acknowledgement and gratitude of parents and trailblazers before us was heartfelt and sincere.

Hope and optimism for the future in our youth rang throughout the awards.

Calls for unity and community resonated the evening.

Youth Awardee Jason Tengco said, “Despite our community’s ideological differences, now is the time more than ever for Filipino-Americans to come together: four million strong. We need everyone’s help to empower the nearly one million young Filipinos who are between the ages of 18 to 34.”

Executive Director of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), he also pointed out that Filipinos needed “to expand and engage our electorate after only 50% of eligible Filipinos voted in 2016 and to defend the nearly 5,000 Filipino DACA recipients whose livelihoods are at stake.”

“I tell stories for a living. And my parents’ story is one I’m most proud to tell,” said Hazel Sanchez, Media & Publishing Awardee.

Sanchez is a general assignment reporter for WCBS-TV in New York.

“Both born and raised in the Philippines with little privilege, they made their dreams to raise a family here in the United States a reality,” said Sanchez.

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“Their strength of character, hard work, resilience, determination and pride is what makes me who I am today. I strive to provide the same inspiration to other young Filipinos, especially my two beautiful daughters Avery and Kenzie. In this era of fake news and assaults on the media, being true to who I am has never been more critical. I am truthful, I am responsible, I am fair, I am all the stories I tell. I am my mother, I am my father, I am Filipino and I am proud.”

Reflecting on TOFA awardees, guest speaker Loida Nicolas Lewis said, “All of them are positive thinkers. They simply do not allow negative thoughts to hamper their efforts to succeed. They have the ‘can do’ spirit.”

Despite challenges and setbacks, she points out that “they consider failure just another teaching moment, something to learn from, which would help them achieve their goal...They do not stay down. They learn from their mistakes and they rise up again. They believe in their mission and they move forward again...In the words of St. Paul to the Romans, ‘All things work together unto good, to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.’”

Guest speaker Consul General Tess Dizon-De Vega presented two challenges to the Fil-Am Community: “Accept, embrace and share the achievements of others Filipinos, Fil-Ams; let us celebrate them even if they are not our own, we should develop collective pride in the strides made by all Filipinos, no more envy, no crab mentality.”

“Let’s level up let’s move forward but let’s set targets, let’s elect councilors, let’s get *Pinoys* on community, school, library, planning boards, let’s support designers for Fashion Week, let’s champion our artists, professionals, IT achievements, and more!”

The Awards night also featured guest speakers, including Katherine Creag, Brendan Flores and Nicolas Caraquel.

Dr. Boy Abunda was the master of ceremonies.