

MEET THE NEW FILCA PREXY FROM SA Ms. Carmen Garcia

Anon Came the Greatest Hope of All

by Mars Cavestany

As a semi-retired educator-theatre actor/director/playwright/multi-media writer and cultural animator, it has always been my dream to discover and mine new emerging talents and future community leaders – specifically shaping their minds and socio-cultural personalities of the younger people I love working with.

Without aiming to throw a wet blanket or putting a damper on the general situation in our community, I feel much mollified having lived here for almost 3 decades. Now having reached my pensionable age of 65, my physical capacities to do what I do best have been limited so that I have concentrated instead on journalistic and creative writing using the power of the pen to continue looking and forever pining that one day I shall stumble upon a goldmine more than the minefield I keep getting entangled into like the proverbial fly caught in a spiders web.

Well don't look now, but my alter-ego from Perth Benny Chan privately messaged me recently during the FILCA annual assembly that was hosted in WA mid-November this year. (I too was supposed to have been invited as a speaker at the Youth Forum but for some reason, it didn't materialize.)

Like me, my soulmate Benny won't easily get excited at somebody or something truly promising as he did in dropping the name Carmen Garcia, the newly elected President of FILCA, the largest and leading umbrella body confederating the Filipino-Australian in Australia.

Agog and anon, came this shooting star, whom I have not even met face to face. But again written communication is more meaningful and spellbinding than verbal diatribes can ever achieve. Without further ado, let's make welcome Carmen Garcia...

Q-1 The initial press release we received about your election as the youngest President ever elected to the national peak body FILCA (Filipino Communities Council of Australia) as well as being "the first Australian-born Filipina to achieve this position", sounds very promising but also quite intimidating and daunting at the same time in view of the amount of work facing you in your 2-year term. May we know your initial reaction to this?

A. It is a big responsibility and not one I entered without due consideration. I don't think my age plays a big factor as my experience and capability in achieving results gives me confidence in my abilities. I know my talent and strengths and also know my weaknesses and have learnt not to be afraid of seeking help when I need it. The bigger challenge is potentially a perception of my commitment to our values and ambitions as a Filipino community. My success and identity is very much built on my culture, it is the reason I am resilient, driven to succeed and have the courage with the right amount of kindness to be a difference maker. I am confident the results I can accomplish for my community over the next two years, this will be the measure for my success and will prove my steadfast commitment to positioning the Filipino community in the minds of decision makers. I hope that the community will back me and support my new way of working. An approach that illustrates there is a different way to do things to achieve different outcomes. Already my first meeting of the FILCCA Executive included induction and orientation to what good corporate governance looks like and my expectations on transparency and compliance. I am clear we cannot have such a privilege to hold office, without assuming all the responsibilities that comes with it. Although we are volunteers, it is so important that we are accountable. I am managing a diligent handover at present. For example at the FILCCA AGM, audited financial statements were not presented due to a range of reasons, in essence they were not completed. This is something I have asked be addressed ASAP to avoid any speculation, and have clarity on a definitive point of transition. I ran a tight ship having held various board positions in the past and presently, and there are just some things that are not negotiable in good governance for me. Nothing is worth the reputational damage poor governance can cause.

Q-2 Please paint us a picture of your background especially in relation to being born and bred as Filipino-Australian and your exposure to your immediate Filipino community in South Australia and the larger Filo community throughout Australia that you are now practically leading and representing? What underpinning Pinoy values were inculcated to you by your parents and how do



Carmen Garcia

you marry them with your Australian upbringing.

A- I was born to a Filipino mother in Adelaide, Australia in 1979. Not soon after, at the age of 2 my L Lola and L Lola moved to Australia to help raise me as my mum carved out her career and re-qualified for the Australian bar as a lawyer. Even though I was born here, I was raised with the language and speak Visaya fluently. I understand Tagalog but my responses always come out in Visaya. As one of the first Filipino families in SA, our home was host to the Sto Nino de Cebu fiesta – I would perform cultural dances, read the rosary and learnt from a young age to be proud of my identity.

My Lola taught me to cook adobo, pansit, pinakbet, and leche plan which are now all staples in my home. Food played a big part in my history. I remember an early experience at primary school, where my lunch comprised of rice and binwad (dried fish) – I remember my classmates looking at me as the smell came flying out of my lunch box – when they all had fritz and sauce sandwiches. This memory is so clear as I remember coming home and telling Lola 'what are you giving me for lunch, everyone thinks I'm different' and she replied 'lets go shopping'. We went to the Asian grocer and bought ingredients to make spring rolls and pansit and the next day I brought it to school to share (before nut allergies was a thing) – everyone loved it and it was a way for me and Lola to talk about our Filipino culture. I felt so proud as everyone complimented our food as delicious!

I also owe my sense of community and volunteering to Lola. At the age of 16 and half when I got my driver's licence and second hand car I would volunteer and drive the elderly Filipino ladies to appointments and shopping – this sense of helping others has clearly shaped who I am today. My Lola always taught me 'to whom much is given much is expected' and this is how I have lived my life.

Over the years, some examples of my involvement include:

- Volunteered to help Filipino students with English
- Established Filipino Youth SA
- Represented Filipino youth on the state Multicultural youth body

- Went on to be the inaugural Vice President for Youth Affairs in FILCCA and led a mission of FILCCA Youth Ambassadors across all states to the Philippines raising money for GK777

- Donated our family land in Bohol in trust to the community to start a social enterprise on the rice fields where they reap what they sow.

- Raised thousands of dollars for the Philippines with a focus on women and children, including raising \$20,000 plus for FILCCA led by myself in 2 weeks in the light of Typhoon Haiyan through my corporate contacts

- Volunteered and facilitated corporate donations to many orphanages in the Philippines



Family life on the farm. "The family lives on a farm in the Adelaide Hills with alpacas, sheep, chickens and a Shetland pony with my husband Adam, daughter Ashlee Aida (6yo) son Cooper Adam (3) and Lola Aida (aka my amazing mum)".



Family photo with Lola and mother in law.

- As a former Vice President Internal Affairs of FILCCA I developed a complaints and grievances policy and procedures, our charter of quality representation and communication protocol with member organisations.
- Supported 457 Filipino workers settle in SA.
- Chaired Filipino Network of SA and delivered a range of projects for women in the Philippines and raised funds.

My involvement is consistent and ongoing, it is not what I do, but who I am. So, it is hard to give you a list of my Pinoy values and as they are inherently part of who I am, which is reflected now in my business and overall purpose in life.

Q-3 At a young age, you must have been exposed to some extremely Filipino cultural traits that have become pejoratively common perception and angst amongst us e.g. tendency towards "kampi-kampi, kanya-kanya, tayo-tayo, sila-sila" amongst one too many Filipino organizations often regarded as a blight or deterrent to achieving unification not only within the Filo communities in each state but more so interstate. How do you intend to counteract this mentality?

A. Factions exist everywhere. I know to overcome perceptions of this I need to build trust. I do not have a negative view of this and understand relationships are important, all I ask, as I did in the election is people look to merit and make informed decisions in the best interest of community – I am confident our leaders will do this and my results will galvanise support for my genuine ambition for our community.

Q-4 In this regard, again, we welcome with such great expectations that which you may please allow us to quote from your press release: that your "consultative style yet strong vision and priorities will no doubt challenge some conventional thinking" Can we go into actual definitions here on what your visions and priorities will be and how exactly your "consultative style" achieve these vaunted goals?

A. There were some key calls to action from the FILCCA AGM, I must take forward, one being the need to advocate for honorary consuls to be of Filipino descent. This is not to say our current incumbents are not doing a great job, we have some amazing advocates, but it is perceived that there is little faith in our own people and questions as to why we do not seek consuls from our own community. I will be formally raising this matter and ask that due consideration be given based on merit

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to those who meet the requirements and come from our own community.

A seat at the table is something I am striving for our community. As the sixth largest ethnic group in Australia, it upsets me that our contribution as a community is not fully recognised. I aim to seek funding and investment in quantifying the contributions Filipinos have made to Australia for over 100 years since our first settlers arrived, both economically and socially. I believe we have an important story to tell, and this means raising awareness among the wider community not just among ourselves.

Along the same lines creating a stronger and more positive image of our kababayans is very important to me. I want to engage the wider community to have speakers at our conference made up of local Filipino heroes, success stories that shine a light on our entrepreneurs, innovators, social champions and more. In contradiction to the trends with our consuls, when it comes to engaging experts at FILCCA conferences we look outside and not within our own community.

I will have many calls to action and want to truly be representative, already I have meetings booked with state organisations to hear their views so I can help activate their vision as well as my own. Collective impact can only be achieved if there is a shared vision and this is where I need to start.

Q-5 Where lies your personal interests and inclinations? Have you any conceptual projects in mind that somehow gives expression to such whilst aiming towards greater reach for the wider Filipino community?

A. It's the same as above, at the moment I am on a listening tour but ask me after my first 100 days as President and I can better articulate a plan that is well informed.

Q-6 Notice that the Philippines, despite being one of the top sources of migrants to Australia, do not have any Filipino migrant or true-blue Aussie born politician in the upper rung of Australian political arena. If given the opportunity, would you consider jumping into the fray?

a. Not at this time. I have a six year old daughter and 3 year old son. They are my priority and I know what the cost to them would be of public life. In fact, I have run for federal parliament previously as I was preselected for the Federal Seat of Adelaide in 2013 for the Liberal party. (not sure you want to highlight this as I need to work with ALP too for the good of the community, so I suggest it shouldn't even be mentioned in your

publication) But want to be honest with you.

What I have learnt as a long term advocate for culturally diverse communities, is that influence can take many forms and sometimes true change and influence can be more effective from the side line.

Q-7 As Founder and Managing Director of national award-winning Diversity and Inclusion firm, Community Corporate who works with the Australian business sector in corporate social responsibility, you're supposed to have helped hundreds of refugees and migrants across Australia access work and pursue their small business dreams. Will you expound on these more and demonstrate to us how you may be able to extend this to the Filipino community at large. If at all possible?

A. My Australia-wide diversity and inclusion firm operates in the niche space of corporate social responsibility. We design and activate innovative solutions that make a profound economic and social impact. Community Corporate successfully delivers sustainable public, private and community partnerships to meet business imperatives that boost productivity, increase market share and build workforces that reflect the diversity of their consumers. I have used this influence to have product donated to the orphanages in the Philippines from my corporate partners already as an example.

Community Corporate is the national provider for Woolworths' Refugee Employment Program. The partnership with Woolworths, is this year a national finalist in the Australian Human Rights Awards. (To be announced in December 2018.) We are also working with other companies such as Spolless, Cosia Group, Workskill Australia, Agilyx, HTN, Calvary Care, Federal and State Governments. In the last year alone, Community Corporate has assisted over 300 migrants and refugees, long term unemployed and youth into work and to pursue small business endeavours from over 50 different cultural backgrounds across Australia with a strong focus on refugees and migrants. To date we have already advised and supported over 19 individual Filipinos in small business in SA.

My regional employment work in particular, also lends itself to job opportunities, should Filipinos be interested then by all means I encourage them to contact my team via communitycorporate.com.au. Our model is employer-led so our client defines the opportunities and we match and align candidates

seeking work to demonstrate competence beyond the pages of a resume to reduce the disadvantage of lack of local experience.

In 2018, Community Corporate was recognised as the State Winner for the Economic Development Award, SA Governor's Multicultural Awards for an organisation that has made an outstanding contribution to improving the economic status of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Q-8 Talking of dreams, would you like to share with us your dream as a leader of a better Filipino community in Australia? How would you go about transforming such dream or dreams into reality within your time parameter?

A. I will simply lead by example - I am one to under promise and over deliver....but stay tuned I'm just getting started. Ask me after my first 100 days what I have done as my actions will speak much more than my words.

Q-9 Have you any fears, frustrations or sad experiences dealing with the Filipino community? How did you confront them before and now should they reappear and tend to blur, block, or burden your way?

A. Transparency is key. Already I was asked for advice on a state grievance matter since my election. I believe as long as we follow due process and transparency, any perceptions and issues can be addressed. I have faith in my community, we are all volunteering to serve, but we are human and personalities can play a part in conflict. I do not like conflict, like most but I am not afraid of it. I believe we can't fix a secret, so I'd rather know the problem and tackle it head on then be consumed by hearsay. I will not shy away from working to resolve any issues that arise, I have the courage and conviction to not shy away from the hard decisions that may need to be made.

Q-10 It's customary for this writer to end these featured interviews with a parting shot. What is your own personal message to our PCHN readers?

A. I am grateful for the honour to serve my community. I take this role with the utmost responsibility it deserves, and I will not measure my success or failure on those who walked before me, but run my own race, play to my strengths and will remember why I am here - for all of us!

I do have an agenda, and it is simply to ensure my children and all Filipinos living in Australia can hold their heads up high in declaring our proud identity and the contributions we have made to Australia as Pinoy-Australians!

Well beloved readers, before closing, I'd like to tickle your funny bones as well as fire your imaginations even more by sharing Ms. Garcia's latest lovely email:

“SAMUT-SAMOT-SIMUT-SIMOT” (Cobwebs and Flying Ants) by Norma Hennessy ... From Page 23

lounge in the morning after their group's arrival in Adelaide. I found Joey's enigmatic skill with words just as entertaining as it was disarming. He was engagingly well informed. Lighthearted and highly-in tune with the world around him.

After all, he is not just an institutional 'notable' in the Philippines' music, art and culture scene, he comes from an artistic lineage blessed with excellent DNA.

The mixture of elements of blues, jazz, rock, folk and pop of his style gave his music its very own integrity and a dose of refreshing uniqueness that wowed audiences in his two successive engagements.

His band's two day performances were enthusiastically applauded. The music had a universal timelessness that appealed to the receptive crowd of young people, families and elderly that filled up the venue on the Saturday, November 3. Children danced to the music, parents sipped wines listening under makeshift outdoor umbrellas, people sang-along between bites and diners in the nearby festival theatre's riverside café tapped their feet drinking steaming coffee.

The acoustics reverberated effectively over the landscape and faded off across the Turrets to the Adelaide Oval, drawing more crowd into the venue. The sound was perfect, belying an initial crucial problem that had faced them on arrival. The soundboard of Joey's guitar has lifted while in flight into Adelaide. He has

reared a temporary 'fall-back' guitar but he put it on stand-by. He preferred to use his original one which he has temporarily mended with black duct tape.

At one point of the band's performance, Lou Blinco and Ben Hur Winter from the Adelaide Filipino community unexpectedly rose from the crowd. Inspired by the waft of euphoria that swept over the atmosphere, the two stepped out in front and grasping the magic of the moment, started dancing to the delight of the audience. It was poetry in motion. They synchronized their impromptu interpretative dance routine deftly to the band's haunting music triggering heartfelt thoughts of cultural pride. Philippine honorary consul, Darryl Johnson who was seated on the grass with the crowd in front of the stage was seen proudly beaming and applauding the longest.

Given the band's magnificent initial performance, Joey's fans from the Filipino community and his admirers from the mainstream audience braved the stormy weather the following day to watch the band's second gig. The band featured as the finale of the riverside event. Rain or shine, they impressively put out a splendid closing.

JOEY AYALA'S MUSIC

The lyrics of his songs were insightful, often anecdotal and deferential of people's cultural traditions, social norms and beliefs.

The potency of his Tagalog compositions which he introduced and translated into English and then sang to rhythmic notes that seemed to echo straight from nature's depth and haunted cooves, patently stoked recollections of forgotten quirks that were once dominant in lives that

have gone by.

As his music paid tribute to nature, its bounty and its correlation with the pristine core of humanity, it also graciously exalted that which is raw, simple and ordinary.

His music touched a universal chord, drawing a wholesome cohesive reaction and admiration from the Australian audience that was comprised of varied cultural ethnicities.

A quick research brought up an impressive trove of revelations. He has been a newspaper features editor, marketer, artistic director and member of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. He is currently chairman of the Filipino Composers Development Cooperative and president of the Bagong Lumad Arts Foundation, Inc.

He has written about a hundred ingenious compositions - a number that he self-deprecatingly considered minuscule compared to those of other composers and song writers. He credits rock music of the 70s as his influence, along with jazz, blues, folk and pop of later years.

His compositions have been used for musical scores in films and sound tracks in theatre plays. The use of his work in schools dovetails to his culture-relevant pilot Corebook project titled "Palay, Bigas, Kaniin" (PBK).

Many of his work used in school stage plays are pro bono. He does not have the heart to charge students knowing the economic struggle that artists most often go through. He performs with equal relish to a wide variety of audiences, from cosmopolitan music

elites, culture-sensitive artists, students, rural folks and the general public.

On the subject of inspiration in his work, he spoke of having variety of interests early in life.

Faced with such variety, "There is magic in clutter," he says where skill development comes into play. He believes in developing skill first rather than depending on inherent raw talent. He spoke about deriving inspiration from developed skill; about gaining confidence and achieving excellence. "With developed skill, I know that I will be inspired, so I can do. You can invite inspiration with skill because skill makes the 'doing' effortless".

JOEY THE ARTIST, MUSICIAN AND CULTURAL WORKER

Joey writes and sings his own songs. His themes are as varied as his inspirations. Listening to him talk in his light-banter style, I learned that Joey was born in Bukidnon. He was named Jose Inigo Homer Lacambra Ayala III, being the third Jose Ayala in the family line. His parents "eloped to Los Baños" when he was a year old. "It was a case of rich boy, poor girl story", he said, of his parents' marriage and of why he spent his early childhood in Laguna.

The romantic nuances that came with the mention of 'elope' tickled bearwarming stories of youthful 'first loves'; tales of love moving mountains; stories of devotion; and sagas of pains and glories with happy endings. With the gifted Ayalas, it was a blessed beginning. Individually and as family, they successfully established their leadership and respected niche in the field of arts, humanities and culture.

His father, Jose V. Ayala Jr. (deceased) was a poet, a Palanca Awardee fiction writer and a painter. He was fiction editor for the Philippine Free Press for years. Jose Ayala Jr.'s paintings can be found in the National Museum collection as well as in private collections.

His mother is the acclaimed writer, poet and painter Tita Lacambra Ayala. She was an Ilocuana born in Sarat, Ilocos Norte. She was a Palanca awardee twice and a recipient of several other prestigious awards and citations in poetry, literature and creative writing - a fact, no doubt, that served as challenge and inspiration to Joey.

Joey is the eldest of six. His siblings are - David, Cynthia, Monica, Fernando and Laura. His brother, Fernando, is also a poet. His sister, Cynthia Alexander (nee Cynthia Veronica Ayala) is a celebrated guitarist, singer-songwriter and a globe-trotting indie artist based in the US.

With parents of such stature, it is reasonable to expect weight of their influence over their children. Likewise, the culture influences which might have helped direct Joey's views and perception of the world but which could have been latent in his growing up years, would have been a blend of Philippines' North and that of the archipelago's South.

In his Linked-In page, he identifies himself as artist and a cultural worker, referring to himself as "Mandiriva". The term is a play-on-words for "mandirigma" - a vernacular for warrior, which by itself includes being a protector and defender. "Mandiriva" contextually translates as 'exponent of consciousness and awareness' - a fitting title to a passionate advocate for culture, humanity and environ-

mental preservation.

With excellent art and literary genetics, it was logical that he followed the steps of his parents.

He pursued similar interests as theirs, but with a twist. He blended music into the mix. His initial interest in music was piqued by a Silverstone acoustic guitar that his father acquired. But he reckoned that early on, he was not quite encouraged to seriously pursue his music interest and that it must have been because it was commonly believed that music was economically a no-goer for a living. He pursued it nonetheless.

He became a multiple recipient of various honors and awards. The Benigno S. Aquino Jr Award for Social Artistry in 2007, particularly summed up the reason for the icon that he has become and for the institutional stature which he holds to this day. "Joey Ayala has taught the young generations through his well-celebrated songs, the essence of communion and community, of compassion and service, and of human dignity. He exemplified through his most ordinary actions what it means to be a man of God and a man for others..."

Other notable recognition he has received included: Fr Neri Saur Award for Environmental Heroism, 2009; Best Musical Score- Cine Malaya, 2008; Musical Intelligence Award, 2007; Datu Bago Award; 61st Araw ng Dabaw Special Philippine Centennial Citation; Special MAGIS Award for Outstanding Alumni, Ateneo de Manila; Gawad ng Pagkilala, Awit Award - multiple honoree and many others. He was also once nominated to the "Ten Outstanding Young Persons of the World" by Junior Jaycees Chamber International.

Joey is married to Maria Jessie Sorongon, a fellow artist. They have two boys. They live in Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines.