

On My Mind
3/30/07

There once was a song about being "bewitched, bothered, and bewildered." Well, I'm not bewitched, but I was certainly bothered and bewildered by the coverage given by the CNMI's two local newspapers to the meeting between the Filipino community and Department of Interior's Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Insular Affairs David Cohen this past Sunday afternoon.

Did anyone who wasn't there know that Cohen used not one but several Filipino phrases throughout the meeting - much to the appreciation of those in attendance?

Did anyone who wasn't there know that Cohen spontaneously conducted an informal poll of attendees so that he could better understand the composition of the audience?

Did anyone who wasn't there know that Cohen asked - when formal questioning by the panel wore down - for individuals from the audience to tell him their story so he could get a better idea of the specific nature of their concerns?

Did anyone who wasn't there know that several of the Filipino speakers said they were not interested in taking over the place, in political power - that all they wanted was job security and the freedom to accompany their American citizen children off-island to compete in athletic events, for medical attention?

Aren't those facts? Legitimate pieces of news? Isn't it the purpose of the press to keep its readers informed? To help readers grasp not only reporters' sense of hot topics, but also some of the context, the setting, the proceedings?

Maybe cable tv reported those things - its reporter was also there. But some of us don't have tv. It's been said before, but based on their reporting of this event, it seems clearer than ever that one cannot rely on the newspapers to stay informed as to what is happening around the CNMI.

Other examples abound. Neither newspaper reported on the fact that the JROTC members stood in the hot sun for two hours during the Covenant Day observance at the Court of Honor in Memorial Park last Friday, and that an elaborate system had apparently been worked out ahead of time to relieve them, one by one, as needed. Or took a picture of the poor cadets who spent a lot of the time with the flag wrapped around their head and shoulders - because to remove it would have meant breaking their positions.

Neither newspaper reported on Rota's fishing derby, held the first week-end in March.

Neither newspaper reported that the summit meeting of regional chief executives held here last week was open to the public. Nor have they explained why a second summit will be held this year. Or why Yap's leader was expected, but not other FSM leaders; why Palau's governor attended but the Republic of the Marshall's did not.

Neither paper has reported that the governor has appointed the Senate President, the House Speaker and the Attorney General to the 902 talks.

Nor are the local papers the only ones guilty of such omissions. The *Pacific Daily News* (referred to by some as the Pathetic Daily News, by others as the Guam Daily News) did not carry a single word about either the XTERRA or the Tagaman competitions last week-end, even though Guamanians were among the participants in both.

The death of four Korean students at Forbidden Island earlier this week is indeed tragic, and I offer the families my condolences. But shutting down access to Forbidden Island will neither bring them back to life, nor prevent a similar accident in the future. The best way to avoid such accidents is to teach every single person on island how to swim; to inculcate in each and every one of them the understanding that the ocean is a foreign environment for human beings, and the need, therefore, to treat the ocean with respect; to make sure every one has an understanding of ocean, wave, and reef systems.

The lesson, if you will, that could be taken from this tragedy is that the CNMI needs a better system of water safety programs, from posters, signs and flyers in the language of resident and tourist alike to life guards to curriculum development for the schools. These victims were students, but the CNMI has also seen a number of tourists - and residents - lose their lives in the surrounding waters.

Maybe its time to develop a state-wide park system that would, among other things, provide park rangers at all tourist sites and take on the responsibility for educating and protecting both residents and tourists who make use of the many facilities the CNMI offers. Such a system could be supported by park and/or site entry fees. It would, admittedly, take some education to persuade local residents that they would now be expected to pay to access certain of the island's beaches (the lagoon - except around Managaha - might be excepted) but in exchange they'd get better protection, and the CNMI would get a better reputation as a safe island resort - at least as far as its waters were concerned.

Whatever action is taken by either legislators, the Marianas Visitors Authority or the private sector in reaction to the past week's tragedy, let us hope it takes into consideration the bigger picture, the longer time frame, and is not simply a knee-jerk reaction.

Short takes:

There's more than one way to make one's voice heard. For example, while no law has yet passed officially establishing the Garapan fishing basin as the site for an island-wide farmer's market, in actuality, there is now a market in place there one day a week. From three p.m. until nine p.m. on Tuesdays, farmers are bringing their produce to the Garapan fishing basin, together with ready-made foods and other items for sale to the general public. That's a toe-hold. Now all that is needed is for everyone to patronize the Tuesday market, and if it becomes popular enough.....

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For anyone who wondered why Dr. Dela Cruz now is able to euthanize dogs but not cats (another fact the newspaper could have told its readers but didn't) it's because, according to Dr. Dela Cruz, the medication he was sent clearly states that it is to be used only on dogs, not cats. He said he is trying to find a source for medication approved for use with cats.

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It seems timely to suggest that maybe new ways should be sought for memorializing people who have passed away other than naming buildings after them, or roads. Often such changes become costly, when not only existing signs have to be changed, but also logos, letterheads, stamps, and who knows what else. It may become difficult to find appropriate

buildings, or road sites. One alternative could be to plant one or more trees. Trees can last up to a hundred years or more. They are good for the environment - taking up carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. Depending on the kind of trees, they provide fruit and shelter - to birds, people, insects, geckos. They provide shade - a nice place to sit and remember others, as opposed to sitting at a cross-road under a road sign. And for identification, one could always add a plaque (best set in concrete so it isn't stolen). It might even be possible to establish a memorial garden/park, so that whenever people wanted to memorialize an individual, they'd have a place to plant one or more trees, flowers, or shrubs for doing so. Could make for an interesting botanical garden, after a while!

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I find the emphasis on test scores for teachers to satisfy the PRAXIS requirements a little disquieting. I realize funding is an issue - that the tests are given to qualify for particular federal grants. But before teachers are punished for not passing those tests, it seems to me that other less tangible factors should also be considered. PRAXIS exams cannot judge a teacher's ability to share a love of learning, a teacher's ability to motivate and inspire students or control a classroom, a teacher's ability to help students relate to and understand and participate in both the micro- and the macro-worlds in which they find themselves. Surely that is also important? An academic can pass a test, but it takes much more to be a good teacher.

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Can't help wondering where the *Marianas Variety* got its "new" comics from. Did you ever see such an assortment of weird creatures? I haven't been able to relate to any of them.

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While one can't rely on the local papers for full, accurate news accounts, at least they provide, selectively, timely, informative, thought-provoking and sometimes downright amusing commentaries on their editorial pages from nationally by-lined as well as local writers. The *Variety's* are quite conservative in nature; the *Saipan Tribune's* the more liberal. The *Trib* also features highly readable weekly comment by economist Ed Stephens, ever-encouraging words from self-proclaimed Saipanpreneur Walt Goodridge, and useful business tips from the Villanueves, among others.

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It's been reported that the administration has hired a "Covenant consultant" to block legislation that would extend federal immigration law to the CNMI. I guess a consultant could hold two jobs at once, so maybe it's Howard Willens? Or could Dr. Jesus Camacho have re-surfaced? Or maybe it's Rudy Pamintuan's firm? Speculation is such fun!

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Last but not least, my apologies for sending two copies of the column last week. I'm still not sure how that happened.

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New movies: "Meet the Robinsons," PG, and rated third by <www.rottentomatoes.com > reviewers (out of five in the "newly opened" category); and "Blades of Glory, ranked fourth by "rottentomatoes" reviewers, and which, contrary to the ad in the *Variety*, is not PG but PG-13. Of the rest, four are among the five current box-office hits. Total: 4 PG's, 1 PG-13, and 3 R's.