

On My Mind  
8/19/11

The act was so rare as to leave one struggling to find a word for it; perhaps the closest being "affront" (an open or intentional insult) or perhaps "outrage" (an act grossly offensive to decency...), though neither one quite describes the enormity of the disrespect reflected in the governor's leaving the Lt. Governor in charge on the day of the Lt. Governor's wife's funeral - and on the most trying, private grief days immediately preceding and following the funeral. Words to define the act come easier: Shameful. Shocking. Unfeeling.....

It might be understandable if the governor had faced some dire emergency of his own. But this was not the case. The governor left the CNMI to travel to Alaska, to give a speech. If the speech could not be postponed - and it could not - it was to be given at a conference - the governor could have sent a representative to give his speech for him. But he did not.

He could have designated the next in line, the president of the Senate, as acting governor in his absence - acknowledging the Lt. Governor as "unavailable" - as provided for in the CNMI Constitution. But he did not.

The observance of death in this largely Roman Catholic community is a well-known ritual, and it is widely respected by everyone, regardless of his/her faith. That a person in so public an office would disregard those rituals, impose such an intrusive demand on a bereaved spouse, had been unthinkable - until now.

One more shortcoming in the CNMI's nominal leader.

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On a sharply contrasting note, the audience at Congressman Gregorio Kilili Sablan's town meeting earlier this week had nothing but praise for the Congressman and his efforts on behalf of the people of the CNMI. Every speaker praised Kilili for his hard work, for his successes in obtaining help and satisfaction, for the time and energy he spends in trying to obtain maximum benefits for the CNMI from the federal government.

Conspicuously absent from the town hall meeting were 18 members of the House of Representatives, all nine members of the Senate, to

whom Kilili had extended a special invitation. Only Representatives Ray N. Yumul and Joseph M. Palacios, both Republicans, accepted the invitation.

Kilili reported on several efforts underway through his office: establishment of a national guard for the CNMI, increases in Medicaid funding, in Title 1 funding for the public school system, a proposed wild life stamp that would fund conservation....

He explained again that his H.R. 1466, introduced in the U.S. Congress, does NOT give anyone the right to vote, does not make anyone eligible for food stamps, does not make anyone eligible for medicaid. All it does is enable certain specific categories of people otherwise overlooked in current law to lawfully remain in the CNMI. as permanent residents. He debunked the administration's claim that his bill would apply to 11,000 or more foreign workers.

According to Government Accounting Office statistics, he said, the number is no more than 4,000.

He brought a wealth of information with him - copies of bills he has introduced regarding submerged lands, a national guard for the CNMI, food stamps, among others; correspondence regarding medicare coverage, the AYUDA (Assuring You Uniform Dietary Assistance) act; pamphlets on Social Security, on career choices for students; a very helpful list of members of the 17<sup>th</sup> Legislature, together with their pictures, phone and fax numbers.....

In light of the administration's roadblocks to increased federal funds for the CNMI, Kilili appealed to his audience to help him dispel the false information being disseminated, to help him reach out to the general public, to help him bring understanding - or at least a willingness to dialogue - to the remaining members of the legislature. One person he said, cannot do it alone.

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It is widely believed that an educated citizenry is the key to progress, and it is therefore totally appropriate that hundreds of thousands of dollars are awarded to CNMI students each year to help them earn post-secondary degrees. What does not seem quite so appropriate is that much of this money is awarded as a "stipend" or allowance to anyone who enrolls in college and maintains a 2.5 average, whether they need it or not, and regardless of their field of study.

Within the Saipan Higher Education Financial Assistance framework, this stipend is called a grant-in-aid, and distinguished from scholarships - which SHEFA also awards. Just how the program works is not clear. The published regulations provide a list of priorities: undergraduates in identified priority fields; graduate students in identified priority fields, advanced degree students in identified priority fields and lastly, all other residents of Saipan who qualify as new or returning students. The "identified priority fields" are pretty inclusive - listing most white-collar professions.

A statement elsewhere in the regulations reads, "Scholarship is a type of financial assistance that is available to a student from Saipan pursuing post-secondary education based on financial need, academic achievement and other established criteria. A second type of assistance ...is one in which a student pursues a field of study that has been identified ...as a priority field of study....a third type ...is based on academic performance...."

SHEFA funds come from poker machines, and with the declining revenue, there's been talk of eliminating incentive scholarships and those awarded on the basis of field of study. It is not clear whether this means that more emphasis will be placed on the traditional criteria for scholarship: financial need, academic achievement, "well-roundedness," or on its "grants-in-aid."

SHEFA's board is apparently in the process of re-examining its policies - not an enviable task, but certainly a much-needed one! Let us hope that more clarity will ensue, as well as a more conventional view of its purposes.

There is also a CNMI Scholarship Board within the Office of the Governor. Apparently, it also offers "grants-in-aid" rather than scholarships in the traditional sense of the word. Perhaps it too should re-examine its purpose!

One could argue, of course, that keeping students in college keeps them off the street, and keeps them from flooding the employment market, which is already over-flowing, so to speak. But that, in turn raises the question of whether there aren't more cost-effective ways of achieving the same ends.

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Short takes:

The litany is that the Japanese are the CNMI's biggest, most important tourism market. But that market is declining. What are

growing are the Korean, Chinese and Russian markets. Instead of "flogging a dead horse," as the saying goes, continuing to put money and effort into promoting, one way or another, the Japanese market, shouldn't the CNMI be nurturing and encouraging the segments of tourism that are growing? How about some profiles of Korean tourists? Publishing a short pronunciation guide of important Korean, Chinese and Russian words? Offering talks on Korean, Chinese and Russian history and culture? Finding ways to make these new additions to CNMI's tourism feel welcome, comfortable?

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Maybe the Marianas Visitors Authority should think about hiring someone to sell tourism to the CNMI, instead of, or in addition to, someone selling the CNMI to other countries? Everyone is told to make tourists welcome, but it's rather haphazard. There are few concrete suggestions, no follow-ups, no organized or consistent programs for doing so.

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If former Marianas High School principal Craig Garrison is serious about re-employment with the Public School System, one would expect that he'd want to withdraw his suit against the system, as well as apologize for his public criticisms of the Commissioner and of PSS. So far, there've been no signs of either.

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The Marpi sidewalk/pathway is turning green! Not a positive green in the sense of energy conservation, but a negative green in the sense of sprouting greenery - weeds, grass, beginning trees. It's been a while since the path has been cleaned, and the lack of maintenance and upkeep is clearly evident. As has been suggested before, sections of the path could be "auctioned" off to civic-minded groups, individuals, companies for upkeep and maintenance, with the reward being the right to post a sign, "these n miles of the path maintained by x." It works along highways on the mainland. There's no reason it couldn't work on the Marpi path....