

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

AUGUST 2007

145-60 Helma Avenue, Hamilton, Ohio 45013 USA

www.mekongcircle.org

WELCOME TO THE 17 TH ISSUE OF OUR NEWSLETTER !

We carry sad news in this issue – the passing of Jovito J. Naranjo, Jr., —“Mang Vitoy” to many of us who knew him. And many did know him very well because in the 18 years that he devoted to OB Laos, he was the Project Manager for most of that time. Hence it can be said that for 400-plus OB volunteers, our lives at one time intersected with Mang Vitoy. We had emailed to all an obituary the day after he died July 10. It is reprinted inside.



A few weeks earlier, we had emailed an obituary on Danny Torres. That triggered news of others who died recently – Danny Infante, Cesar Leyran, Juan Ilaw – among them. As we get more details, we will post them to you. Their passing underlines the ageing of a large part of our membership. We were in our twenties and thirties in Laos. Today, as we mark our 60s and 70s, there is no more compelling reason to join our next reunion before, as one poet said “we shed our mortal coils.”

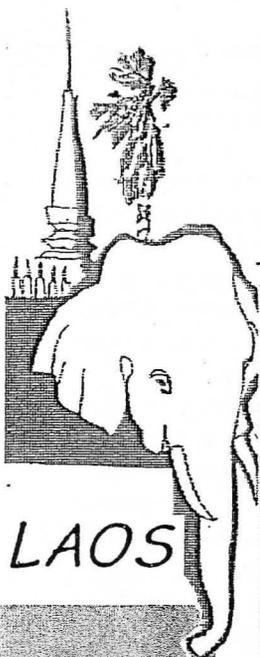


We were in Manila last June as we witnessed shops stock up on school supplies, malls string up back-to-school sale placards. The streets within the so-called “university belt” sprouted “Bed Space Available” flyers on electric posts. Mekong Circle can bask in some satisfaction to know that as the school year opened, we enter the fourth year of our Iskolars Ng Mekong educational project. It began and remains a modest effort, but a big step up the lives of its beneficiaries. It is entirely sustained by your donations. We describe what it has accomplished inside this issue. Some measure of credit is due to its coordinator Red del Rosario who shepherded this effort from the beginning. His committee needs your continuing support to keep it going and to expand the number of Iskolars.



We enclose with this issue a survey form to help us plan our 2008 Manila Reunion. Yes it's 17 months away. But reunions require a multitude of details to attend to. Go and ask the organizers of the last six events. This time around, the first across outside the USA, we'll need a longer lead time. So stop whatever you're doing now, fill out the form, and mail it today. We made it easier for you by enclosing a self-addressed envelope. Your response is vital to insure another memorable get-together.

Comments on this issue : Email fuentecila@aol.com
Past issues can be viewed and printed from www.mekongcircle.org. Click on “Reports”



LAOS

Our
2008
Reunion
will be
in
Manila,
The
Philippines
on
Nov.
7, 8 & 9.
Hold
these
dates!

VIToy NARANJO: PIONEERING OB LEADER Was 78

Jovito J. Naranjo, Jr., one of the few remaining Operation Brotherhood-Vietnam veterans who made the transition to OB Laos and served in both countries from beginning to the end of the programs, died July 10, 2007 in Jaro, Iloilo City. He succumbed to cancer at the age of 78.

Mang Vitoy as he was called, first joined OB in Vietnam in April 1955 as its Personnel and Operations Officer, then functioned in the same capacity when the program transferred to Laos in January 1957. Beginning in 1962, when he was named Project Manager, he was the overall supervisor of an operation that at any one time consisted of 130 Filipino professionals providing public health and community services in Laos. By the time the program ended in 1975, more than 400 personnel — doctors, nurses, social workers, agriculturists, nutritionists, engineers and administrators — had served in Laos, in 12 of its 16 provinces. Its six hospitals in various parts of the country had a combined capacity of 370 beds.

As a field administrator, Mang Vitoy helped set up most if not all of the provincial outposts and closely supervised all aspects of their activities. This included cultivating relationships with Lao officials from village heads and governors to Ministers as well as with administrators of the U.S. Agency For International Development — Laos. USAID began funding the Laos program beginning in July 1963. Previously it was supported by the Philippine and Lao Jaycees. His hands-on style of management endeared him to the Filipino volunteers and to the 600 Lao support staff.

To prepare for the transfer to Laos, Vitoy was instructed to look for the first provincial sites to assign incoming medical personnel. Thus began a three-month epic journey that took him across several provinces of the Buddhist and animist Kingdom. It can be said he may have been the first Filipino to set foot on these isolated towns. At each stop by plane (the only way to reach each site) he would confer with Lao officials and do a survey. Christmas eve of December 1956 found him stranded in the northern town of Nam Tha. The "Beaver" plane pilot that brought him there could not find the heavily fogged in airstrip to fetch him out. He passed the night on the upper floor of a police station, the loneliest Christmas he ever spent, he said. (The fog lifted the next day for his return to Vientiane).

When Mel Granada, OB-Vietnam and OB-Laos' first project manager invited Vitoy to join OB Vietnam, he introduced him to Oscar Arellano, the Jaycee officer who launched the Vietnam program. After the interview, Oscar asked: "When can you leave?" At that time, Vitoy was assistant executive secretary-treasurer of Inter-Island Labor Organization in Iloilo City, the Philippines. Negotiating labor disputes with industrial companies honed the skills that became necessary later on in Laos.

Smoothing personnel relations among and between a multinational (Filipino, Lao, Thai, Vietnamese) multi-professional set of employees was a key demand in running the program. Indeed, keeping the volunteers harmoniously working for months on end while living under one roof in remote outposts was crucial to management success. Aus-

tere, if not hazardous, working conditions were also factors to contend with. During his 18 years in Laos, ten OB Filipinos lost their lives. The Kingdom honored his Laos services when the King conferred upon him the Order of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol of Laos with the rank of Chevalier on February 1965. In 1963 he was a nominee among the Ten Outstanding Young Men (TOYM) awarded by the Jaycees

"There are personnel incidents, too numerous, that are not described in that book" he told his wife Joji, an OB nurse, referring to "Filipinos In Laos", an account of the exploits of the 900 Filipinos who by the mid-1960s composed the largest expatriate community in Asia.

When all foreign agencies which employed the Filipinos left Laos in 1975 after the takeover of the country by the Pathet Lao, Vitoy received several offers to tap his experience. One came from a Saudi Arabian-based company to manage a shipborne hospital. Another was a consular job in Bangkok. An unusual request, said Joji, came from a Filipino United Nations official to help conduct a UN agricultural program to replace opium poppy growing in the "Golden Triangle" region where the borders of Laos, China and Burma intersect.

Heeding Joji's appeal that it was time to settle in the Philippines and spend more time with their children, Vitoy rejected the offers. Joji and their children (all boys from a year to three years old) had joined Vitoy in Vientiane from 1962 to 1967 before returning to Iloilo where Vitoy stayed for two months after every two years in Laos.

Back to his Jaro hometown, Vitoy plunged into community service, joining the local Lions chapter, and then the Jaycees. They installed a water system for a barrio school. In the busy Plazoleta Gay street circle of the city stands a Jaycee monument inscribed with passages from the Jaycee international creed ("... the brotherhood of man transcends the sovereignty of nations...") He also helped manage the family-owned fishpond business. He served as Treasurer for ten years of the Iloilo Fish Producers Association, consisting of about 200 producers from the whole island of Panay.

At 3:30 in the afternoon of each day after several sets of tennis with his friends, they gather for beer and grilled bangus (milkfish) from his ponds. He was playing up to two months before he fell sick. Two months after a quadruple bypass heart operation in 2000, he was on the tennis courts of the National Food Authority. Tall (five feet nine), white-haired and with a permanent tan sheen, he appeared at every U.S. reunion of Mekong Circle, including the sixth one in Florida-Bahamas in August 2006.

Born October 18, 1928 in Jaro, Vitoy was the son of a former secretary to the Governor of Antique province and Jaena Presbetera. Vitoy's survivors include his wife Josefa "Joji" Dumadaug, sons Jonah a Manila architect born in Laos; Josel who manages the fishpond business; Joshua, a PhD mathematician who teaches at the Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA; and Nemesio, an adopted son; a sister Nilda Hueler and brother Jose. He has eight half brothers and sisters, among them Ofelia who married Ato Paglinawan, a former OB office staff member. Joji's sister Melanie Dumadaug was an OB nurse married to Bert Reyes, an OB agriculturist.

He graduated in 1951 with a Bachelor's degree in Education from the Central Philippine University in Iloilo city.

Last rites will be held at the family residence compound located in Arayat Extension, Alta Tierra, Jaro, Iloilo, the Philippines. Tel. 033 329 4921. Burial is scheduled for Tuesday, July 17.



REMEMBERING VITOIY

Dear Joji

We were saddened by the news of the passing of Vitoy Naranjo. Vitoy had performed important tasks in his life of service, having positively influenced the lives of a great number of people in Laos and many other countries in the world. Our families were one of them. We respectfully say farewell to such a precious person. May the Almighty bless you and your family.

*Tianethone & Viengsay Chantharasy
Riverview, Australia*

Tianethone was the president of the Jaycees of Laos during the 1960s, the organization that invited Operation Brotherhood into Laos in 1957.

Dear Pete:

Upon learning from Cecile Salarda Datu of Vitoy's passing away on our Tuesday, the 10th, Mart Martell who now lives in Manhattan called up. Add this to your write up about Vitoy and us the Casseloup Loubat boys. He reminded me that when we were in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh city) there were four of us who manned our headquarters 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, at 25 Casseloup Loubat (later Hong Thap Tu or Red Cross in Vietnamese). Vitoy, Joe Alejo, Mart, Rene Maglaya and myself manned the fort and shared the same room. Joe went ahead and joined the Father in Heaven. There are three of us left among those who lived in the same room with our telephones beside us at all times to respond to any emergency from any of our 12 stations all over South Viet Nam — Mart, Rene, who is now somewhere in New Jersey working with Veterans or the Elderly, and myself — the survivors of this group of Oscar Arellano's elite. Mart reminds me that we were young then, and never minded threats to life and limb. We all later went to Laos. Vitoy with me, as my man Friday and loyal assistant and chief trouble shooter. Rene was our first Team Leader in Paksong, while Vitoy founded our Team in Thakkek, and traveled to Vientiane via Savannakhet where the airport was.

Since our original Laos patron was the Royal Family, we in Vientiane worked with the Crown Prince, those in Luang Prabang and north in liaison with the office of His Majesty the King. In Pakse we worked with Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak. Of course our liaison with these Royal Offices were the Laos Jaycees, Inpeng Suryadhay who was the Laos Junior Chamber President was the Secretary of State at the Prime Minister's office. Chao Sopsaisana, JC Laos Vice President, was the Director General of the Office of the Crown Prince. Dr. Khamphai Abhay, JC Laos Vice President, was the Chief of the Pharmacie Generale du Laos and Secretary of State of the Ministry of Public Health. Thianethone Chantharassy, JC Laos Secretary General was the Deputy Director of Customs. I as a Laos JC member, and awardee of Outstanding 1957 Vietnam Jaycee was named country manager of OB Laos. Vitoy became a Laos Jaycee as did most of our OB Laos management and administrative staff.

We were young then. I turned 18 in Vietnam, and spent most of my late teen years there. Vitoy, Rene, Joe and Mart were in their early 20s. Cesar Climaco, our boss in Vietnam, who was a devout Catholic, kept us under strict supervision, checked on our



Naranjo (left), Felisa Garina, Ann Gregory looked over supplies -- food, clothing, medicines, sewing machines -- donated in 1954 by Jaycee chapters worldwide to OB Vietnam.

after dark affairs. The order was we could not date any of our female companions and because Saigon was a war zone then it was unhealthy to have any serious affair outside of our premises. We fell in love with our OB Vietnam colleagues but we had to wait until we returned to the Philippines to seriously do any serious courting.

All the Casseloup Loubat boys later married OB ladies -- Vitoy with Joji Dumadaug, a nurse who was assigned in Hue in Central Vietnam, Mart with Offie Leano, a nurse from our Saigon-Bien Hoa, Joe Alejo with Mely Kagahastian, a nurse with our Tay Ninh team, Rene Maglaya with Carol Mabilog, a social worker with our southern teams in Camau, and I with Nati Mercado, a dentist with our Tay Ninh Team. We went to Vietnam in 1955 and in 1957 to Laos, We were all settled family men. This was the OB of our late teens and early 20s.

*Mel Granada
Manila, Philippines*

Mel was the first Project Manager of OB Vietnam and OB Laos.



Not-Yet-Grand Slam- Finalists: back row, from left Mart Martell, Ed Lim, Deo Caro, Cesar Mendoza, George Alba. Front: Primo Guevara, Vitoy Naranjo, Jose David (1960s photo)

MEMBER NEWS



Mekong Circle Philippines. Continuing an annual tradition that our members started in 2001, the next get-together is on November 10, 2007 at the residence of Jovit and Ben Revilla in Los Banos, Laguna,

the Philippines. In preparation for our 2008 international, this next gathering is expected to draw a larger attendance than the usual crowd like above.

MINUTES OF PHILIPPINE MEETING, JUNE 18, 2007

Place: Vietnam Pho Bac Restaurant (Galeria Robinson Mall, Mandaluyong, Manila. Host: Dom Menguito)

Present: Chapter Officers Jovit Revilla, Sonia Ballo, Frisco San Juan, Jun Belicena, Mel Granada, Dom Menguito. Visiting from USA: Mekong Circle International officer Pete Fuentecilla. This meeting is a followup of the last meeting on February 2, 2007 in Quezon City, Metro Manila.

1. Chapter Incorporation — Sonia Ballo reported that the Philippine Chapter has been incorporated with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The incorporation papers, duly signed by all 15 incorporators, were presented. (Note: their names were reported in the May 2007 issue of our Newsletter).

2. 2008 International Reunion – November 7, 8 and 9 (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) dates remain unchanged.

3. Attendance – For planning purposes, a minimum of 200 participants is the target. This includes members based in the Philippines and everywhere else.

4. Program – a tentative three-day schedule of activities was lined up:

First day (Nov. 7) – Registration begins at 12:30 pm. Welcome dinner follows.

Second day (Nov. 8) – Morning out-of-town excursion which will include lunch. Corregidor is suggested. Dinner dance and cultural program in the evening.

Third day (Nov. 9, Sunday) Farewell and thanksgiving Mass:

4. Consideration was given to provide as much free time as possible to allow members to do city tours, courtesy calls to city and national officials, shopping, and get-togethers among themselves on their own in restaurants or private homes.

5. Tentative committees were named – registration, fund-raising, venue, etc. Several metropolitan hotels have been visited, their rates and amenities compared. Renaissance Hotel in Makat, metropolitan Manil, is the likely candidate for the dinner dance as well as the registration site and accomodation.

6. Promotion and Outreach – U.S.-based regional representatives and Board members will be tapped to actively recruit participants from their U.S. regions. International Membership Coordinator Puring de Jesus has been recommended by the chapter to head this activity and is officially informed by copy of these minutes.

7. Laos Side Trip – Members returning to North America will be invited to join a one-week visit to Laos after the Manila reunion on their way back. Philippine-based members are invited to join them. Organization of this activity will be undertaken by the U.S. chapter.

8. 2007 Annual Reunion – the Philippine chapter will hold their traditional yearly reunion on November 10, 2007 at the residence of Jovit and Ben Revilla in Los Banos, Laguna, the Philippines. The new Laos Ambassador to the Philippines will be invited. The chapter is issuing a call for all members to join them.

FROM ONE KINGDOM TO ANOTHER

With Iran very much in the news today, our thoughts go back to 1975, the year when we said our last farewells to Laos. As we joined the first mass exodus out of the Kingdom, most returned to the Philippines, others immigrated to the USA. Some others found their way to another kingdom ruled by the Shah of Iran.

Among those who renewed Laos ties there were **Seseng Derequito, Viring de la Rosa, Gaby Ruiz, Joe Banda, Dioscoro Sergio, Maning Guerrero, Nits Eusebio, Hernan and Thelma Aquino, Rey Zamora, Bob and Asil Monserrat, Demetrio Granada, Filbert Trinidad, Ben Garcia, Andy Cabla, Jun Ventura and Bon Datu.** They have since left a long time ago but during their sojourn there they were a microcosm – USAID, CASI, OB, OICC and others – of our Mekong Circle. We are missing many of them in our membership directory. So, if you have contact numbers, let us know.

CHAIRMAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

Let's greet the newly named Chairman of our Philippine affiliate. Named to the post after Mekong Circle Philippines was officially incorporated on April 4, 2007 in Manila, **Frisco San Juan**, also known as "Johnny", has been Chairman for most of his life.

From 1954 to 1957 he was Chairman of the Presidential Complaints and Action Committee Office of former Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay; Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Founda-

tion from 1976-1977; Chairman of the Public Estates Authority from 1998 to 2001; Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Veterans of World War II in 1996. And during his three-year term (1966 to 1969) in the Philippine Congress, he was Chairman of the Committee on Scientific and Technological Research. (He won another three-year term to the House from 1970-1973 during which he was named Minister of State for Public Works and Highways).

And that's only from the government service side of his career. A 1944 graduate of the Philippine Military Academy, his military service was awarded the Gold Cross and the

Military Merit Medal from the Armed Forces of the Philippines for outstanding guerilla service during the World War II Japanese occupation (as well as six other war medals from the United States Army). He was a reserved Lt. Col. of the AFP Corps of Engineers.

Frisco is best known among Mekong Circle members as head of Eastern Construction Company in Laos or Eccoil. Contracted by the U.S. government to help train the Royal Lao Armed Forces, Eccoil fielded, beginning in 1959, Filipino technicians of diverse skills, from engineers to mechanics, ordnance and communications. By 1962 when an international convention mandated all foreign military advisers to leave a "neutral" Laos, Eccoil's roster of advisers had reached 424 personnel. For his service, he was given Laos' royal civilian award Order of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol with the rank of Chevalier.

Frisco, 75 years old, has been active in politics since his Congress days. He is now president of the Nationalist People's Coalition, a party formed in 1992. During the midterm May 2007 elections, it represented a slate of candidates, from Senators to Mayors, of whom 27 won seats, he says. There were some 2,000 candidates nationwide for all elective positions.

If winning in politics is a monumental task in the Philippines, chairing the organizing committee for our 2008 reunion should be a breeze...and fun. At the committee's June 2007 meeting, it was suggested that the first reunion day's festivities should start with a golf tournament. Frisco is President Emeritus of the Federation of Philippine Senior Golfers, Inc. Tee-time starts at 7 in the morning.

HOLLYWOOD'S "LAOS" JUNGLE

"Rescue Dawn", released July 4 and still showing at this writing (August 12) nationwide, has received good press from major newspaper reviewers: "A marvel", "Thrilling", "Mesmerizing", "Extraordinary", "Astounding". A Hollywood MGM studio film (think big budget, respected director, starring an actor with recognizable credits), it is the true story of an American Skyraider jet pilot shot down on Laos soil during the Vietnam war. Taken prisoner by the Pathet Lao, he escapes and is said to be the only American pilot to do so. One reviewer

however noted that six other American prisoners of war escaped from Vietcong (not Pathet Lao) captivity.

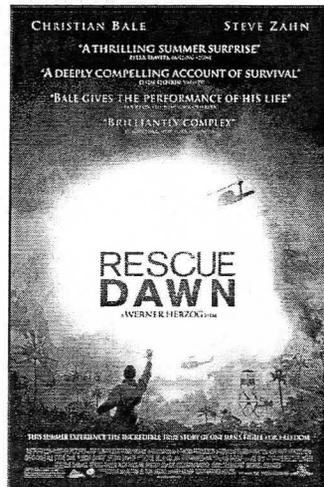
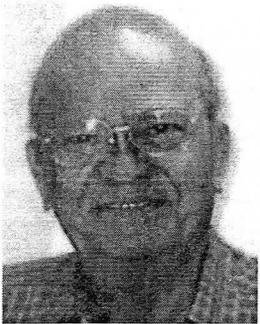
Christian Bale ("Batman Begins") tries to convince two other American POWs to attempt an escape. One rejects the idea, saying "Don't you understand, this jungle is our prison." No way they can survive it even if they succeed to break out. Predictably, he does survive the ordeal of dysentery, starvation, insect bites and despair.

Although the plot is straightforward – man, against all odds, conquers self and nature — it is the setting, the jungle, that enticed us to see the movie. You see, a number of us have walked through Lao jungles during our times there. Veterans of our OB "medical mobile" missions did much jungle trekking from village to village.

It turns out from reading the movie's production notes that "Rescue Dawn" was "shot on location in the remote northwestern hill country of Thailand, near the border with Burma, and an area known for its fecund beauty, its landscape a thick, jewel-green jungle dotted with rocky hills and simple tribal villages." Okay, so it's not Laos. But the movie jungle is the same "terrifyingly beautiful landscape" we remember watching unroll below the open door of a C-46 plane that had picked us up after dropping refugee relief supplies, unrolling for miles and miles to the horizon, a lumpy, dark vast carpet.

This is not director Werner Herzog's first jungle film. He shot "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" and "Fitzcarraldo" in the Amazon jungle. Indeed he admits a fixation with jungles. They are "all about our dreams, our deepest emotions, our nightmares. It is not just a location. The jungle is a form of our soul. It is a state of our mind."

"It is never any doubt we are in the jungle" wrote one reviewer about the movie. "The screen always looks wet and green. And the actors push through vegetation with difficulty. We can almost smell the rot and humidity." The production notes say the cast "ate slithering maggots, snatched real snakes with their bare hands, moved through the jungle in a deeply vulnerable state of bare feet and raggedy clothing." Well, all we can say is we wore boots on those mobile missions. No fungus between our toes for us, no sir.



HISTORICAL NOTES



MALIGAYANG BATI (WELCOME)

At a reception in Manila's Sofitel Philippine Plaza, a group of Mekong Circle Philippine members were among those who welcomed Laos Prime Minister **Bouasone Bouphavanh** during his June 7 to 9, 2007 state visit. Responding to a call from Philippine Ambassador to Laos **Elizabeth Buensuceso** for representation from former OB-Laos volunteers, **Jovit Revilla** gathered **Sonia Ballo**, **Johnny** and **Baby Asuncion**, and **Tony Victa** to greet the Prime Minister on June 8 at the hotel, shared brunch, heard the Ambassador speak fondly of OB's years of Laos service. Also present was the newly appointed Lao Ambassador to the Philippines His Excellency **Leuan Sombounkhan**, originally from Pakse, who is familiar with OB Paksong and OB Pakse of the 1960s and 1970s.

REFERENCE CATALOG

For the serious scholar of Lao affairs, there is no lack of printed materials for research. Log into your local library's catalog or type in the title into the book ordering section of www.amazon.com. However some titles may or may not be available. By good fortune, we bumped into another source at the Arizona State University, site of the Second International Conference on Lao Studies last May. There, laid out on a table was a wealth of hardcover, softcover, and mimeographed materials. "My specialty is the Vietnam War with a particular interest in Laos, a pawn in the war. I worked in Laos from 1962-1965 with the Agency For International Development," said George Dalley. Indeed some of the mimeographed titles in his Books on Laos catalog would be hard to come by anywhere. His Laos 21-page catalog lists 307 titles, a superb collection that is available free from Dalley Book Service, 90 Kimball Lane, Christiansburg, Virginia 24073. Or you can scan a description of each at www.dalleybookservice.com. George will arrange to list our two books -- "Filipinos in Laos" and "Goodbye Vientiane" in his catalog.

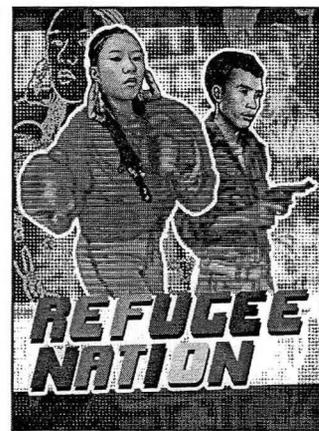
FOR ONE SHINING MOMENT, WE WERE ALL LAO

Looking for a stage production of a Lao play, musical or dance staged in the USA can be a futile quest. There is no Laotown anywhere dense enough to draw a paying audience. But on June 22, 2007 at the Abingdon Theatre in Manhattan, New York, its 96-seat June Havoc venue was sold out. The occasion was the staging of "Refugee Nation" -- a two-person theatre performance that described (using drama, dance and poetry) the Lao side of the exile experience. The play is one of 32 productions staged by the National Asian American Theatre, a California-based consortium of six major artistic groups, mostly with Asian American orientation. It pooled the works of more than a dozen theater groups across the country in a Manhattan theater festival that run from June 11 to 24. (Three of the productions were written and performed by Filipinos).

Reviewing "Refugee Nation" for Mekong Circle, **Vivi Saensathit**, a recent Lao graduate of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, not only has roots in Laos. Her parents belong to the generation that lived through the Laos war years of 1954 to 1975. Some are exile survivors who are subjects of the play. Excerpts from Vivi's essay:

The one-hour play are true stories of Lao refugees who settled in the USA. One is a mother who lives in the darkness of a south Los Angeles apartment; a boy and his street battles in urban America; a Lao princess learning to mother an African American child; a former general, still depressed by the defeat of the Royal Lao Armed Forces. The boy asks him what the war years were like. The general refuses to talk, a refusal that denies a younger generation the lessons of that war and the healing that can come when traumatized memories are unburdened.

The play taught us who we are, what we are struggling about, and the trauma that creates a generation gap. As a Laotian who has witnessed the lingering effects of the war on my people that ended 30 years ago, I joined the crowd when Ova Saopeng, one of the actors, exhorted us to shout "Be Lao, be proud!" It was the moment when everyone in the theatre became a Lao, regardless of their ethnicity.



CALIFORNIA MEMBERS PARTY ON

Our Southern California chapter convened June 2 another of their potluck gatherings at the residence of **Cecile** and **Manding Datu** in West Covina. The usual loyalists were present as well as a number of new faces among the 50 guests, namely **Joe** and **Riza Macabeo**, nurses **Bounmy Somchit**, **Nonglack Shoumphong**, **Khamsy Siharath** and her husband **Bouadeng**, **Liza** and **Dustin Saythong**. Also making their first attendance were **Glen Orense** and his mother, **Peter Anh Dover** and his son **Michael**. Glen was the first

Filipino baby born in the newly opened OB Vientiane Hospital in 1960. **Ben Garcia** brought his DJ set. Ben's ham radio system in Vientiane came handy for relaying emergency messages to Manila.

What's a Mekong Circle party without a baci? So **Sivilay Sivongxay** fashioned a sukhuang and her husband **Chantha** was the mohphon who beckoned the good spirits on the merrymakers. Many photos of the party were posted by **Jun Ilustrisimo** at www.pbase.com/zhcsc/mci_social_. Use the password "mekong" to open the file. Manding looks cool in his Lao chest sash.

As we look forward to our 2008 trip to Laos after our Manila reunion, there is talk of visiting some places there that hold a special spot in our hearts. They transformed us during one of our most formative years. Their images remain indelible in our memories. Those images are half a century old and fading fast. It's therefore a shock to discover how they have changed. Sayaboury is one example.

BUILDING A HOSPITAL, ONE FENCE POST AT A TIME

A posting on July 25, 2007 on a photo-sharing website beckoned us to view recent pictures of the town of Sayaboury, capital of the province also named Sayaboury in northwest Laos. We clicked on the link, and ...whoa!... what the passage of time can do to a place we had visited many times, some 50 years ago. We remember the OB hospital and the elephants – the province is home to the largest concentration of this animal in the country – but what sticks in the mind were dusty, dirt roads, thatch homes, and not much else. It was then and still now one of the more isolated places to get to, although it takes only 30 minutes by air from Vientiane. Mountains and forests have prevented more road access. There are 35 color pictures on the photo site. The elephants are still there, doing their customary log hauling. But the other photos show buildings and streets and bridges and shops that the Sayaboury of our memory never fantasized would emerge. Yet there they are, in brilliant reds and yellows and orange colors, not the dull grey and browns of old. From the air, the streets and buildings are laid out like a toy town. Click on this link to see 2007 photos: <http://flickr.com/search/?q=sayabouly&m=text>

OB came to Sayaboury in October 1959 but after a year, the one Filipino doctor staffing a clinic had to leave. The clinic reopened in November 1960. Eager for a more permanent health care resource, the town pledged to help put together a hospital building. Construction began June 1964. Merchants donated 14 wooden beds. Nine villages promised to fashion the fence posts. One November day in 1964, 15 villagers from Ban Nasang, six kilometers south of the town, arrived on foot. Each carried with him a tree trunk, four inches in diameter and eight feet long, with their names carved into the wood. Altogether, some 70 posts were delivered.

The 30-bed hospital was formally opened on July 27, 1965. It had an operating

room, a delivery room, X-ray, clinical laboratory, dental clinic, two private rooms and a dispensary.

Following the OB development plan of integrating curative medicine with disease prevention and improved livelihood, the Sayaboury team conducted a range of projects. Twelve village dispensaries were set up and staffed with health care aides trained to promote public health practices. Team members organized youth clubs, taught gardening, handicrafts, put together a kindergarten school and cooking classes. OB agriculturists developed demonstration farms and distributed seedlings. In three years, in a campaign called pig dispersal, the team gave away 80 weanlings to villagers. The recipients return to OB a portion of the weanling's future litter for further dispersal.

In 1975, after a new Communist government took control of the country, OB together with all foreign aid organizations, were told to terminate their programs. We list below team members who served in Sayaboury, some for months, others for years. It is not a complete list. Most of them are missing from our membership directory. If Mekong Circle members have any contact information on them, please transmit by email to

bjreyes@earthlink.net or write Puring de Jesus, our membership coordinator (1638 Ontario St. Oshkosh, Wisconsin 54901 USA.). Email: prdejesus@aol.com.

Drs. Orlando "Bingbing" Alagar; Sisinio "Sining" Azul (deceased), Ben de Gracia, Pilo Ocampo; dentists Nelly Robles, Florencia de los Santos, Bac Bacordo; nurses Benny Guzman, Marlene Jamero, Florence Omengan, Mila Buenaventura, Thelma Villamar Ilustrisimo (deceased), Virginia Guzman (who married Sining), Melanie Dumadaug (now Reyes), Nemia Altura (now Ramos), Dory Cabatuando, Manuel del Rosario, Volet Agustin, Puring Dayawon, Conse Sotio, Romy Agbayani, Flor Saguisi, Mary Degay, Sining Limcangco (now Capili), Chanthone Chinyavong; agriculturists Felix Valera, Miguel Palacpac, Anacleto "Jun" Paras, Eddie Tamayo; medical technologists Gloria Punzalan, Pete Tapia, Ernie de los Reyes; community development technicians Manuel Galera, Renato Talatala, Luzbella Ramirez (deceased); home technologist Ching Caldoza, Linda Masibay; mechanics Viring de la Rosa, Sandy Corcuera, Rey Zamora; fiscal/supply officer Oscar San Mateo, Denis Hebreo, Pol Custodio, Vic Capili; administrative assistants Mel Palma, Reynaldo Dandan



The Crown Prince was one of several dignitaries who came to visit. In this 1966 photo are Dr. Mon Pablo, nurses Nemia Altura-Ramos, Melanie Dumadaug-Reyes and home technologist Linda Masibay. We were told a government hospital across the site has replaced the OB hospital.

UPDATE: ISKOLARS NG MEKONG

Four years ago, Mekong Circle launched its scholarship program in the Philippines. Its beneficiaries are residents of a Manila center for abused and abandoned women operated by a religious order of nuns. Our Iskolars Ng Mekong beneficiaries come from different parts of the Philippines.

Tahanang Paghubog Mother Bonifacia cares for as many as 16 young women in a two-story house in a busy residential neighborhood in Cubao, Quezon City. Here they share bedrooms, a study area, a communal dining room and an activity floor where livelihood skills are taught together with lessons in what their teacher-nuns call "wholistic" character-forming.

In a partnership agreement with Tahanang, Mekong Circle agreed to help fund the educational costs of the residents who are already enrolled in two-or four-year college courses. Initially, the assistance earmarked four students at various levels towards completing their degrees. At \$500 per school year per student, our goal is to help pay for their schooling costs – tuition, transportation, lunch allowances, books, supplies. To make good on our promise, we delivered the first check of \$1,200 in 2003 for the school year 2004-2005. Subsequent school years were followed by Mekong donations — \$1,500 (for the school year 2005-06); \$3,000 (for 2006-07). On June 13, 2007, we personally handed a \$2,500 check for the school year 2007-08, completing four school years.

Five of our Iskolars have completed their studies and are now gainfully employed. Four more will graduate by 2010. At the end of each school year, we receive from Tahanang a detailed accounting of expenses and receipts for each student before we turn over the next check. We also receive personal notes and photos from each of the students

Over the years, Mekong Circle members have dropped by Tahanang's center to encourage our Iskolars. We extend our appreciation to those who took the time to visit – Linda Masi-bay, Pol Custodio, Ciony Agbayani, Puring de Jesus and Pete Fuentesilla (the latter was served kalamansi juice and pizza, not the usual combination). Linda and Puring brave the horrendous traffic to make their yearly visits during their vacations.

Tahanang receives donations from other sources to finance their activities. But, "for our educational program, our donors have dried up and Mekong Circle is now our only source," said Sr. Rossel Ramirez, who together with Sr. Beatrice Ristol currently manage the center. Both belong to the Siervas de San Jose, a religious order founded in Spain in the 1800s.

Iskolars Ng Mekong has been coordinated by Red del Rosario, a former OB accountant, out of New Jersey since its launch after our New York 2002 reunion. Seed money was first collected among Mekong Circle East Coast members, then expanded nationwide during our Chicago 2004 reunion. At that occasion, if you will remember, former Mekong Circle treasurer Tony Victa went on a fund-raising blitz during the picnic at Edith and Pete Palu-ay's residence. Those who carried their check-books with them at that time will remember.

Your tax-deductible donations made out to Mekong Circle International should indicate on your check "Iskolar Ng Mekong." Mail to Red at 1129 Heartwood Drive, Cherry Hill, New Jersey 08003. (email delrosario1129@yahoo.com). We thank all Mekong Circle members who have donated to this project. There are more school years ahead and more Iskolars in line completing their degrees. We look forward to your continuing generosity.



April 16, 2007

Dear Mekong Circle

I, Leana Rose C. Viclar, a graduate student of Samson College of Science and Technology want to thank you for all the support that you have given me. Without your help, I will not reach what I am right now. As of now, I'm working at Gigahertz Computer System as a Sales Technician. Thank you so much and more power! God bless you all.

ISKOLARS CONTRIBUTORS

Marie Aguilos **, Rebecca Ciborski; Puring & Raul de Jesus **, Edith & Red del Rosario **, Helen & Bayani Domingo ; Pet & Pete Fuentesilla; Pat Tesoro Gonzales; Rusty Gotico ; Denis Hebreo ; Estrella & Gene Hernandez ; Dickie Labao; Vic Lagleva; Amphie Malolos; Anita & Bik Marquez **, Linda Masibay; Mario Morales; Henry Nano; Cora Ortiz; Jojo Pablo; Sallie Pablo; Edith & Pete Palu-ay; Teddy Parreno; Cora & Tony Sazon **, Conse Sotio **, Sabina Fajardo Swift **, Vilma Valenzuela **, Fenny & Tony Victa **, Minerva Will

(** denotes yearly contributors)