

## Remembering Vincent “Bik” Marquez: Balancing Momentary Finances



Bik, Mekong Circle’s first treasurer who steered our Association’s financial affairs since its incorporation in 2000, died in a vehicular accident in Half Moon Bay, California, USA on September 30, 2017. He was 74 years old.

A certified public accountant with a practice in San Bruno, California, he served with Operation Brotherhood (OB) Laos, a member of a fraternal group of fiscal officers, who assured U.S. auditors that American tax aid money funding OB was not spent foolishly. Indeed, during OB’s 18 years of Laos service, out of about 411 Filipino volunteers, 29 served as fiscal officers over two-year employment contracts. Likewise, Filipino accountants from Manila were among the first dispatched to Vientiane in 1957 by the United States Operations Mission, predecessor of USAID.

Mekong Circle’s treasury was virtually bare most of the time. It survives on donations for its projects. It does not impose membership fees; indeed, it has no membership rules, welcoming all those with any formative roots in Laos. For its major undertaking -- the biennial reunions -- it would collect some \$25,000 each time, which promptly drained away the day after the celebrations, consumed mainly by hotel food and beverages and a band. Hey Bik, what’s our balance? “*Bo mee heng*” -- he would respond, “no strength”, the usual complaint of a sick Lao visiting an OB clinic. Still, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, demanded an accounting of every penny if we were to retain our nonprofit, Federal tax-exempt status (also known as a 501 (c)(3) in the tax code). It’s an annual chore he dutifully did.

One of Bik’s distinct legacy is our incorporation as a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization in 2000 based in San Francisco, California. Previously, Mekong Circle was an ad-hoc group of Los Angeles - and San Francisco - based, Laos expats who met in each other’s living rooms to share potluck “adobo” because somebody turned 50. Incorporation formalized a structure, and not incidentally, a tax break for those with generous donations.

It was after the third Mekong Circle reunion in July 2000 in San Francisco that the incorporation momentum took shape. Reunion organizers Bik and Jojo Pablo noted a growing influx of attendees, almost 200 from 14 states, 10 from overseas (the Philippines, Italy, Australia and Canada).

On November 3, 2002 Bik led 11 members for a week-long visit to Vientiane, their first return after our exodus almost three decades ago in the wake of a takeover by a new government. At a welcome reception hosted by the Philippine Embassy at Novotel Hotel (now the Mercure), he addressed a crowd of Filipinos and Lao:

I have to say, right from the beginning, that personally this must count as one of my most emotional journeys. My Mekong Circle companions, strongly feel the same way. That is why I choose to read my remarks rather than break down for loss of words.

The last time I was in Laos, I was 34 years younger, my hair was dark, I was single. Today I have a son, and a wife whom I met here. We came together on this trip to revisit a country and its people where a large part of our lives took shape and substance. It has all come true - all those *baci* strings during my years here have promised me good things. They promised me health and wealth and a wonderful family. They all happened. Thank you *baci* spirits.

Let me address my remarks to certain participants at this event.

To his Excellency Ambassador Mario Galman and consul Raul Dado of the Philippine Embassy - this Balik Laos program was conceived here by you. It was announced at the 4th Mekong Circle reunion in New York City last August. Our group today is the first wave of what is hoped will become a continuing influx of visiting Filipinos who worked here during the 1960s and 1970s. It is a two-year program that will culminate in a celebration in 2004 marking 50 years of Lao - Philippine diplomatic relations. This is a wonderful vision of Ambassador Galman. When we return home we will do our utmost to encourage our other members to come and visit. This is truly a historic event and we are honored to be part of it.

To the Filipino community in Laos – I am told that there are about 200 *kabayans* who are living and working here. During our time, in the mid-1960s, there were an estimated 900 Filipinos in Laos, most of them in Vientiane. It was quite a large foreign community in a small city of perhaps 150,000 residents. Indeed there was a Filipino Association of Laos. I brought with me some issues of their newsletter. Quite a number of you, I am told, work with the local offices of United Nations agencies. It is always heartwarming to know that Filipino compatriots render the kind of good work we did at one time here. On a personal level, I thank Gina Alicando of Novotel, a Filipina herself, who has been most helpful in arranging the logistics of our visit. I also extend our thanks to the staff of the Vientiane Philippine Embassy for their warm reception at Udon Thani airport and for making our visit a very pleasant experience. *Manga kabayan, mabuhay sa inyong lahat !*

Finally, to our Lao guests here. Let me say it another way - greetings to our Lao hosts. Yes, many years ago, you invited us. We were your guests. You were our hosts. You knew us as "khon filipin". Every Filipino in the street was either a *tan moh* or a *nai moh* - a doctor or a nurse. We served in your hospitals, clinics, refugee camps, orphanages, farms and schools. This was at a time when Asians working with Asians was not the usual way to do international assistance. It was indeed a new experience for each of us in Mekong Circle. It is unforgettable. It was precious. Truly, it was your gift -- to know you and to be able to live a part of our lives here. Saying "thank you" now will never really reflect the depths of our feelings for you and your country. Laos was our home at one time. It is always a great feeling to come home. *Kop chai lai lai.*

Bik was born April 2, 1943 in the town of San Juan, Batangas province, the Philippines, the son of Celestino, a school principal in the town, and Rufina, a homemaker. He earned his accounting degree from the University of the East in Manila and joined OB Laos in 1968. In 1971, he married Anita "Baby" Angeles in Vientiane, an administrative assistant

with the U.S. Embassy there. He is survived by a son Brian and twin grandchildren Charles and Sofia; brothers Celestino, Jr. and Maximo, and sister Zorayda.

Donations by checks in his memory should be made payable to Mekong Circle International and mailed to 903 Sneath Lane #125, San Bruno, California 94066. For messages, send to Baby at 27 Ray Court, Burlingame, California 94010; email [marquez6976@comcast.net](mailto:marquez6976@comcast.net).