

June 13, 2016; Marking Milestones of Diversity

Recently, Guam celebrated three milestones. On June 4th, the island hosted the closing ceremony for the very successful Festpac. June 5th was the one-year anniversary for Kathleen (Kate) Aguero and Loretta (Lo) Pangelinan's victorious legal battle for same-sex marriage, and today marks their one-year wedding anniversary.

These three milestones have much in common. Festpac was a wondrous celebration of cultural diversity and acceptance throughout the Pacific region. Thousands of Guam residents and visitors alike were treated to a spectacular showcase of art, dancing, handicrafts, film, and theater. Festpac was a massive organizational undertaking. All those who worked tirelessly to promote and organize the multitude of activities deserve a warm Si Yu'os Ma'ase from the entire community. With very few exceptions, the events went off without a hitch.

What I, and many others, especially enjoyed was soaking up the congenial atmosphere by simply walking around the Chamorro Village and the adjoining pavilions that housed the various island delegations. Islanders from across the Pacific region mingled with each other and with the many visitors who came to enjoy the festivities. People were extremely friendly and welcoming. Smiles and laughter could be seen and heard everywhere. The sense of pride in shared Pacific-islander heritage was palpable.

This overwhelming sense of brotherhood is not a historical given. The Pacific Islands have a rich history of both inter and intra island warfare. The historical underpinnings of tension and animosity were evident in a number of the pavilions. Several island nations showcased and offered for sale numerous weapons of war including sling stones, war clubs, axes, and knives. These are the hallmarks of distrust, dislike, and aggression.

As FestPac clearly demonstrated, tensions among the Pacific nations have obviously calmed down over the centuries. Along with the passing of time, improved education, a communication revolution and a willingness to come together to highlight and celebrate that which unites us, rather than to focus on divisive differences, has opened the door to tolerance, cooperation, and mutual respect.

The same can be said for Kate and Lo's experiences over this past year. Although their quest for marriage equality was controversial, and at times divisive, over the last 12 months they have encountered overwhelming community support and goodwill. Guam is clearly demonstrating a growing sense of social justice and acceptance for diversity.

We humans come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and persuasions. Biological, cultural, and religious differences don't make any of us superior to others, nor do

they automatically make any of us bad people. We shouldn't be judged for who we are. Rather, we should be judged by what we do and how we treat others.

When it comes to social revolutions, the influence of our legal system has its limitations. As the old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." While our laws may require institutions to treat people equally, laws in and of themselves can't change minds and attitudes. Successful social changes can only come about through education, open minds, and a willingness to engage in honest dialogue.

In our ever-shrinking world, we can no longer afford to base our judgments of others solely on political or religious doctrine. Our judgments of others should be based on our own personal exchanges and observations. We shouldn't allow political and religious leaders to do our thinking for us. As recent events here on Guam have clearly demonstrated, those in leadership positions who speak the loudest against others and who sow seeds of divisiveness and hatred may do so for personal gain or hidden agendas. Blind political and religious allegiance to hateful positions is the height of ignorance.

FestPac was phenomenally successful because it both highlighted and celebrated diversity. The camaraderie and goodwill that enveloped those in attendance did not result from the command of a law or the dictate of any religion. Rather, it resulted from interpersonal exchanges that emphasized tolerance for diversity and an appreciation for those traits and activities that unite rather than divide us.

Let's carry this spirit forward and push for continued progress in social justice in Guam. As a community, let us demonstrate respect for each other and choose to celebrate love, not hatred and intolerance. Together, let us all wish Kate and Lo a happy anniversary.