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Vice President Leni Robredo Keynotes the 12th National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) Empowerment Conference in Philadelphia



Upper left photo: Vice President Leni Robredo giving the keynote message at the 12th NaFFAA Empowerment Conference in the Radisson Hotel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Upper right photo: New York Consul General Mario L. De Leon, Jr. introduces Vice President Robredo to the audience. Lower photo: Vice President Robredo (center) together with Dr. Aida Rivera, Chairman, NaFFAA Host Committee; Mdme. Eleanor De Leon; Consul General De Leon; and Atty. JT Mallonga, NaFFAA National Chair. (photos by Boyet Loverita)

Greater Philadelphia, PA 7 August 2016 – Vice President Maria Leonor “Leni” Gerona Robredo was warmly welcomed by the U.S. Filipino community during her first official visit to the United States. Upon invitation of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), she keynoted the Federation’s 12th Empowerment Conference held in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.

VP Robredo arrived at the Philadelphia International Airport on Friday, 5 August 2016, where she was met by New York Consul General Mario L. De Leon, Jr. and Chargé d’affaires Patrick A. Chuasoto of the Philippine Embassy in Washington, D.C. At the Radisson Hotel in King of Prussia, PA, where she stayed, the Vice President was welcomed by officials of the Philippine Consulate General in New York led by Consul Felipe Carino, Katrina Banzon of the Philippine Trade and Investment Office (PTIC-NY), Zeny Pallugna of the Philippine Department of Tourism in New York (PDOT-NY), and Michael Azucena of PAG-IBIG Fund. NaFFAA leaders led by Chair of the Conference, Dr. Aida and Rommel Rivera, NaFFAA National Chair, Atty. JT Mallonga, and co-Chair of the Conference, Brad Baldia, were also part of the welcoming party.



Upon her arrival in Philadelphia, Vice President Robredo was officially welcomed by Consul General De Leon, Chargé d'affaires Patrick A. Chuasoto of the Philippine Embassy in Washington, D.C., and senior officers of the Philippine Consulate General New York, Philippine Trade and Investment Office (PTIC-NY), Philippine Department of Tourism in New York (PDOT-NY), PAG-IBIG Fund, the Radisson Hotel and NaFFAA. (photos by Wendell Gaa)

During the opening plenary session of the Conference on August 5, Consul General De Leon conveyed the goals and aspirations of US Foreign Service Posts for NaFFAA in a session entitled “Envisioning the Future of Filipino Americans through the Lens of our Shared History.” Also participating in the panel were philanthropist and community leader Loida Nicholas Lewis, NaFFAA National Chair JT Mallonga, and NaFFAA National Vice Chair Emraida Kira.

Consul General De Leon remarked how the NaFFAA Empowerment Conference was an opportune time for the Filipino-American community to come together and discuss pressing issues and initiatives that impact the lives of the estimated 3.4 million Filipino-Americans living in the U.S. He also discussed how the leadership changes in both the Philippines and the U.S. have created new opportunities to enhance bilateral engagements between the two countries, all of which coincide with the 70th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and the United States.

He commended NaFFAA for its initiatives to promote civic engagement and its efforts in transforming the Filipino-American community into a cohesive political constituency. He further noted how there were also more registered Filipino-American voters who casted their ballots in the May 2016 Philippine national election than previous elections, and underscored that the Fil-Am vote was among the very few overseas voters’ groups that secured Robredo’s Vice Presidency. Among NaFFAA’s primary advocacies is Fil-Am Vote.



(Upper left) Representative Bobby Scott of the State of Virginia as a guest speaker at the plenary session. (Lower – L-R) Atty. JT Mallonga, ConGen de Leon, Ms. Loida Lewis and NaFFAA National Vice Chair Emraida Kira. (photos by: Wendell Gaa)

The Consul General reminded the NaFFAA delegates to continue lobbying for the Filipino community’s interests with US elected officials. In particular, he cited the urgency of working with US representatives to co-sponsor the Congressional Gold Medal Bill for the Filipino World War II Veterans to secure its passage. He thanked Representative Bobby Scott of the State of Virginia who was among the first to sign as co-sponsor of the House version of bill and was also a guest speaker at the plenary session in the afternoon. The U.S. Senate earlier passed their counterpart bill on the same.



Vice President Robredo addresses the Fil-Am media during her press conference at the Radisson Hotel, together with Consul General De Leon. (photos by Boyet Lovereta)

The following day, Saturday, 6 August, Vice President Robredo held a press conference at the Radisson Hotel hosted by the Consulate General for the benefit of members of the U.S. Fil-Am media. She was formally introduced by Consul General Mario de Leon.

During the Press Conference, VP Robredo thanked the Filipino diaspora for their support in the last elections. (During the elections, she topped the Vice-Presidential race with a huge margin in North America). She promised to serve all overseas Filipinos regardless of those who voted her. As Chairperson of the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council, the Vice President said that

she intends to go beyond her administrative mandate and mere “ceremonial position” by reinventing the Office of the Vice President (OVP) into an advocate for positive change. She identified advocacies such as prioritizing the most economically deprived provinces and promoting health care, public education, and rural/agricultural development therein. Enlisting the cooperation of private organizations to assist our citizens in need is also part of her mission, she added.

She also addressed queries on how young Filipino-American leaders could be more involved with business and entrepreneurial opportunities in the Philippines, and that she would work to support efforts of Fil-Ams contributing to the strengthening of the Philippine economy.

During the NaFFAA Gala Dinner later that evening, Vice President Robredo delivered her keynote address where she reported the efforts of the new Philippine administration in steering the future of the Philippines towards further political, social and economic development. She underscored that her office will focus on five core advocacies: hunger and poverty, universal health care, public housing, education, and women empowerment.

She also acknowledged how the Fil-Am vote was crucial to the overseas balloting which thrust her to the office of the Vice President during the May 2016 Philippine presidential elections.

VP Robredo conveyed that she understood the plight of Overseas Filipinos having lived in Boston with her family while Secretary Jessie Robredo attended school. She said that “perhaps at times you also feel left behind...feel like you are part of the marginalized community ... are homesick and tired of working long hours... thinking of how to pay for college education of the children, health care, mortgage and other things. I know how you feel,” she added.

She praised how Filipinos have thrived in the United States, “You’ve created Filipino communities here that care, just like in the barangays and villages at home...as you transform the lives of those you touch through trainings and advocacy. Filipinos truly are citizens of the world, but always rooted in our homegrown values of *bayanihan*. *Walang iwanan*. *Tulongan*. Simplicity and courtesy. Most of all Faith” she underscored.

The Vice-President further encouraged Filipinos to give back and participate in nation-building activities, citing examples like the Naga Migrant Resource Center - the first of its kind in the country – organized to assist overseas Filipinos in pre- and post-deployment activities and reintegration programs which can be replicated all over the Philippines.

The Vice President then extolled the NaFFAA regional leaders for being role models in initiating projects which have contributed to improvement of communities, as well as acknowledging the NaFFAA awardees recognized in the “Trailblazer Award” who have used their position to elevate the profile of the Filipino-American in mainstream American society. The awardees include Ronnie del Carmen, Fil-Am co-director of the Pixar animated film “Inside Out”, Billy Dec, founder of Rockit Ranch Production, and Jason Tengco of the White Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders

Towards the end of the Gala, Vice President Robredo led the official induction of the new NaFFAA officers who were led by its newly-elected National Chair, Brendan Flores, a 2nd generation Filipino American. Earlier in the evening, NaFFAA community members were able to have their photo opportunity taken with the Vice President. – **END**-



NaFFAA delegates and community members divide into their respective regional group for a photo opportunity with Vice President Leni Robredo at the Gala dinner on Saturday, 6 August (photos provided by Boyet Loverita and the Office of the Vice President)