

# Sariling Gawa: Our Own Work

History and description of a community-based,  
youth-directed program for Filipino youth



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## SG's Inspirational Poem

“Go to the people  
Live among them  
Learn from them  
Start with what they know  
Build on what they have.  
But of the best leaders  
When their task is accomplished  
Their work is done  
The people all remark  
‘We have done it ourselves.’”  
--Anonymous

## The Organization's Name

Since 1980, the above poem is included in every *Sariling Gawa* brochure, conference booklet and report. The organizing theory and foundation of the organization can be gleaned from this short poem.

“*Sariling Gawa*” translates from the Filipino (Tagalog) language into “Our Own Work,” which captures the manner in which young Filipinos, youth with other ethnicities and community members are in the leadership body. That is, participating youth plan, coordinate and lead various *Sariling Gawa* program activities. The three founders of the organization commented that they carefully considered the name of the organization. One of their considerations in naming their group was the desire to emphasize the Filipino youth's role in leadership. They firmly believed that their newly conceived project would not be successful if they did not conduct the work for themselves. As young people and young leaders in the Filipino community, they had already experienced unfulfilled “promises” from Filipino adult leaders.

Moreover, the founders' intentions were to promote and institutionalize the involvement, cooperation, and leadership among Filipino youth throughout the state of Hawaii – within every aspect of the organization. The founders contended that if their project were to foster the importance of youth working among and for themselves, Filipino youths' concerns and needs would be addressed with sensitivity and caring. As a result of these guiding principles, they conceptualized an organization that was “our own work.”

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The founders also decided that the group's name should be in Filipino (Tagalog), the primary language of the Philippines, rather than in English, to emphasize the fact the “Filipino-ness” of the organization (interviews with Asuncion, Domingo, and Macugay-Asuncion, 1988).

## The Organization's Symbol

The founders wanted to establish a symbol for the organization that had roots in the Filipino culture and traditions. Two of the founders, Lito Asuncion and Helen Toribio, conceptualized the growing coconut sprout as the symbol, or logo for *Sariling Gawa*. The growing coconut sprout represents the Filipino youth being nurtured by the older, more established Filipino community in Hawaii as symbolized by the mature coconut. The coconut plant was chosen as the symbol because it is adaptable to any tropical setting throughout the world just as the Filipinos adapted to Hawaii.

Since the group formed within the historical 75th Anniversary of Filipinos in Hawaii, the three developed leaves of the coconut palm symbolize the three waves of Filipino migration to Hawaii. Each leaf denotes 25 years, therefore representing 75 years of Filipino experiences in Hawaii as celebrated in 1981. The fourth developing sprout represents the next 25 years. When a coconut washes ashore and gives

birth to a sprout, it develops deep roots where it settles. The roots of the coconut are strong enough to withstand hurricanes and high waves in much the same way the

Filipinos have established strong roots in Hawaii and have experienced strong struggles against discrimination in employment, education, housing, and government” (Asuncion et. al., 1998).

## Sariling Gawa's Mission, Goals, and Objectives

The organization, as *Sariling Gawa* Youth Coordinating Council, Inc. was established in 1980 in Hawaii to plan, coordinate, and implement educational, health promotion, and cultural activities to Filipino young people. The organization was formed by young Filipino college students and Filipino community leaders (SG Handbook, 1996).

The group's stated goal has been "Through community involvement and ongoing education, *Sariling Gawa* plans to increase the number of well-informed Filipino leaders as well as ordinary citizens who will contribute to the growth of the community."

- The organization's written objectives are:
- to provide a vehicle for developing leadership, social, and life skills;
  - to increase awareness of issues facing Filipino youth;
  - to provide a forum for Filipino youth to voice their issues and concerns;
  - to facilitate participation in local community affairs and community organizing as well as in the governmental system;
  - to develop strategies that address educational, social, and health problems of Filipino youth;
  - to instill a positive self-concept of being Filipino;
  - to increase knowledge, appreciation, and preservation of Filipino culture and values; and
  - to maintain an effective communication and social network among Filipino youth groups throughout the State of Hawaii (SG Handbook, 1996).

### History of the Organization

Originally, *Sariling Gawa* began as a project of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Filipinos in Hawaii. The idea for developing a Filipino youth leadership body originated among the celebration organizers of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Filipinos in Hawaii (referred to as "Committee"). These individuals named themselves "Hawaii Filipino Plus" and comprised of elder community leaders who were business owners, directors of service organization and public agencies. This group envisioned a conference for high-achieving, gifted Filipino students to be called a "Youth Congress" (Asuncion, et al., 1981).

D. Los Banos, a Filipino elder and former superintendent of schools, took the initiative to approach college students at the University of Hawaii. He contacted the Filipino-American Club at the University of Hawaii-Manoa campus and spoke with the club president, W. Domingo. The college student, at the time a senior undergraduate majoring in Philippine studies and who would eventually attend law school, challenged the elder Filipino leader regarding the intentions of the Committee. W. Domingo proposed that he would contact other Filipino students at the campus to strategize and establish a Filipino youth project.

Subsequently, W. Domingo approached two other Filipino students – L. Asuncion and M. Macugay. L. Asuncion had recently graduated with a Master of Public Health and Master in Sociology and had begun a PhD program in sociology. M. Macugay was an undergraduate with a major in Human Development. The three of them met regularly to strategize, "throw ideas around," writing freely on many, large newsprint papers their organizing strategies, ideas, names of persons to contact, timelines for completing project



activities. M. Macugay recalled "covering her apartment walls" with newsprint and transcribing their notes for future meetings (Interviews, 1998).

The core group of three college students brought into the working group several other college students with diverse academic and community organizing experience. They also requested assistance from several Filipino faculty members who were teaching in the education and ethnic studies departments (Interviews, 1998). Within weeks, this core group were able to present a comprehensive plan to include as many interested Filipino youth rather than targeting a select few. The group also planned to assess the needs of Filipino youth in Hawaii and incorporate the findings into a Filipino youth agenda.

Subsequent meetings with Committee members were for the purpose of establishing the process by which the Filipino student group would implement their plans. After the Committee met with the Filipino college students and recognized their commitment and capabilities to follow through with their plans, the Committee agreed to earmark funding from the State of Hawaii for the youth project. As the momentum and enthusiasm increased, the youth working group and Committee members led by D. Los Banos also solicited private funds to support this project (Interviews, 1998).

The college students volunteered numerous hours for this endeavor. Out of the ten youth who worked on the project, only two of the college students were paid a minimal stipend to coordinate the statewide effort. The other working group

... college students  
volunteered ...

members volunteered their time to assist with all of the logistics, lead small groups, facilitate discussions, contact schools, organizations, and service providers.

The whole group (ten Filipino college students) was charged with conducting outreach, organizing, and conducting the community meetings throughout the islands. The group decided to conduct an in-depth needs assessment focusing on local Filipino community issues by utilizing a community forum approach. The working group invited all interested Filipinos, young people, service providers, and university faculty to the community meetings.

The college students who formed the working group had strong ideas about community involvement. They believed that: "...the reappearance of neighborhood board, health committees, parent advisory councils, community associations, advocacy groups, and other similar groups is - a reflection of the resurgence or coming back to participatory democracy through citizen participation in our society."

The process that went on in this conference project, its activities and decision making, followed the concept of citizen participation...people, in order to be affected by a project or program...must

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take an active role in the project...youth must be involved from the onset of idea formation, identification of community needs, writing and rewriting of plans, implementation of project activities, and in reviewing and evaluating their own accomplishments and failures.

An equally important reason for the conference planners to stick to the concept of citizen participation is that they wanted to avoid a common mistake where the results of information gathered are never communicated back to the community. *Sariling Gawa* subscribed fully to community involvement and made every effort to include community input..." (Asuncion, et. al., 1981).

Community forums were held in Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, Big Island, and Oahu. The dual purpose of these community forums and the statewide conference was to gain knowledge about the concerns and problems of Filipino youth and to provide Filipino youth the opportunity to participate in leadership within the larger community. These forums and conferences were successful in bringing together several hundred Filipino youth throughout all of the islands of Hawaii and the participating youth "delegates" established a comprehensive agenda for continuing the initial efforts. As a culmination of the local forums, a statewide conference took place that brought Filipino leaders and over 150 youth together (Asuncion et. al., 1981).

### Sariling Gawa's Growth and Evolution

It is again crucial to remember that *Sariling Gawa* started as a grassroots community effort in 1980, within the context of commemorating Filipinos' historical roots in Hawaii. The stimulus to create this project originated from inside a community by those concerned with the overall well being of the whole community. Social service, education and public health professionals did not create the organization – rather it was a group of college students who were reflected, analyzed, and acted on their experiences of being immigrant, Filipino, and young in Hawaii.

*Sariling Gawa* has undergone three distinct stages of growth during the almost two decades of its life. I am labeling these stages as "creation, expansion, and perpetuation."

In the creation phase, roughly the first five years of the organization's existence, the original group of founders and other Filipino youth leaders who joined them within this initial period, worked to establish an organization with a strong identity and capable leadership body. The youth who

were involved during this phase debated over the mission, goals, and direction of the organization and worked out their differences and conflicts.

Several adult leaders of the community, predominantly from the University of Hawaii who were professors, including Drs. Agbayani, Alegado, Nagtalon-Miller, and Tria-Kerkvliet, and educators in the school system: D. Los Banos, Ernie and Shirley Libarios provided the fledgling group the necessary resources. Under the tutelage of these experienced Filipino leaders and educators, who mentored them through this process, this initial group of young people was able to establish a foundation for a sustainable project.

The youth leaders utilized their skills to lead groups and conduct group process; head program committees; offer public presentations; develop training curricula, plan and conduct conferences; and fundraise to offset some of the expenses to conduct the various activities.

During the expansion phase, lasting approximately eight years, subsequent groups of Filipino young people, primarily college students from the University of Hawaii campuses, sustained and broadened the early efforts of the founding group. They brought Filipino youth together to work on cultural and social events in Hawaii. As members of various college-based clubs, they organized intercollegiate picnics, parties, celebrations, meetings and cultural events so that they could share time together and strengthen their bonds as Filipino youth. These gatherings were also used as the channels for attracting future *Sariling Gawa* participants and leaders.

One of the characteristics of this second period was the emphasis on developing sustainable leadership. The continuing youth leaders also developed other volunteer youth leaders to maintain the work of the organization despite the fact that many of the ten college students who were the in the first year's cohort of leaders dedicated less of their time to

*... they could share time together and strengthen their bonds as Filipino youth ...*

*Sariling Gawa*. They had graduated from college and established careers and families. Some moved to other islands of Hawaii or other parts of the world (interviews with Macugay, Asuncion and Domingo, 1997-98).

Two sectors of the Filipino community led the efforts to recruit and train new leaders of the organization. Professors at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, including Drs. Alegado, Okamura, Revilla and E. Libarios at Leeward Community College taught various courses in Ethnic Studies, Philippine Studies and Community Studies whereby they provided their students with a field studies option. They encouraged their students to participate in *Sariling Gawa* and to write course papers on what they learned. At least one hundred Filipino,



other Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander and European American college students became organizational members (documents review and interviews, 1998).

New leadership developed among Filipino college students who became inspired to join the leadership body after they were mentored and trained by an earlier group. New leadership group cohorts formed, sometimes annually and they continued the tradition of mentoring and training their successors. They also expanded the initial curriculum and improved upon the earlier efforts. Many of the young people returned year after year to volunteer, to lead groups, to serve on committees and/or the Board of Directors. Between 1982 through 1998, several hundred Filipino young people volunteered for various leadership roles for periods of up to eighteen years (interviews and focus groups, 1997-1998).

The current stage of “perpetuation” in *Sariling Gawa* seems to be the result of having established a core of leaders who are committed to the organization and a core set of activities that Filipino youth are committed to conducting annually. There is a general feeling that “*Sariling Gawa* will live on forever” (statement from a survey respondent, 1997 and focus group participants, 1998). Moreover, *Sariling Gawa* appears to be a well-known youth organization in Hawaii whereby the major Filipino community organizations, such as the United Filipino Councils of Hawaii who have chapters on every island, the Filipino Jaycees, the Filipino college student organizations and

## Summary

The organizational structure of *Sariling Gawa* was formulated by the founders to be egalitarian and cooperative so that its youth members would share responsibilities to fulfill its original purpose that is embodied in the name “Our Own Work.” In order to operate as a federal and state registered non-profit organization, *SG* instituted a Board of Directors. Despite the existence of a more formal structure for approximately a decade, the predominant nature of the organization is one of shared leadership and shared workloads.

From the beginning of *Sariling Gawa*, core groups of youth have formed the leadership body to perform the majority of the organizational and programmatic tasks. During their self-determined tenure as leaders, these core groups have performed an assortment of organizational and program duties. Since *Sariling Gawa’s* main activity is to conduct the annual conference for Filipino youth, core groups of leaders are responsible for all planning, recruitment, fundraising and operating the full conference. These responsibilities are significant, given the fact that annually, an average of ninety high school and college students participate from the state of Hawaii.

Despite its structural and programmatic constraints, *Sariling Gawa* has ingredients of being a sustainable community-based intervention that truly attempts to address the needs of the population it serves. Young people establish



organizations such as the YMCA all have a working relationship with members or leaders of *SG*.

The current core activities involve organizing and conducting an annual conference and participating in community and cultural events. These core activities require that the volunteer Filipino youth continually recruit new leaders, network with Filipino youth and community-based organizations throughout Hawaii, and participate in Filipino social and cultural events, such as the Philippine Centennial Celebration. The organization, at this stage, is a well-known entity with a statewide presence. Therefore, the challenge in this perpetuation stage is to sustain its efforts with Filipino youth and the Filipino community. The next challenge, however, is to advocate for societal-level changes that would address deeper levels of institutional discrimination that leads to economic, social and educational barriers, as noted earlier by Agbayani (1996) and Revilla (1996).

***Sariling Gawa’s main intervention approach can be framed within a personal empowerment model that aims to enhance protective factors against at-risk behaviors.***

their priorities and programs, within their capacity and capabilities. Filipino youth are the leaders of an organization whose mission is to work towards improving their own social, educational, health and overall well-being. In choosing to address issues of self-esteem, self-efficacy, Filipino culture, Filipino identity, peer pressure and peer conflicts, social support, family and intergenerational problems, education, future careers, *Sariling Gawa’s* main intervention approach can be framed within a personal empowerment model that aims to enhance protective factors against at-risk behaviors.

Social and health-related problems that Filipino youth face in Hawaii led to the formation of *Sariling Gawa*. Community leaders and youth formed *Sariling Gawa*, in response to their mutual concerns about Filipino youth gangs, violence between U.S. born and Philippine born youth, and the relatively low socioeconomic status of Filipino immigrants in Hawaii. What makes *Sariling Gawa* notable as an organization is that by design, Filipino youth serve as the organization’s leaders and from that vantage point, create their own programs for themselves and for their peers. ♦ [End Excerpt]

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