

In Honor of AMY AGBAYANI, PH.D.

Agbayani means “to be heroic” in Ilokano. Dr. Amy Agbayani has truly lived up to her name. For over 40 years, she has – in her humble yet heroic way – been a tireless advocate for social justice, protecting the rights of women, workers, citizens and immigrants. She is especially passionate about promoting equity and diversity in higher education by giving Filipinos and other minority students an opportunity to succeed.

“Today’s young adults will soon take the reins and provide leadership to our growing community,” said Agbayani. “Each of us has the responsibility to nurture and support the next generation of leaders.”

Agbayani’s advocacy for social justice began in 1964, when an East-West Center scholarship brought her to the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa from her native Philippines. She earned a doctorate in political science from UH then immersed herself in local political and community causes.

In 1971, Agbayani founded and became the first director of Operation Manong, a UH program now referred to as the Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS). She later served as vice president for UH’s Academic Affairs Office and is now the founding director of Student Equity, Excellence and Diversity

(SEED), which encompasses OMSS. Among the other university programs she administers are the UH Women’s Center, the College Opportunities Program for disadvantaged students and the KOKUA program for students with disabilities.

Agbayani has been a huge supporter of Sariling Gawa since its inception in 1980 because it shares a similar mission to Operation Manong. Sariling Gawa empowers young Filipinos to succeed at higher education by building their leadership skills, providing peer support, encouraging community involvement, and instilling ethnic pride.

“Sariling Gawa is making history,” said Agbayani. “It has touched many individuals over the years, both youth and their families. The experiences, memories, and lessons learned have a lasting impact on the youth and their future, in turn impacting our community and our state.”

But in order to achieve widespread impact, she says that today’s youth need to be actively involved in the political process. Agbayani is doing her part serving as co-chair of Abercrombie for Governor and chair of Friends of Representative Joey Manahan.

“Active involvement is imperative to making an impact on policy and programs,” she said. “It is especially important to help assure that diversity and equity remain priorities for funding at UH. It’s easy to cut programs that don’t have community and political support.”

Agbayani has received many accolades for her advocacy efforts including the Alan Saunders American Civil Liberties Union Award, the YWCA Outstanding Women Award, and the UH Distinguished Alumni Award. But when asked to name her most rewarding professional achievement, she simply replied, “mentoring university students who have become leaders, serving the community with integrity.”

Agbayani currently serves on the Board of Advisors for Sariling Gawa. She lives in Kalihi Valley with her partner for over 30 years, retired engineer Gus Gustafson.

