

In Honor of LITO ASUNCION

Lito Asuncion has dedicated his life to being an advocate for equality and helping those who are less fortunate in life. While pursuing a master's degree in public health at the University of Hawai'i in the late 70s, Asuncion witnessed the influx of young Filipino immigrants to Hawai'i and the challenges they faced assimilating into the local culture. He had faced the same challenges at age 16, when his family immigrated to Hawai'i from the Philippines.

"The locals looked down on immigrant Filipinos which caused a lot of conflict," said Asuncion. "We needed to be on equal footing with them to move forward. I realized that if we don't help our own young Filipinos, nobody else will."

A man of action, Asuncion sought opportunities to help. In 1972, while pursuing a graduate degree in sociology, he worked for Operation Manong, a UH program aimed at encouraging young Filipinos and other minority students to succeed in higher education. This experience put him on a career path of helping Hawai'i's immigrant population through

organizations including the UH Ethnic Studies program and the Kalihi-Palama Immigrant Service Center.

In 1980, Asuncion and other leaders were approached by respected Filipino elders to help convene a Filipino youth congress to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Filipino migration to Hawai'i. Instead, Asuncion and some dedicated college students created an organization to enable Filipinos to help their own. Asuncion's philosophy was the inspiration for its name – Sariling Gawa, "Our Own Work." He, William Domingo, and Milli Macugay were the group's first president, vice president, and secretary/treasurer.

Sariling Gawa empowered young people to succeed in school and in their communities by building their leadership skills, providing peer support, encouraging community involvement, and instilling ethnic pride.

"The approach we took was purely one of empowerment and a sincere commitment to improving young adults," said Asuncion. The group's most impactful event was, and still is, its annual youth leadership conference attended by over 120 delegates each year. "Through the years we've produced many leaders who have grown up to be contributing members of the community, he said."

Today, Asuncion lives in Hilo with his wife Milli while their son Rico attends UH Mānoa. He is currently using his gerontology training as a program planner for the Hawai'i County Office of Aging. Asuncion also serves the community by sharing his time and expertise with organizations including the Big Island Filipino Community Council and Hospice of Hilo. Over the years, he and his wife Milli have remained involved in Sariling Gawa. He currently serves on the organization's Board of Advisors and she on its Board of Directors.

As a parting statement to conference delegates and leaders each year, he says, "Take the knowledge you learned at this conference and share it with the community – plant new seeds of knowledge. It is up to all of us to make sure the spirit of Sariling Gawa lives on."

