

RHYME & REASON

Challenging Desperate Slurs and Systemic Racism

Many of us must have heard about a recent *Desperate Housewives* episode where the character played by Teri Hatcher denigrated Philippine medical doctors by asking, “Can I see his diploma, just to make sure it did not come from some med school in the Philippines?” or words to that effect. This caused a major uproar among Filipinos, including those living abroad, which then led to the issuance of an apology by the producers of this very popular television show.

The knee-jerk reaction from the Filipino community is quite understandable, considering the fact that numerous Philippine medical school graduates have excelled and continue to excel in their fields in various parts of the world, including the United States. Therefore, this act of belittling the quality of medical education in the Philippines is extremely offensive and undeserved. Beyond the knee-jerk reaction however, this incident should also remind us that racial stereotyping is a deeply embedded and systemic problem, which cannot simply be remedied or eradicated by an empty apology.

This incident also highlights the need for continuing and comprehensive efforts to break down stereotypes through education, advocacy, lobbying and more education. Ignorance, after all, breeds insensitivity, insensitivity breeds hatred, and hatred breeds all these nonsensical attitudes.

Canada is no stranger to similar types of attitudes. While proud of its multiculturalism, the Canadian society is still prone to stereotyping which targets new immigrants and members of non-white ethnic groups in particular. Sociological and statistical studies abound which prove that racial profiling, stereotyping, and outright discrimination are still some of the major obstacles faced by these groups of people in obtaining full equality within Canadian society.

The lack of proportionate political representation for instance, is very evident in the highest echelons of government. While non-whites now comprise a greater majority of the Canadian population, a visible majority of government officials, judges and parliamentarians remain predominantly white. Non-whites are also very much underrepresented in the medical and legal profession or in the corporate arena. Consequently, the socio-economic make-up of society reflects a disproportionate representation of people of color toiling in low-paying jobs such as domestic work (e.g. Citizenship and Immigration Canada statistics show that some 80% of those who enter Canada via the Live-in Caregiver program are from the Philippines).

The call for full accreditation of foreign credentials is another area, which cries out for immediate attention and full-blown advocacy. While the Canadian government has recently launched some efforts to this end, there is still much to be done towards allowing countless foreign trained professionals obtain meaningful jobs within their areas of expertise. Again, ignorance of, and suspicion over the quality of foreign-earned credentials are among the factors, which leave many highly qualified professionals unable to practice in Canada. The lack of so-called “Canadian experience” leads them to a frustrating cycle of unemployment, financial

burden, and eventual deskilling. It is recognized that the respective organizations which conduct the evaluation of foreign credentials and the regulation of professions are mainly private entities. However, the government still plays a significant role in ensuring that principles of equality, fairness and non-discrimination are upheld even by private entities. Moreso, when public interest issues such as these are at stake.

But all is not hopeless. With sincere and concerted efforts, we can still achieve full equality. To start, we can try to shed the remnants of colonial mentality that we, as Filipinos, inherited through centuries of colonial history as a nation. We can also unite and join efforts with other marginalized groups in advocating and lobbying for systemic, genuine and long-lasting reforms.

Calling all lawyers and law students (Canadian and/or foreign-trained):

Speaking of joint and concerted efforts, a group of Asian lawyers and jurists have recently formed the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers (FACL). Its mission statement includes the promotion of “equity, justice, and opportunity for Asian-Canadian legal professionals and the community” as well as “advocacy, community involvement, legal scholarship and professional development.” The launching conference of FACL will be held on Saturday, November 3, 2007 at the University of Toronto law school from 1-5:30 pm. If interested to join and to receive further details, please send your name and contact information to FACL.Ontario@gmail.com.

The author would be interested to receive any feedback and may be reached at santoslaw@yahoo.com