

Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

May 2003

Nurturing Women

By Lisa Kircher Lumbao

Pace and tranquility, calm minds and flexible bodies, and luxurious spa treatments were the rewards 15 MWF members received for venturing out to

Nurture Tropical Spa & Café in the windy hills of Tagaytay on Saturday, April 26. Co-owned by MWF member Cathy Palma, who hosted us for a lovely day of yoga, lunch, and spa treatments, Nurture is well worth the drive.

Cathy officially opened the spa late last year, after her original plan to build a private weekend getaway home led her to open a small cafe so that the place would pay for itself. After bringing in a masseuse, then two so visiting friends could also come and stay on occasion, before she knew it the weekend home had

become a spa. Soon, the media heard about it and an enticing spread in the Inquirer created so much demand that Nurture has become a thriving business. Like we did, they come for a fabulous lunch and a health, relaxation, or beauty treatment.

After we arrived Saturday morning, Cathy gave us a tour of the landscaped grounds with piped in music, outdoor facial and foot treatment stations, indoor massage beds, and several native huts where guests can stay overnight. The entire site is dotted with native housing, natural materials and fabrics, and even the air conditioning is natural, á la the highlands.

The group gathered in a second floor, open air room, thatched with the intriguing cogon grass designs of a Bontoc house, for a challenging yoga session that had us breathing deeply,

stretching and toning our muscles, balancing on one foot (difficult!), and calming our minds. The stress of our hectic lives floated away with the cottony clouds that floated past the open windows. It was enchanting to be so quiet and enjoy the sound of the wind blowing through the trees and the birds chirping. What a sharp contrast to the honking horns on EDSA!

After our workout we were treated to a sumptuous, healthy, vegetarian lunch of spring rolls, soup, tofu in delicious sauces, fresh fruit, and health shake. We were so full we had to rest before waddling down the pathway to the treatment houses for our massages, facials, and foot rubs. Ah, what luxury!

Although it took us less than an hour and-a-half to get there, it felt as if
(Continued on page 4)



Cecilia Leung, Joan Silver, and Cathy Palma enjoying themselves at Nurture Spa

Next MWF Meeting



When: Monday,
May 19, 2003, 6:30 p.m.

What: Laura Cunning,
Gemologist, pearl expert and
jewelry designer will speak on
“everything you need to know
about pearls.”

Where: Susan Nishihira's
home 2427 Bougainvillea Place,
Dasmarinas Village, Makati

Bring: A contribution to the
potluck dinner.

June meeting: June 16, 2003



Voice of the Chair

By Lisa Kircher Lumbao

The Subtext of Fear

By Rina Jimenez-David

In the world of academic research, it might have looked like every red-blooded male's dream project.

A few years ago, Eric Ratliff obtained a Fulbright grant to do research on the women working in the “go-go bars” of Angeles City and Makati, traveling as far as the provinces of Leyte and Samar to interview the women’s relatives and gain a first-hand view of the families and communities that nurtured them. But most of the time, Ratliff conducted research by hanging around the bars, talking to the women while they were entertaining customers or in their off-hours, inside the clubs or in their boarding houses. So familiar did Ratliff become to the women that they soon began calling him their American “kuya” (elder brother). And lest readers think Ratliff took advantage of his unique position as a researcher-confidante, he says he took pains to tell the women that he was married (to a Filipina), and that his interest in them was purely “academic.”

Still, this did not prevent him from developing sympathy for his research subjects, or recognizing the social and cultural roots of the sex industry in this country. “You have to be careful of uncles because they might rape you” is the title he uses in a presentation on “Gender and Everyday Violence in the Philippines,” an abstract of his doctoral dissertation for the Department of Anthropology of the University of Texas in Austin.

“Relations between men and women are informed by violence-not only the actual experiences of abuse, but also the images, public

discourse, and memories concerning acts of brutality upon others,” writes Ratliff. Seeking to show how “various forms of masculine aggression (physical, psychological, economic) influence women’s roles and activities in Philippine society,” Ratliff says the “macho” ideology of manhood “rationalizes forceful behavior toward women,” while fostering the “complementary notion of a passive Filipino femininity.”

“Religion supports this imagery,” writes Ratliff, “presenting the wife/mother as a ‘martyr’ who suffers for the benefit of the all-important family (marriage and the ideology of ‘the family’ stress reproduction and the raising of children rather than the relationship between husband and wife). Filipinas who challenge male authority are subject to violent recrimination from husbands/fathers in the household with limited legal protection or social recourse. The state is also involved in the control of women’s actions through the perpetuation of abusive situations (exploitative labor laws, ban on divorce), as well as the policing of women’s public displays of ‘immorality’ (in appearance or behavior). Male domination is thus maintained by the ever-present threat of violence against women who transgress social norms.”

Using samples from local media stories of violence against women, Ratliff then shows how, despite the many laws against abuse of women, including domestic violence, Filipino women get the subtext of fear loud and clear.

Graphic representations, by way of photographs or video images, or even of detailed and colorful descriptions, of forms of brutality against women help create this atmosphere of fear.

“Women are constantly reminded of their powerlessness and position as ‘victims’ by their supposed vulnerability,” says Ratliff. While highlighting women’s victimization may serve “political ends,” he says it also serves to reinforce “the assumption that women are powerless, and ironically, that safety may be found in the protective custody of male family members or the State.” To illustrate his point, Ratliff uses a headline from this paper: “Wife who refused sex with hubby hit by club.”

“Rape in many Asian cultures is linked to feminine chastity, and

“Women are constantly reminded of their powerlessness and position as ‘victims’ by their supposed vulnerability...”

While highlighting women’s victimization may serve political ends...it also serves to reinforce the assumption that women are powerless, and ironically, that safety may be found in the protective custody of male family members or the State.”

women who are raped suffer a loss of ‘virtue’ since this form of violence is often seen as a lapse in personal morality,” says Ratliff. He cites local statistics showing that women who are single and virgins have a 94 percent chance of obtaining a conviction in cases of rape, while rape cases involving single women who admit to no longer being virgins result in a conviction rate of only 32 percent. Married women who are raped are also deemed more believable in the Philippine justice system, with an 81 percent conviction rate, perhaps

(Continued on page 3)

Manila Women’s Forum

The Manila Women’s Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Penny Poole**, Programs, Newsletter. **Beaulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter. Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 818-2887 or 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

The Subtext.... (From page 2)
because they have engaged in “socially sanctioned” sexual relations.

Says Ratliff: “Such statistics communicate to women that legal protection is available for those who are chaste (either as virgins or married women), but those who are sexually active outside of marriage are ultimately responsible for any misfortune because their ‘promiscuous’ status renders rape a reasonable outcome.”

Though statistics have proven that most violence occurs in homes and is committed by family members, “the information that women receive from the media underscores the dangers of public spaces, where rape is presented as a crime committed by anonymous persons with some form of social pathology (rapists are usually described as ‘mentally ill’ or ‘drug addicted’).”

And so in this country, “women are ultimately blamed for venturing into what are perceived and presented as dangerous situations,” and women who fail to act “sensibly,” or who expose themselves to unnecessary risks by venturing out to public spaces, have only themselves to blame.

But if “ordinary” women in the Philippines live under a shadow of fear, threat, risk and blame, those whose behavior strays from the norm, because of sexual identity, practices or even occupation, are burdened further by their “stigmatization.”

—Inquirer, April 22, 2003

On Valentine’s Day three years ago, a Japanese customer summoned Rosita Canaman, a bar girl, to his hotel room for sex. As he told the police later, he became enraged when he caught her stealing from him. The customer then stabbed Rosita in the neck with a fork (!), strangled her and pushed her through a window on the 21st floor of the building.

The Japanese then called the escort service to request another companion for the evening, but the service called the police when he told them what happened to Rosita. It turned out that the customer had been accused of rape several times before, yet managed to avoid prosecution each time by paying a token amount to the victim’s family.

Eric Ratliff, who tells this story,

...the government has embarked on a day-care construction program, mainly in response to findings that most incidents of incestuous and child rape occurred inside the home between 10 a.m. and noon.

Women’s groups also argued that the feminization of migrant labor left children vulnerable to the abuse or neglect of fathers who are not prepared to raise a family alone.

says Rosita’s fate is an “ominous narrative” for many of the women he had worked with on his “ethnographic” research on women in the sex industry. “Since (the Japanese) was a regular customer at the bars in Manila where I conduct research,” recounts Ratliff, “I discussed this event with some of the women who knew him personally. They described him as a ‘sadist,’ noting that his drug use caused him to ‘go crazy’ sometimes. However, this attack did not induce a general recognition of vulnerability among these women working in an occupation that is usually associated with a high incidence of sexual violence. Women working in the go-go bars -- and indeed female friends throughout Philippine society -- have informed me that violence can occur anywhere at any time...”

“WITHIN two days of this savage murder,” notes Ratliff, the Japanese was back in the go-go bars “seeking comfort in the company of friends who did not want to have anything to do with him anymore ... Several women later told me that they ran and hid upstairs when he came into the bar, hoping to avoid him because they were afraid. His mere presence on the streets serves as a form of gendered terrorism because it reveals the extent of male power, able to get away with murder because the state does not care to prosecute violent offenders especially when the victim is labeled a ‘prostitute,’ and thus viewed as being responsible for her own demise.”

“Sex-for-delivery libreng droga pa [plus free drugs]!” is how the Abante Tonight tabloid headlined its story on Rosita, who was described as not just a prostitute but as a drug provider as well (a charge relatives deny). Regardless of the motives for thus labeling the victim, Ratliff says “her identification as a prostitute diminishes the severity of the crime, and indeed, her case faded from the headlines as a more ‘serious’ mauling of a cab driver caught the media’s attention (he received a black eye in an altercation with several American servicemen).”

RATLIFF observes that in this country, social “controls” constrict the behavior of women while serving to “punish” those women who dare cross them. “Filipino women realize that they risk sexual violence simply by being in a public place -- especially at night -- because they are considered available for sex if they are not accompanied by a protective male figure.”

“Antiquated” vagrancy laws are often invoked by police to arrest women suspected of engaging in prostitution, though their suspicions are often triggered by nothing more substantial than a woman’s having an unusual hair color, wearing heavy makeup or revealing clothing, or behaving in a boisterous manner.

In the last few years, the government has embarked on a day-care construction program, mainly in response to findings that most incidents of incestuous and child rape occurred inside the home between 10 a.m. and noon. Women’s groups also argued that the feminization of

(Continued on page 4)

In the local setting, both wives and prostitutes are seen as not having any right to refuse sexual relations.

...fathers convicted of raping their daughters often justify their acts by citing their wives’ refusal or inability to satisfy their sexual needs, needs that daughters must then fulfill.

The Subtext... (From page 3)
migrant labor left children vulnerable to the abuse or neglect of fathers who are not prepared to raise a family alone. And yet, Ratliff points out, “despite the increasing recognition of home and family as a location of violence, the government insists in maintaining the current structure at all costs by denying couples the right to divorce, and providing few alternatives for women in abusive situations.”

Ratliff cites the policy of making individual plaintiffs responsible for paying all legal fees as in effect “rendering justice inaccessible for most.” Also, he points out, “local values dictate that confrontation

Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies.

The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.

—C. S. Lewis

should be avoided, so domestic conflicts and instances of sexual abuse rarely make it to the courts. In many cases, single women who have been raped are encouraged to marry their attackers to avoid scandal. Men who realize that this is a socially desired outcome of sexual violence have thus employed rape and kidnapping as an accepted form of courtship and expression of desire.”

MANY of the women he interacted with uttered the cautionary statement that Ratliff uses as the title of his paper: “You have to be careful of uncles because they might rape you.” “Uncle” in this case, says Ratliff, refers not just to a male blood relative but also includes “the many fictive kin that form the basis of intimate Filipino social relations.” That the women recognized the threat posed by real or honorific “uncles” shows, says Ratliff, “how prevalent the idea of the predatory male is in this culture.”

“Kinship” is supposed to preclude any sexual motivations or relations among the people involved, but Ratliff says “the status of these individuals in the local context should be analyzed to discern the nature of consent.” In the local setting, both wives and prostitutes are seen as not having any right to refuse sexual relations. And fathers convicted of raping their daughters often justify their acts by citing their wives’ refusal or inability to satisfy their sexual needs, needs that daughters must then fulfill. ■

—Inquirer, April 23, 2003

Nurturing... (From page 1)
we were hundreds of miles from the grit, grime, and noise of Manila. It was great for a day trip and some of the women began planning weekend getaways, as there are several rooms available to rent overnight.

Cathy is exploring ways to expand the services offered at the spa to create a complete nurturing center for women, especially those facing personal problems and in need of professional advice and counseling. For more information about Nurture, contact Cathy at 813-6954 or email Nurture at nurturespa@edsamail.com.ph or see their website at www.treasures.com.ph/nurture. ■

New Medications for Women

St. MOM’S WORT
Plant extract that treats mom’s depression by rendering preschoolers unconscious for up to six hours.

EMPTYNESTROGEN
Highly effective suppository that eliminates melancholy by enhancing the memory of how awful they were as teenagers and how you couldn’t wait till they moved out.

MWF Newsletter
c/o Lisa Kircher Lumbao
3B Cordova Condominium
138 Valero Street, Salcedo Village
Makati City, Metro Manila