
Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

July 2003

The Business of Building Bridges

By Diane Loik

Networking is a vital skill for those entering a new culture and environment, but some people have made it their specialty: Dorota Owen is one such individual. "...call Dorota if you have trouble getting information, she knows who to call"...if you want to get involved in counseling, there is this gal who runs a course at In Touch—give her a call...her name is Dorota." As a newcomer to Manila, I began to gather information about my new home, and was referred to Dorota repeatedly. At various meetings I listened to announcements about her speaking engagements and courses she was teaching at In Touch. Who was this person getting more press than President Gloria Arroyo?

It was my good fortune that on the day I attend my first Manila Women's Forum meeting the guest speaker was none other than the infamous Dorota Owen...finally, my chance to learn about the person who has impacted the lives of so many. With a great big smile, she introduced herself as someone who is "in the business of building bridges" and as her story unfolded we came to understand what this means.

Dorota was born in Glasgow, Scotland; her parents immigrated to the U.K. from Krakow, Poland. She appreciated at an early age the duality and diversity of growing up with two distinct cultures—early training for things to come. Her post-secondary education included architecture, art history and English literature and she became a teacher. In 1993, she married in Scotland and moved to Muscat, Oman. As Dorota said "It was the right opportunity at the right time." She found work at the Sultan School

as a teacher of English literature and during this time she started a family. By 1994, in addition to a full-time job, she was raising two children and also preparing for a career change.

There was a need for a life-skills educator in Muscat, so she seized the opportunity to develop her own skills to meet the demand. One thing led to another, and Dorota, the free-lance education consultant, was born. She developed programs for schools, colleges and corporations, providing program training for business communication, career and personal development. In the process, she enhanced her own career development in her new field; she took a variety of courses including counseling and psychology and found time to have one more child! In 2000, Dorota and her now family of five, completed their contract in the Middle East and moved to Manila.

On arrival in Manila, Dorota was suffering from physical and emotional exhaustion; she sought help from trained professionals and was able to re-energize herself for her new adventure in the Philippines. She immediately became involved in local expat networks and readily took advantage of any help and information available. As she gained strength, she found herself in a position to help others. She was in the process of creating a foundation that would offer courses, resources and support for personal development when she discovered In Touch.

In Touch Community Services, Inc. located at 48 McKinley Road, Forbes Park, Makati, is a non-profit, non-government organization that offers an assortment of programs and workshops including: crisis line telephone counseling, face-to-face counseling, business training, cross-cultural orientation, support groups,

volunteer opportunities, and other community services. Dorota became an In Touch volunteer and helped to expand the scope of the center's programs and workshops, and was recently named Acting Executive Director.

Dorota's energy is endless; it is doubtful this woman will have time for menopause! In addition to her many accomplishments and her role in bringing together various aspects of Manila's culture and community, one project deserves special mention—the highlight of her talk to the Manila Women's Forum: "Meditations for Mad Moments—A Stress Handbook for City Dwellers."

In May of 2002, Dorota decided to write a book that would provide comfort, inspiration and information on resources to stressed out residents of Manila, especially newcomers. The proceeds from the book will be used to support the In Touch center and its various community programs and workshops. Dorota knew her time in Manila was coming to an end, so if

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Next MWF Meeting

When: Monday, July 21, 6:30 p.m.

What: Cecilia Leung will speak about Chinese antiques and show us the pieces in her gallery/shop.

Where: Cecilia Leung's home, 44 McKinley Road, Makati (look for the red gate across from the shopping center)

Bring: A contribution to the potluck dinner.

August meeting: Monday, August 18



Voice of the Chair

By Lisa Kircher Lumbao

Sustained by a Community of Women

The following is an excerpt of a chapter in Dorota Owen's upcoming book, "Meditations for Mad Moments: A Stress Handbook for City Dwellers."

Living in Manila over the past 10 years has been a great adventure for me—challenging, difficult, and frustrating at times, but also exciting, inspiring, and incredibly fulfilling.

One of the things that has contributed greatly to the positive side of the scales is the Manila Women's Forum (MWF), a cross-cultural networking group for women that meets once a month at someone's home for a potluck dinner and presentation. I got involved in the group in 1993, a year after I moved to the Philippines with my Filipino husband. I came from the US as an idealistic, fresh graduate with a master's in environmental management.

I was lucky to find an interesting job in my field quickly that paid enough to cover my student loans. I was immersed in Filipino culture both at home (living with a Filipino family) and at work, although I could speak English at the office. I rode the bus and a jeepney every day from Parañaque to Quezon City and back. It was a tough year.

But there was a light at the end of the tunnel of that first year. I went to my first MWF meeting in June, right after my husband and I moved into our own apartment. What a revelation! I hadn't realized how much I needed to talk with other women who were facing similar challenges of living in Manila as a foreigner or *balikbayan*. At that first meeting we were asked to introduce ourselves by

sharing information that would be surprising to the others. So I told the group that I had been up until 1 a.m. the night before doing laundry in our new apartment. In unison, they ordered me to: "Get a maid!!" Which I did, and life was much better.

Over the years, I have treasured MWF and have attended nearly every meeting, except when I was out of town or living overseas for short periods. The group is made up of women from more than 23 countries, including many women from our host nation, who get together once a month, usually at someone's home, for a potluck dinner, a round of introductions, a speaker, and discussion. Meeting with other women to connect, let our hair down a little, encourage each other, share experiences, and laugh is rejuvenating, and I quickly realized was absolutely necessary for my sanity. When I leave the meetings I am so energized, inspired, and happy, that it takes me a few hours to settle down before I can go to sleep.

Others have commented that the group is welcoming, validating, encouraging, and is "a women's group for women who don't enjoy women's groups as a rule." Maybe it works because it doesn't try to be anything more than it is: a forum for women to meet and learn. There is no competition with other groups, we don't run fundraisers, we don't have a big committee structure, and we don't compete among ourselves.

MWF was the creation of an American "networker extraordinaire" named Marcia Hamilton who was in Manila in the early 90s. Marcia is one of those incredible people who has made it her *raison d'être* to connect people who don't know each other but should. She makes the phenomenon of "six degrees of separation" seem far too many...in Manila, Marcia was the single connector for many of us. She formalized her love of networking by forming the Bangkok Women's Forum before her husband's UNDP job posted them to Manila. When the family later transferred Italy, she formed the Turin Women's Forum, which is also still going strong.

In those early days, Marcia asked me to start a simple monthly newsletter to give the group more exposure and depth. A regular publication also helped us stick to a monthly schedule for meetings since

we had to announce something every month.

There is something about the regularity, the informal structure, and the desire of women to help each other that has provided a sense of cohesion to MWF that I haven't experienced in other groups. I've found more than eight jobs, close friends, helpful advice, and encouragement through MWF women, and I'm not alone. It seems that at least one person at every meeting has something positive to report that has come from an MWF encounter. My first MWF job was the handiwork of Marcia who found out that another member was looking for an environmental specialist and recommended me.

Part of the beauty of the group is its fluidity. Some women move away and new women arrive. It's always fresh. Some don't find us for years, others who have been on our mailing list for several years have attended only once or twice, but pay their dues regularly to stay in touch through the newsletter. More than once someone's plane has landed the very day of the meeting and a friend insisted that she attend right away to help start her Manila adventure on the right foot: surrounded by a supportive community of women.

I insist that it be a "guilt free" group. Come if you feel like it; not

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The 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 and Susan Nishihira**, Programs. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 818-2887, 632-4478, 0917-892-2989 or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

Voice (from page 2)

because you feel obligated. From the current mailing list of 180 women, meetings average between 20 and 35 women. The group is unique among women's groups in Manila because it meets in the evenings so working women can attend. This can make some women who aren't working outside the home feel inferior when they hear about others' exciting careers. I try to jump in and correct someone if she introduces herself as "just a stay-at-home mom." With a child of my own, I know how exhausting and incredibly important the 24-hour-a-day motherhood job is.

I also think MWF has a friendly and welcoming atmosphere because of the (sometimes lengthy) introductions that we share at each meeting. The women tend to become better acquainted through each introduction, and are more likely to talk later with new people instead of just sticking with the few "safe" people they know. And we often cheer each other on during the introductions. Stephanie Bender-Kitz was a long time member and often hosted our meetings at her luxurious house in Forbes Park. She was working on her Ph.D. for many of those years, so when she finally finished she got an enthusiastic round of applause from the group.

At the last MWF meeting held at her house, I was sad to see Stephanie leave and move back to the U.S. But a wonderful connection occurred at that meeting to ease that sad memory: the speaker told us about her orphanage for victims of the Mindanao conflict in Zamboanga. This led one of the members to voice her interest in taking in a foster child. Another member called her the next day, and a week later, she opened her home to a cheerful little boy who urgently needed one.

I first became Chair of MWF in 1995 when I realized that someone needed to take control so that we didn't finish at 10:30 p.m. every time we met. So I jumped in. Over the years, I have taken on most of the duties of running the group mainly because I find it easier to do myself. At one time we held steering committee meetings monthly, but dealing with traffic and everyone's hectic schedules was a hassle. I deeply value the group, and want to keep it running as efficiently as I can. To do this while also working full time, caring for my daughter, and being involved in my church and

other activities, has led me to keep things as simple as possible. The newsletter format is pretty standard and I twist someone's arm to write the article for page one summarizing the presentation. The newsletter assistant and my maid take care of getting each issue to print, and many people help scout out and arrange speakers and tell newcomers about the group.

I'm told that pass on value of the newsletter is high, among offices as well as families. I'm also aware that men are often disappointed that they are not invited to our meetings because we've had such interesting speakers over the years. These have included such venerable personalities as Sister Mary John Mananzan, former President of St. Scholastica's College and founder of Gabriela, a radical women's rights group, and the Women's Crisis Center; Eleanora

Misuari, wife of then leader of the Moro National Liberation Front; discussions on female circumcision (from a circumcised African woman); personal finance; how to build a website and Internet business; exploring personality types; and much more.

I used to worry about what would happen to MWF if I ever left Manila, so was gratified that it rallied on while I was in the US for 4 months for the birth of my first child in 2001. Several people pitched in to make it work.

Running MWF gives me a tremendous sense of satisfaction, knowing that my commitment to the group fills a need that clearly exists in Manila's expatriate society and among returning Filipinos who don't quite fit into their previous networks and support systems. For these bicultural women and for expats in general, in some way, MWF creates a sense of both safety and of family.

My close involvement with the group also gives me the opportunity to welcome and assist newcomers, which I find rewarding. Living in Manila can be a wonderful experience once you know the ropes, so I enjoy sharing what I know with new people to help them adapt and have a better time doing it. Although I complain along with the rest about the incessant difficulties inherent to this city, I do love it here. From the Filipino warmth of spirit and their family values, to the interesting and friendly expatriates that congregate here, to my terrific household help who take such good care of us, to the luxury of SCUBA diving, tropical beaches, and affordable massages and pedicures. All of these, plus the joy I get from MWF, are potent antidotes to the stress that inevitably comes with life in Manila. ■

The Development Set

Excuse me, friends, I must catch my jet -
I'm off to join the Development Set;
My bags are packed, and I've had all my shots,
I have travellers' cheques and pills for the trots.

The Development Set is bright and noble,
Our thoughts are deep and our vision global;
Although we move with the better classes,
Our thoughts are always with the masses.

In Sheraton hotels in scattered nations,
We damn multinational corporations;
Injustice seems so easy to protest,
In such seething hotbeds of social rest.

We discuss malnutrition over steaks
And plan hunger talks during coffee breaks.
Whether Asian floods or African drought,
We face each issue with an open mouth.

We bring in consultants whose circumlocution
Raises difficulties for every solution -
Thus guaranteeing continued good eating
By showing the need for another meeting.

The language of the Development Set,
Stretches the English alphabet;
We use swell words like "epigenetic,"
"Micro," "macro," and "logarithmic."

Development Set homes are extremely chic,
Full of carvings and curios and draped with batik.
The eye-level photographs subtly assure
That your host is at home with the rich and the poor.

Enough of these verses — on with the mission!
Our task is as broad as the human condition!
Just pray to God the biblical promise is true:
"The poor ye shall always have with you. "

— *Ross Coggin*

Building Bridges (From page 1)

she was going to do this project she had to do it immediately. So she set the dream in motion and over the last 6 weeks completed a wonderful collection of writing, photos, and artwork donated by both Philippine nationals and expats. The book relates how various individuals deal with the stress of Manila city life and what coping mechanisms can be applied to help reduce stress when faced with day-to-day frustrations. The book requires financial support in

the way of sponsorship and book sales: orders and sponsorship information can be obtained from Dorota directly by e-mail: dorota@mydestiny.net. (the pre-selling price of the book is 500 pesos). The book will be launched in October, 2003.

Dorota is scheduled to leave Manila July 10, 2003 – she leaves an incredible legacy of what desire, creativity and networking can do. To stay ‘in touch’ with her, you may e-

mail her or visit her website: www.intuitionfoundation.org. Dorota attributes much of her success to the dedicated and committed volunteers at In Touch; in fact, it is from the In Touch volunteer pool that a new and dynamic leader of In Touch has emerged.

Nikki Sayres is the newly appointed Executive Director for In Touch Community Services, and she assumes her new position July 1. Nikki is originally from the U.S.A. and has worked as a consultant in international development. She has worked in Japan, Cambodia, and Vietnam. She came to Manila about 8 months ago and started volunteering at In Touch. As the new Executive Director, Nikki intends to expand programs and increase the scope of the core mission. Nikki is looking for volunteers who can “do anything!” In Touch is always in need of individuals to help with fundraising, administration, counseling, and the crisis line.

For more information about volunteer opportunities at In Touch call 893-1893 or Fax: 893-1892. A telephone call to In Touch Community Services is a great way to get involved in the community and a great start to one’s own ‘bridge building.’ ■



Nikki Sayres (left) and Dorota Owen (right)

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