



# Staten Island Advance

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## Gracelyn's Chronicles: The Nicotra's Go Above and Beyond Again

### Staten Island, N.Y. -

It was mid-November 2013, almost Thanksgiving, when Richard and Lois Nicotra, hoteliers and philanthropists, called an impromptu meeting of Filipino-American community leaders in the main ballroom of their Hilton Garden Inn in Bloomfield.

They wanted to help the millions of victims of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

A week prior, Typhoon Haiyan, the deadliest typhoon in Philippine history, slammed into coastal towns. Especially hard-hit were Tacloban, Leyte and Samar Island. At latest count, 6,200 Filipinos are dead, 27,000 people injured, close to 4 million homeless and 1,800 remain missing.

The Nicotras were moved by the images of destruction on television, of young children ripped from the arms of their parents, of dead bodies strewn on the sides of roads. They were saddened by footage of Filipinos scavenging in wreckage for food to feed their babies and mass burials in makeshift hillside cemeteries.

The Nicotras announced to the committee that they wanted to host a fundraising dinner dance on January 15, 2014 to raise money to aid recovery for typhoon victims in the Philippines. Many of their trusted employees were Filipino-American. Their hearts bled for them.

But unlike other fundraisers that have enormous overhead costs, Richard and Lois Nicotra were donating everything.

That's right, EVERYTHING: The food, beverages, service, and event space, not to mention the time of their incredibly talented team: Kristine Garlisi, Executive Director of the Nicotra Charitable Foundation; Susan Anderson, Director of Marketing; and Carroll Tavella, their Director of Catering.



*From the left, Kristine Garlisi, executive director of the Nicotra Foundation; Ch. 7 Eyewitness News journalist Nina Pineda; Lois and Richard Nicotra, and columnist Dr. Gracelyn Santos at the Typhoon Haiyan fundraiser Jan. 15 at the Hilton Garden Inn, Bloomfield. (NICOTRA FOUNDATION)*

100% -- every last penny -- of the proceeds would go directly to the Philippines, under the auspices of the Archdiocese of New York. The Nicotras, in addition to being wildly successful business people, possess incredibly generous hearts. They walk the walk, they talk the talk.

Previously, they've held similar fundraisers to benefit victims of natural disasters closer to home: Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and Hurricane Sandy, in October 2012.

They have raised literally hundreds of thousands of dollars for their neighbors, colleagues, and loved ones.

Everyone at that first, newly-formed committee meeting left with an energized resolve to make this Filipino Typhoon Benefit the most successful fundraiser ever.

But then something happened that sidelined preparations:



The holidays. Christmas (an overwhelming majority of Filipinos are Christian) and New Year consumed the time and energy of committee members, including me.

By the time everyone came up for air after all the holiday partying, it was January. There was an underwhelming number of paid reservations. How many, you ask?

Well ... let's just say we were gunning for 500 people. What we had was 40. Ackk.

It was feared that Staten Islanders wouldn't care enough to help the typhoon victims, almost six weeks after the fact, half-way around the world. But we remained optimistic and got to work.

Tita Imperial and Lourdes Panlilio of the San Lorenzo Ruiz Association, and their teams, mobilized the members of their Filipino networks. Phone calls were made, email blasts sent, and flyers distributed to Filipino communities on Staten Island and through the office of the Consul General of the Philippines, Mario deLeon.

Unsuspecting people from colleagues to patients to customers of Filipino businesses received invitations. Facebook and Twitter were bombarded with reminders to attend or donate (sorry about clogging up your newsfeeds, by the way).

Pretty soon, the reservation count grew to 250. Respectable. A week later, the buzz caught on. Thank God.

Three days before the event, the tally hit 400 people. Donations poured in online from folks unable to attend but wanting to help.

The day before the event, we hit a remarkable 600. Frankly, I was shocked. The generous heart of the Staten Island community just absolutely floored me.

But through it all, Richard and Lois Nicotra never lost hope, not one iota of faith. They were confident that Staten Islanders would step up. They always do, they said.

And they were right.

That night on January 15, almost 800 people gathered at Nicotra's Hilton Ballroom for the Philippine Typhoon Benefit, completely underwritten by them.

It was an incredibly fun evening of entertainment and laughter and raffles. It made me proud to be a Filipino-American, proud to be a Staten Islander.

Ever more thrilling was my co-emceeding the evening's program with Nina Pineda, WABC-TV Ch. 7 Eyewitness

News journalist and lead reporter for "7 On Your Side. She was the picture of elegance and personality. She was absolutely lovely and had rushed to Staten Island immediately after taping the 5 o'clock newscast.

The Jaleo Filipino Dance Ensemble of New York performed three fantastic traditional dances in authentic Filipino costumes. Renowned artist Scott LoBaido, introduced by Advance Editor Brian Laline and Dr. Larry Arann, painted his trademark American flag, which fetched \$1,700 at auction, by Dr. Manny Lagmay.

His eminence, Timothy Cardinal Dolan, even attended and addressed the crowd, expressing his gratitude for the outpouring of Staten Island love for those suffering halfway around the world. My parents were thrilled to have their photo taken with him.

There were performances by the fourth-graders of Blessed Sacrament School in West Brighton, who'd raised \$316 for the cause by selling Rainbow loom bracelets.

Additionally, 13-year-old Charista Santos Mroczek, who is half-Filipino and Miss Richmond County Outstanding Teen 2014, played Chopin on the piano for the crowd. Charista raised \$1,200 for the event through a bowling fundraiser two weeks prior.

Staten Island Tech students, headed by student Juvianne Rivera, presented a giant check in the amount of \$1,100. Students from St. Joseph Hill Academy High School volunteered and sold tons of raffle tickets.

The crowd was wowed by 15-year-old Filipino recording artist, Nina Mojares, who had sung the American AND Filipino national anthems; Father Glen, the "singing priest"; and opera singers Giuseppe and Daniella Taormina.

Incredibly, almost 800 people came together that night in a true team effort to raise a staggering \$70,000 -- and counting -- for typhoon victims in the Philippines. All made possible by the generosity of Lois and Richard Nicotra.

At the end of the night, I was reminded, once again, how incredibly generous and compassionate Staten Islanders can be.