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Help is on the Way: Malalis (far left) established BABAE, Inc. after seeing the need for an organization that focuses on helping Filipinas deal with violence, immigration and psychological problems. With co-founders Jeanie Casison-Tansiri (second from left), Vivian Itchon Gupta and Carolyn C. Antonio.



HEAR HER ROAR

By Lisa Wong Macabasco

Fighting for justice in and out of the office, Carmelyn Malalis is making waves with her case management organization for Filipino survivors of violence, the first of its kind in the nation.

A poster of Wonder Woman proclaims “Wonder Woman for President” and hangs behind a vintage Bionic Woman lunchbox in the corner of Carmelyn Malalis’ office. Like these two female superheroes, Malalis is a strong woman, with an athletic 5-foot 7-inch build, a sturdy gait, shiny long dark hair and a bright smile.

But a better comparison to those heroines can be made in the work that she does, fighting injustice not with her fists, but with the law and with kindness. Malalis aids those in need, both in her day job as an employment lawyer at the law firm of Outten and Golden LLP and in her free time as co-founder of BABAE Inc., a case management organization for Filipina survivors of violence in the New York and New Jersey area, the first and only

one of its kind in the nation.

Growing up, Malalis, 30, encountered few Filipinos in the New Jersey and New York areas. Born in Newark and raised in the blue-collar, Catholic small town of Carteret, New Jersey, Malalis felt isolated as part of the only Filipino family for miles around. Today, there is a large Filipino population in Carteret, but back then classmates often mistook her for Chinese.

“They would call me ‘ching-chong,’” Malalis says. “And it didn’t help that my mother bought me a Hong Kong Fooey lunchbox.”

In high school, she became increasingly interested in politics, particularly civil rights movements. At Yale, she entered as a pre-med student, but eventually followed her interests and majored in women’s studies.

In college she studied not only Filipinos, but all types of minority groups, including gays and African Americans. Susan Shah, a classmate from Northeastern University Law School, says Malalis brings that “coalitional” view to her work today.

“She’s all about team effort, a broad-based effort,” says Shah, who met Malalis through both Northeastern’s Asian Pacific American Law Students Association and also the school’s Queer Caucus, a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender legal organizing group.

In 2002, Malalis, along with three other Filipinas, co-founded BABAE, a nonprofit organization that provides culturally sensitive case management services for Filipina survivors of violence and trafficking.

Malalis met BABAE’s co-founders

through GABRIELA Network, an international advocacy and education organization that deals with issues affecting Filipinas, such as militarized prostitution, the mail-order bride industry and labor exploitation. The group would often receive calls from other advocacy organizations asking for help for Filipina survivors in the form of direct services and referrals, and after going through the same routine numerous times, they decided to form BABAE.

"Filipinas coming into the country are very vulnerable to this sort of thing," Malalis says. "They're still acclimating, yet they have to deal with intimate personal violence in a completely new country. They don't even have firm immigration status, and they have no support, cultural or otherwise."

Violence towards Filipina immigrants is at the nexus of multiple issues, according to Malalis.

"These women aren't just dealing with violence, they're dealing with immigration, psychological problems," she says. "There was a real need to make sure all these dots get connected. There was no group dealing specifically with Filipinas."

Strong cultural factors in the community often worked against Filipina survivors receiving adequate care and attention, Malalis says.

"You're dealing with a culture where there's no divorce," she explains, noting how difficult it was to find culturally sensitive care and legal providers. Lawyers often told Filipina survivors simply to leave their husbands, which Malalis was critical of.

"The terms you use are so important—'Does your husband abuse you?' What does that mean to them?" she says.

The influence of Catholicism on the Filipino community and the Church's emphasis on sacrifice also play a role in cases of violence.

"I can't tell you how many times I've heard the phrase, 'This is my cross to bear,'" Malalis says.

Carolyn Antonio, another co-founder of BABAE, says Malalis' activism may stem from her parents' leadership in their church in Carteret. Malalis still goes to church with her parents, a sign of her dedication to her parents more than her religious conviction, according to Antonio.

Since BABAE's inception, the group has served fewer than 20 clients, partly because the group has been functioning for such a short time and partly because only the four founders work on cases in their free time. Funding is in the works, and they recently received their first grant.

"It's basically this labor of love," Malalis says.

She also said the community's response to the group's existence has been very positive, but Shah reveals that Malalis' work has met a lot of resistance.

"There's a lot of denial, a lot of pushing it under the rug, not airing dirty laundry," Shah explains. "She experienced it in the States, within her own family and community in New Jersey and New York. In the Philippines, she felt it with the government and mainstream society on a larger scale."

"When we tell people our group has to do with domestic violence or trafficking, there's like an 'Oh...' like a little bit of a pause," Antonio says. "But it's been positive. There's a weird moment at first, but people like that we're working for the community." ■

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