

Amerasians: The unwanted angels of Angeles City

by Joseph Holandes Ubalde, InterAksyon.com

ANGELES CITY, Pampanga - There was a hint of embarrassment in Mark Gilbore's voice as he pointed to the infamous red light district of Angeles City.

It was almost dusk when girls of various shapes and sizes began to pour out onto the streets. Clad in clothes that showed off more skin than fabric, they sashayed on stilettos into the narrow road called "Walking Street," their glassy smiles intact.

"There," Mark said as he pointed to a girl wearing a skimpy rodeo outfit outside a bar that was just about to open its neon sign. "She's like me," he said, looking away.

The girl, like Mark, is an Amerasian or a child fathered by American servicemen who were stationed in Clark Base in Pampanga, back when the US had its biggest military bases in the Asia Pacific region, here at Subic and Clark. The American bases were opened from 1903 till 1991, when the destructive eruption of nearby Mt. Pinatubo and a historic 12-11 vote by the Philippine Senate finally forced their exit from Philippine shores. But when the soldiers left, few cared about the children they left behind.

Although he lived in Angeles City for 24 years, Mark never had to urge to go bar hopping. Sure, he's been to a few bars before, usually to bring around visitors or tourists, but he said he barely looks at anyone in the bar.

"Every time I see a girl dancing in the bar, I can't help but see my mother," he said.

Mark's mother worked at one of the bars in Angeles City in the late '80s, when US servicemen stationed at the US bases in Clark were trooping to the city for a good time. There his mother met a US soldier. She got pregnant. He left. Then she left Mark.

Mark was only days old when his mother decided to give him away to Purificacion Gilbore, a bar manager. Purificacion seemed to have made it her mission to adopt Amerasians abandoned by their parents. Aside from Mark, she took in three other Amerasian kids; the youngest is now 11 years old.

"I took them because I pitied them," Purificacion said. "I thought it would be better to take them in than see them walk the streets."

When the Americans left in 1991, it was estimated that US soldiers fathered more than 50,000 Amerasian children. In Angeles City alone, some 10,000 of them can be found. According to the 1992 Pacific Rim Law and Policy Review, a quarter of the Amerasian population in the Philippines are of African-American descent.

Most of the time, children fathered by African-Americans were abandoned too by their mothers, according to the study. Aside from being abandoned by their parents, Amerasians in the Philippines are not fully recognized by the US government.

The 1982 Amerasian Immigration Act gave preferential immigration status to children of American servicemen in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. The act did not include those in the Philippines.

"Although nothing in the Act's legislative history specifically indicates why the final version excluded Filipino-Amerasians, one can speculate that Congress was concerned that the Act might induce a larger influx of Amerasians than it desired," the study said.

With these conditions in place, Amerasians in the Philippines are both mired in poverty and socially ostracized.



Ashley Descallar rebelled against her family after being abandoned by her mother and father. She dropped out of school, worked in a bar and became a mother at 18. Photo by Bernard Testa, InterAksyon.com

Pain in the neck

Raising kids who were not her own, and who looked very different from those of her neighbors, was a challenge for Purificacion as she later learned. Mark dropped out of school before sixth grade after he was repeatedly bullied in school for his color. At a young age he learned how to drink beer, smoke, and eventually founded a local fraternity chapter with two other Amerasian friends.

"They became a pain in the neck," she said, scratching her head in dismay. "They rebelled, had their vices and left."

Mark admitted he rebelled when he was younger out of spite for his adoptive mother who disciplined him with a heavy hand and didn't treat him like her son.

"When she's very angry she'd say she wished she hadn't taken me in," Mark said. "I'm not callous, I get hurt too. I'm not stupid. "

He couldn't help but get angry at the policy makers who decided that the US bases should close down in 1991. Mark said it is the same Filipino politicians who have also forgotten about them. "We (Amerasians) are here now because you asked them (US soldiers) to go."

Ashley Descallar, Mark's 21-year-old cousin, had a hard time living as an Amerasian. She felt betrayed when her mother, after weeks of giving birth to her, went to the United States with her American boyfriend and left her.

"I never saw my mother in person," Ashley said. "I only knew her as the voice on the phone."

Growing up with her aunt, she longed for her real mother everyday. Eventually her aunt adopted another Amerasian, this time a Caucasian. Ashley suddenly felt that more attention was given to her new brother.

"They would buy him nice clothes, toys and shower him with attention," Ashley said. "I felt left out again."

She ran away from home when her aunt's boyfriend accused her of stealing some jewelry. Ashley dropped out of school and stayed with her boyfriend. She became pregnant at 18.

When the boyfriend left her, she took a job as a waitress in a local bar. Ashley recently found out that her mother left her because her husband didn't know she had another baby with a different man. They eventually divorced after the American found out about Ashley.

"It's unfair. I grew up here alone. I went through a lot," Ashley said.

Abandoned angels

Most Amerasians like Ashley and Mark, who were abandoned as children, face a lot of psychological and social problems growing up. Discrimination and abuse are rampant among Amerasians and without proper guidance from their parents, their abandonment issues become worse.

"Many Amerasians repeatedly witnessed schoolyard bullying, street gang attacks, intra-family abuse, or general violence directed at their friends or acquaintances based on stigma-laden and discriminatory behavior," said Pete Kutschera, a New York based researcher who conducted a study on Filipino Amerasians.

According to his study published this year, about 6,000 Amerasians in Angeles City are under psychosocial and mental risk following the abandonment by their American fathers. About 62.5 percent of the Amerasians he surveyed scored severe levels of depression, anxiety or stress, which suggests psychopathy or mental disorder in significant numbers.

Their abandonment issues are worsened by the fact that the US government still refuses to recognize them. Without monetary support from their fathers, they are often left to work at an early age, some even turning to the same job as their mothers.

But the worst problem being battled by Amerasians on a daily basis is the fact that their plight has been mostly forgotten.

Retired Master Sgt. Lawrence Wayde, Secretary of American Legion 123, a group of war veterans in Angeles City, said he was not aware of the Amerasians' plight. "I think we need to be re-educated about this," he said.

Kutschera meanwhile, recommended a review of the Amerasian Homecoming Act to ease immigration barriers in the US for Filipino-Amerasians since there is a need for them to be recognized. He added that therapeutic psychiatric and social work treatment initiatives are needed for the abandoned Amerasians.



Mark Gilbore refuses to go inside the bars that line Angeles City's infamous red light district for he sees his mother in the bar girls that work there. Photo by Bernard Testa, InterAksyon.com

From the ashes

Some groups help Amerasians in their plight. Wedpro, a pro-women's group, has been helping Amerasians cope with their situation. Purificacion and Mark are both members of the group.

"I see my family among the Amerasians in that group, " Mark said.

Besides getting help from NGOs, the Amerasians learn to help themselves out of their situation.

Mark realized later in life that he had to depend on himself if he wanted to get out of his dire situation. He shaped up, took theatre classes with the Philippine Educational Theater Association and is now teaching acting skills to highschoolers for free.

Ashley too reconciled with her aunt and mother for her child's sake. She is set to start attending an accelerated high school program next month. She plans to take up Hotel and Restaurant Management in college.

"I sorted out my life because I want to teach people to accept us," Mark said.

But Mark said with the rebirth of Angeles City's red light district, the experiences of Amerasians like him might be repeated. Although the US bases have closed, a few American veterans retired to Angeles City and this, along with the influx of Japanese and Korean tourists, paved the way for the neon lights of Angeles City's numerous bars and nightclubs to be lit again.

As Mark passed by one of the biggest nightclubs on Walking Street, he saw a group of old Americans talking to some Filipina bar girls.

"How can our numbers go down, when the situation is still like this?" Mark wondered aloud.

Ref.: <http://www.interaksyon.com/abandoned>

Look more here: www.Amerasians.PhilippineCulture.ph