

**B**ig things may come from small beginnings. Success for the National Alliance to Nurture the Aged and Youth (NANAY) certainly did not come easy. In fact, during its early years, only a few people believed in its vision. But its founder, Joy Bruce, remained undeterred. Helping others was a mission she had to continue for her mother's sake.

Joy's mother, Jacinta, was the quintessential Good Samaritan. She gave food and money to the poor. She helped build a church. She took care of the sick. But as she became aged, it was Jacinta's turn to need help.

"My mother used to complain that she had so many children but nobody would pay attention to her. When she

# NANAY

## Healing the Community Through Dedication and Service

By Henni Jay P. Espinosa

had a stroke, I was too busy with work that I did not spend enough time with her. When she died, I really felt guilty. My siblings and I remember my mom and her good deeds. I committed myself to carrying on her work. . . We incorporated NANAY 40 days after her death," Joy related.

Why 40 days? Joy pointed out the Catholic belief that a person's soul goes to heaven 40 days after his or her death. She said, "We timed it that day so when her soul goes to heaven, her spirit would still remain with us through NANAY."

NANAY (a Tagalog word for mother) became a daughter's tribute. But it also became Joy's way of reaching out to other older mothers, and fathers, in need. "I used to get calls from my mom in the middle of the night telling me how lonely she was. She wanted to go dancing but nobody would care to bring her. She felt isolated and depressed. When my mother died, I wondered how many other seniors go through those emotions."

Joy pointed out that some Filipinos uproot their elderly parents from the Philippines and bring them to America to take care of their children and grandchildren. "We make them take care of our kids. In the Philippines, they could go out and talk to people. Here, all they



The dedicated members and volunteers of NANAY.

face is the TV and their grandchildren. They don't drive so they can't even go out. I thought, 'There has got to be venue where seniors can engage themselves in activities and be surrounded by friends.' I wanted them to look forward to the next day of their lives."

Armed with a vow to support the elderly, Joy began talking to Filipino American leaders in Miami, Florida. She met a lot of resistance. Fellow Pinoys, she said, were not keen on the idea of associating with seniors. She reasoned, "It made them feel old. Plus,

they thought it was bakya (tacky)."

So for its first five years since NANAY was founded in 1994, Joy made do with what little support she had. She would provide recreational and medical support to Filipino seniors in her backyard, picnic areas, even in an empty beauty salon. Slowly, Joy's enthusiasm became contagious.

Bennie Trinidad, NANAY's current vice-president, admitted that he was one of those who initially doubted NANAY's mission. "My lifestyle was different. Associating with older people wasn't really my cup of tea." But the more Bennie knew Joy, the more impressed he was with her dedication.

The more Joy talked to him about the projects of NANAY, the more he realized that this was a worthwhile endeavor.

"I was running nursing homes and when Joy and I would meet, we would always talk about depression. Perhaps the main reason for depression among elders is isolation. I personally saw them regressing and I understood Joy's mission. She said, 'If I can make one elder smile in one day, then my day is made.' I think that is what really got me thinking. What a noble cause. What a noble mission," Bennie stated.

As more and more people became convinced of NANAY's goals, bigger

and better support also came its way. NANAY received its first major funding of \$50,000 from the Alliance for Aging for Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties in January 2000. A few months later, NANAY received a one-year transitional funding for \$80,000 from the Miami-Dade Department of Human Services. It was also during this time that two benefactors, John Gaudiosi and Ricardo Garcia, purchased a building in North Miami that was to become the center for NANAY's supportive services.

In 2001, the ownership of the Community Center Building was transferred to NANAY and its services expanded to include health workshops, family caregiving support, computer classes, arts and crafts, exercise programs, as well as migrant and refugee assistance. NANAY was also able to purchase two transport buses, with funding from the Florida Department of Transportation, to bring the seniors to and from activities.

Through the NANAY Community Center, the seniors now have the opportunity to mingle with the youth. Joy stated, "We immediately set up the Grandparent Matching Program where we match seniors with the youth. We wanted the young ones to learn valuable lessons from the elders. We also started the intergenerational fashion show, as well as the intergenerational choir where the old and the young had more opportunities to interact. When we discussed perceptions, we realized that the old and the young have the same ideas. After all, age is in the mind."

Age may be psychological but the demands for physical care among the elders also grew. NANAY conducted health sessions in the community center where a volunteer doctor would conduct primary check-ups once a month. Bennie claimed, "We identified potential risks but we couldn't do anything their health. We knew there had to be continuity. We decided to put up a health clinic where we could actually provide healthcare, dispense medication and perform treatments."

In 2004, the NANAY Health Center, which is two blocks away from the NANAY Community Center, officially opened its doors. Many of their patients are those who do not have insurance or do not have the means to pay. These patients are seen and treated for free. NANAY puts those who have little money to spare on a discounted payment plan. The center also has a pharmacy that can dispense medication at \$15 per prescription per month.

With four examining rooms properly equipped for primary care and preventive medicine, as well as a resident physician, advanced registered nurse practitioner and medical assistant, the NANAY Health Center has served almost 500 patients since its opening. Even with their ample staff, the NANAY Health Center is never short of volunteers, majority of them come from the Philippine Nurses Association.

NANAY also became increasingly diverse. "Filipino seniors now have the chance to interact with seniors from other cultures. I think there is an advantage to diversity. I don't want them to be segregated by themselves. At NANAY, we had intercultural activities. We used



Youth volunteers at NANAY perform for their elderly friends.



NANAY holds regular tai-chi and exercise classes for elders.



Computer classes held at the NANAY Community Center.



At NANAY, the old and the young meet and interact.

to have one country present their culture, their food and the issues that they face as a people. In the end, we realized that it really doesn't matter where you're from because ultimately, we have the same concerns in life. There are certain commonalities that we can address and we are stronger in facing them together," Joy maintained.

As they grew in strength and numbers, the demand for NANAY to be self-sustaining was also raised. Grant funding has been their life and blood. But Joy, who is still NANAY's CEO and President, would rather be prepared. "What happens to our seniors when we don't get our funding? We need to become financially independent."

To become self-sustaining within the next few years, NANAY plans on taking the necessary measures: (1) Take in paying patients at the Health Center (2) Provide housing to seniors through the NANAY Community Development Corporation (3) Provide loans and mortgage assistance to elders and low-income residents.

These strategies were discussed during the NANAY annual retreat in Miami last July. Past projects, as well as financial statements were analyzed. Future goals were set. Joy believes in transparent leadership. "As a leader, I am accountable for what I do. I need to be able to tell my members what is happening --- whether it's good or bad. This



NANAY ladies performing a traditional Filipino dance during their the group's Mother's Day celebration.

is the only way I can get their support," Bennie agreed, "As leaders, we are transparent because we have nothing to hide."

With this formidable leadership, active membership and sound plans, NANAY is up and ready to reach for bigger things. Besides its main chapter in South Dade and Palm Beach, Florida, NANAY has regional chapters in San Francisco, California and Little Rock, Arkansas.

It may have had humble beginnings. It even started with a vow to continue to a mother's work. But NANAY has cer-



An Asian American Pacific Islander health forum conducted by NANAY.

tainly come a long way. Joy concluded, "The legacy that I want to leave is the joy of serving. There is nothing like it when you know you've made a difference in other people's lives."