

AMCHP 2007 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

March 3rd to 7th, 2007

Collaboration and Community Sustainability in Rural States

SOPHIE ARAO-NGUYEN: Thank you, Jeff. Distinguished guests, family leaders, the AMCHP leadership team, plenaries of this conference, Title V, Maternal and Child Health, and Children with Special Health Care Needs directors and staff, presenters and MCH partners, it is such an honor and privilege to stand before you and welcome everyone to this gathering. First of all, I congratulate and acknowledge AMCHP staffs in involving families in various levels of its organization. It has convened the family leadership caucus, which is the sure way of continually producing family leaders who can sit at the table to represent their fellow families and constituencies.

In this year's conference, AMCHP has the largest number of family scholars, 20 of them, and there are seven family mentors. It has voted to allow for two delegate at large seats in the board of directors, and presently the family representatives are Linda Hammond from Arizona and Ruth Walden from New York. This fall, the membership voted to add a fifth seat to every state's membership and reserve that seat for a family liaison to the Title V MCH program. Currently, there are six delegates.

Second of all, I applaud the families and family leaders who are here before us whose voices and visibility serve as reminders to those in positions of power and influence what this gathering is all about.

Third, I would like to appreciate my colleagues in the Family Movement and their wisdom figures, Polly Arrango, Betsy Anderson, Julie Beckett, Barbara Popper, Chris Thomas, Nora Wells, Julsie Wall, who are pioneers in working with AMCHP and Title V and numerous family leaders at the state and community levels such as Susan Colburn, Bob Cook, Roden Farley, Linda Hammond, Ruth Walden who have steadfastly and passionately worked on making sure that the needs of children and youth with special health care needs and their families are on the radar screen of politicians, funders and administrators.

I also would like to acknowledge our colleagues and pioneers in the MCH Title V arena such as Diana Demboba, Ann Drum, David Hepple, Merle McPherson, Bonnie Strickland, Peter van Dyck, and others.

It is indeed a breakthrough for me to stand before you as the new executive director of Family Voices. Family Voices is a national organization whose mission is to assist children and youth with special health care needs and their families in the areas of policy, information, education and advocacy. When Family Voices chose to hire me, it took a leap of faith and a bold step in hiring a woman of color. With the changing demographics in this country, it is appropriate to start facing the void in ethnic representation in positions of leadership. I need to pat my back. So you can get to know me a little better. I think Jeff already spoke about my background so I will do away with my background. But I just wanted to say that I think the best qualification in occupying this position is the fact that I have two children who have disabilities, invisible disabilities, a 16-year-old son with autism, and a 21-year-old daughter with ADHD.

I came to the U.S. in '85 to do my PhD in transpersonal psychology, and in the process I found my partner. My dissertation focused on the acculturation journey of Filipino immigrant women in the U.S. And after I graduated from my PhD program, I made a commitment to myself, to make my life work--to make visible the invisible, to give voice to the voiceless, and to touch the untouchables. Since I believe that charity starts at home, I immerse myself in the Asian-American community to just to know what the needs were, and eventually I--when my son stop talking at two and a half, I was invited to work with Parents Helping Parents, and because I wanted to help my son what started as a curse transformed into a blessing. As I saw my second career unfolding before my eyes, my children were to become my next teachers and were showing me the way. So my other work experiences revolved around youth. As my daughter became a teenager, I work with the Filipino Youth Coalition to help me understand how young people grow up in America because I was born elsewhere. So I joined that group to help other teens grow up in America. I also got exposed to the world of recovery from alcohol and drug addiction as a clinical supervisor but my heart was not in it. So when the Family Voices job announcement came, I decided to give this a try, and I think I'm home. I'm home, and I'm back.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge one of our family leaders, Ruth Walden, who lost her daughter Jennifer unexpectedly yesterday. Our thoughts and prayers are with here and her family during this difficult time. So let's spend a moment to wish her--send her our thoughts and healing energy.

A door has opened. I invite all families and professionals who wish to partner with all those who work with Title V programs to come and join me, especially those who considered themselves other in our ethnocentric world. I invite you to help me transform our worldview from being ethnocentric to multicultural so we can serve everyone

regardless of color, culture and creed. I end with a quote from Judith Winston, Executive Director of President's Initiative on Race and Rose Ochi, Director of Community Relation Service, U.S. Department of Justice when they said, "We cannot underestimate the power of dialogues. When people explore perspectives and ideas, they discover how much they share in common and learn to appreciate their differences. Dialogue is an opportunity for growth and change. Dialogue can help open our minds. Dialogue can help each one of us listen better, and dialogue can bring us closer together." Will you continue to create the atmosphere of dialogue with all stakeholders? Thank you very much.