

## STORY OF SAMAHAN FILIPINO AMERICAN PERFORMING ARTS & EDUCATION CENTER

The SAMAHAN Philippine Dance Company was organized in July 1974 under the direction of Lolita Diñoso Carter, Ph.D. Dr. Carter, a dance professor at Grossmont College then, volunteered her services to organize a performing ensemble as a contribution to the growing Filipino American community. Her knowledge of Philippine Dance and Music came naturally from her experiences growing up in the Philippines. Her formal education in Philippine Folk Dance at the University of the Philippines and classes with Francisca Reyes Aquino, eminent authority on Philippine Folk Dances, provided Carter with a solid background in Philippine Folk Dance.

SAMAHAN Philippine Dance Company started as part of the Youth Program of the Council of Pilipino-American Organizations of San Diego County (COPAO). The purpose of the program was to provide Filipino American students the opportunity to gain knowledge and appreciation of their cultural heritage. The name "SAMAHAN" (meaning working together) was selected by the participants who were mostly students from area junior and senior high schools and San Diego State University. The students of the educational and recreational program soon became a group of amateur Philippine folk dance performers besieged with requests for presentations from various organizations, institutions and individuals.

In 1975, Ruby Pearl Bersamin Chiong joined the Dance Company as a dancer, teacher and choreographer. Fresh from the Philippines, she brought with her a rich repertoire of dances reflecting her experiences with the Far Eastern University Dance Troupe and work with several dance companies in Manila. Her knowledge of dances from the mountain provinces of Northern Luzon and the Southern Philippines further enriched the Company's repertoire. Her experience with her university's dance company as Assistant Student Director helped SAMAHAN in producing its first Philippine dance concert staged at the San Diego City College Theater in 1976.

In 1978, SAMAHAN obtained status as a non-profit, public benefit corporation. Its founding directors were Grace P. Blaszkowski, Juanita F. Caccam, Ph.D., Ruby Pearl B. Chiong, Juanita C. Santos, Atty. Jesse G. Quinsaat and Lolita D. Carter, Ph.D. Soon after, the dance company obtained its first grant from the National Endowment for the Arts which was matched by Tawfiq and Richel Khoury of Pacific Scene, Inc. In 1979, the Dance Company was invited to perform in the inauguration of the East County Performing Arts Center. The performance set-off the annual presentations in that theater for seven years. Subsequently, SAMAHAN annually staged the Concert of Philippine Dances and Music in many theaters of San Diego

County including the City College Theater, Sherwood Auditorium, the Educational Cultural Complex Theater, Mayan Hall, East County Performing Arts Center, Mandeville Auditorium, Joan Kroc Performing Arts Center, and the Lyceum Theater.

The musical components of SAMAHAN were formed in 1980 with the assistance of Bayani Mendoza De Leon, well known Filipino ethnomusicologist and composer. Under his expert tutelage, SAMAHAN's Rondalla, Gangsa and Kulintang Musical Ensembles were formed. A grant from Parker Foundation enabled the Company to obtain musical instruments from the Philippines. The students of Maestro DeLeon became the core of the SAMAHAN Rondalla ensemble. Fresh from the Philippines, an experienced Rondalla musician, Derek Embalsado joined the ensemble in 1991. He and Dr. Juanita Caccam, the Music Coordinator, nurtured the ensemble to what it is now. Dr. Caccam's young banduria student, Bernard Ellorin, has now become the Music Director.

Danongan Sibay Kalanduyan, master artist/teacher of Kulintang Music became a guest teacher and artist with the Company from 1989-1991 and 1994-97. He introduced SAMAHAN to the kulintang music of Maguindanaoans as well as the Maranaos. In 1996, Kalanduyan was honored as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment of the Arts. With the NEA grant in 1994, he was enabled to travel bi-weekly to San Diego from San Francisco to provide individualized Kulintang lessons to Bernard and SAMAHAN musicians. They eventually formed the SAMAHAN Kulintang Ensemble. Danny Kalanduyan continued to mentor the Ensemble members until his passing in 2016.

In 1991, George Ragaza joined SAMAHAN as artistic director sharing responsibilities with Ruby Chiong. Under his leadership, SAMAHAN performed at the Poway Center for the Performing Arts for four consecutive years. His collection of well-designed costumes and exquisite accessories greatly enhanced the professional quality of SAMAHAN's performances. He premiered several new dances including "Kaamulan" - A Manobo Rite of sharing in 1993. In 1994, he presented an outstanding Gala at the Poway Center for the Performing Arts which gained him very good reviews.

In 1979, SAMAHAN initiated the Philippine Folk Festival held at the Scottish Rite Memorial Center. The Festival, was a showcase of Philippine Performing Arts in Southern California. Renamed Philippine Cultural Arts Festival, the festival was revived and moved to an outdoor central location in Balboa Park in 1996. The Santacruzian was a special annual feature of the 1997 to 1999 Festivals in the same location. A variety of guest performing artists makes the

## Story of SAMAHAN Filipino American Performing Arts continued....

SAMAHAN Philippine Cultural Arts Festival an outstanding showcase of Philippine Cultural Arts and a very significant Filipino American community event. In the same year, SAMAHAN was invited as the featured performer at the Seattle Opera House in the Northwest Folklife Festival celebrating the Philippine culture.

In 1998 the name was changed to SAMAHAN Filipino American Performing Arts & Education Center. Three SAMAHAN performing groups had been formed, namely, Philippine Dance Ensemble, Kulintang Music and Dance Ensemble, and Rondalla String Ensemble. In addition to its busy performance schedule, SAMAHAN has been committed to a strong educational and outreach program, offering regular weekly Filipino folkdance classes at a studio in National City. The classes were moved to the Bonita Ballet studio in Chula Vista in 1990, then back to National City in 2000 in the office of the Kalusugan Community Services on Eight Street, then in the Building My Wellness on Plaza Boulevard. Additionally, SAMAHAN has been providing free workshops and performances in many area schools and has been specially involved in multi-cultural programs. For more than four decades the folkdance classes taught by Dr. Carter, Ruby Chiong, as well as Georg Ragaza, have been the breeding ground of SAMAHAN dancers.

SAMAHAN's beloved Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Lolita Diñoso Carter passed away in July 25, 2011. Her passing was unexpected and just fifteen days before the Philippine Cultural Arts Festival. Nonetheless the members of the SAMAHAN Board of Directors and the dance and music ensembles were able to hold the event successfully. Dr. Carmen Galang, a longtime member, took over the helm and served as Executive Director for five years. She and the Board, led by Dina Ellorin as President, along with Ruby Chiong as Artistic Director and the dance and music ensembles committed to continue with the mission of SAMAHAN to preserve and promote the Philippine's cultural heritage.

In October 15 and 16, 2011, the 37th Annual Concert of Philippine Dances & Music was held at the Joan Kroc Theatre dedicated to the legacy of Dr. Carter. Several SAMAHAN alumni performed with the dance ensemble. The performances garnered standing ovation and rave reviews. The success of the 2011 Festival and the Concert has proven that Dr. Carter's legacy lives on. The Board has committed to continue holding SAMAHAN's cultural programs and events. In her honor, the Dr. Lolita Diñoso Carter Endowment was established by Dr. Lindsay Carter through The San Diego Foundation. It was intended to support SAMAHAN's needs.

In 2016, The SAMAHAN Board of Directors elected Jhenice Villanueva, mother of dance students and dancer herself, as President. With her experience in corporate management, she helped SAMAHAN streamline its administrative processes. To work with her and the Board, Dina Ellorin, was appointed the Executive Director. In the same year, The Filipino School in Mira Mesa welcomed SAMAHAN to hold its Filipino folkdance classes on Wednesdays. Funding from the California Arts Council, Local Impact program has provided support to engage SAMAHAN's veteran artists to teach Filipino folk dances. Longtime SAMAHAN dancer, Michelle Camaya Julian and Nico Delmundo taught at The Filipino School, while Ruby Chiong, assisted by Dorothy Parker Corona, taught at the Building My Wellness studio in National City

In 2016, as well, the Board formed the Creative Committee to help the Artistic Director, Ruby Chiong, teach folkdance classes and improving the staging of performances. The team has been composed of veteran SAMAHAN dancers, Michelle Camaya, Jd Lynn and Reina Chiong, Dorothy Corona, Maria Grace Nievera, Nico Delmundo and Ethnomusicologist, Bernard Ellorin, PhD. Performances of the dance and music ensembles have been enhanced with the Committee's assistance. Innovative arrangements of folk and ethnic dances were introduced in concert repertoire, without losing the dances' traditional element. With the support of the Dr. LDC Endowment, researched traditional dances, new costumes and ethnic attires were obtained from the Philippines and used during concerts.

The Concert of Philippine Dances and Music featuring the young students' recital, was premiered on May 26, 2018 at the Garfield Theater in La Jolla. It was aptly entitled "Pamana" (Legacy) – Celebrating Heritage through our Children in appreciation for the legacy of rich Philippine culture and tradition handed to community by our late founder and Executive Director, Dr. Lolita Diñoso Carter. Inspired by the overwhelming response to the first concert, "Pamana 2" concert was held in April, 2019 at the same theater. It was being geared to be an annual event.

Due to the pandemic lockdown SAMAHAN's festival and concerts were suspended in 2020. However, Folkdance and Kulintang classes were taught online during the lockdown. Later, in 2021, as the lockdown was eased, the Philippine Cultural Arts Festival was held at Balboa Park on August 14 and the 44<sup>th</sup> Concert of Philippine Dances and Music, titled "Sining Samahan, The Art of Coming Together", was performed live in-front of live audience at the Joan Kroc Theatre, on November 6, 2021. The 45<sup>th</sup> concert was held on November 5, 2022.