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Filner Honors Fil Am Vet By Pursuing Justice for Family

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When Vicente and Editha Rodriguez brought their two young children to San Diego in 1979, there were tomato fields at the corner of Palm Avenue and Beyer Way, adventure-seekers could go to where Palm Avenue dead-ended to ride ATVs in dirt hills. the western end of the Southbay Freeway did not yet connect the 5 and 805—and Bob Filner had just won his first election, to become a member of San Diego’s Board of Education.



Thirty-two years later, shopping centers, a number of new freeways, and the terra cotta roofs of thousands of new homes have totally transformed San Diego’s South Bay. But Bob Filner is still fighting to make sure members of our community, especially our veterans, are kept safe and treated justly—even when they are survived by their struggles. My father’s story exemplifies this.

Vicente Redondo Rodriguez III, like the tens of thousands of other Filipinos we pay tribute to honor on Memorial Day, honorably served the United States Navy for 21 years, before retiring as a Chief Petty Of-

ficer in 1995. Between retirement and his death in 2010, my father remained a patriot, helping charter a short-lived South Bay San Diego VFW Post in 1998; filming an interview about his naval career as part of the KPBS program San Diego’s DNA: Military Roots, and staying an informed and active resident of the district represented by Filner, California’s 51st.

My father advocated for and educated neighbors on many of the same issues Bob Filner has championed throughout his legislative career, and raised my sister and I to be aware and proud of Filner’s

dedication to the South Bay’s veterans and Filipino American communities. Among my father’s things, we still have one of the first letters we received from Congressman Filner, dated March 14, 1995. It opens with, “Dear Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez: I am writing to you because of your concern for World War II Filipino Veterans,” and includes a copy of the “Filipino Veterans Equity Act of 1995”.

This history of steadfast commitment to the welfare of US vets is why my sister and I

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turned to Congressman Filner after our father passed away last year.

After our mother died in 2007, our father opened a hospital in the Philippines, in a municipality about 40 minutes away from Manila. Thereafter, he visited the Philippines for 3-4 months out of the year. During his visit last year, very late on October 22, 2010, we were informed that our father had been brought to a hospital, and declared DOA.

By October 24, my sister and I were flying to Manila, to carry out the instructions of our father's last will, which declared, "It is my wish and desire... in the event of my death, that my remains (body) be transported to the United States of America, to San Diego, CA. It is also my wish and desire to be buried with full military honors at Holy Cross Cemetery Mausoleum... beside my spouse, Editha Ibatan Rodriguez." We had expected our task to be emotionally and logistically difficult; however, we never imagined the nightmare that was to come.

Almost immediately after our plane touched down in Manila, we were brought to a funeral home, and met by a woman ("M") claiming to be our father's second wife. Over the subsequent five days, she attempted to stop us from filing a "Report of Death" at the US Embassy (essential to transport a body across borders, and to file any insurance claims); she refused to recognize our father's last will, and had his body cremated on my sister's birthday; she allowed me to pay for the full cost of my father's memorial and cremation, then demanded that the

funeral home write a receipt that declared her as the paying party; she requested an autopsy of my father's body, then had his government-issued defibrillator removed so that she could keep it; and she ran away from the funeral home with the sealed urn holding our father's ashes. Stuck in Manila for five days after the cremation, due to family obligations and two national holidays, we mourned our failure to execute our father's will nearly as much as we mourned the loss of our last living parent.

Once we returned home, empty-handed, we met and consulted with a number of military staff and advocates, and learned that our story is not entirely unique. While helping us arrange for a military memorial for our father, staff of the Veterans' Administration (VA), Veterans' Group Life Insurance, the Navy's Fleet and Family Support Center, and the US State Department shared that they had seen "way too many" veterans' families suffer after the loss of a loved one, due to the deception of someone claiming to be a bonafide spouse.

We were stunned and saddened. But, when we learned that "M" had applied to collect VA reimbursement for burial expenses, and for Survivor Benefits, we were emboldened. We realized that "M" was not just abusing our family—she was trying to hoodwink our federal benefits system for veterans and dependents. And we could not let her get away with it, especially while vets and their legitimate families are still fighting for decent remuneration, healthcare, and recogni-

tion for their real sacrifices.

So, in March, my sister and I contacted the VA's Office of Inspector General (VAOIG), requesting an investigation into our case be opened. Shortly afterward, we contacted Congressman Filner's office to inform him of our VAOIG request, and for help in navigating their extensive bureaucracy. Earlier this month, Filner's office informed us that they have been pursuing an inquiry on our behalf with the VA, that the VA has confirmed initiation of an inquiry with the VA in Manila, and that Congressman Filner is doing what he can to ensure that there will be an accountable outcome to our case.

Congressman Filner's District Office enjoys a well-earned reputation for constituent services, and we have not been let down. So, while we honor our fallen sailors and soldiers this Memorial Day, let us also recognize those who serve them, in this lifetime, as well as the next: the VA, resources like the Fleet and Family Support Center, and legislative warriors like Bob Filner, who has been defending our retired and active servicemen and women since tomato fields were all that stood at the corner of Palm and Beyer.