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Filipino community knew it could always count on the mayor

Friday, May 28, 2004

By Anthony D. Advincula
Journal correspondent

A Jersey City community leader, still in shock as he spoke Wednesday, recalled his last moments with Mayor Glenn D. Cunningham, barely two hours before the mayor died after suffering a massive heart attack Tuesday night.

"I left him in vibrant mood, and before my bedtime, he's dead," said Lito Gajilan, 63, who was with Cunningham at the Department of Cultural Affairs-sponsored block party at Five Corners on Newark Avenue. "We lost another sincere man."

Gajilan, a founding member of the Philippine American Friendship Committee, said that when the block party ended around 8:45 p.m., the mayor put one arm around him and said, "Lito, thank you for coming. Can you give me a ride?"

But before he could say yes, Gajilan said, a woman he couldn't identify suddenly came up to them and told the mayor about an "emergency." Then Cunningham tried to use his cell phone, but to no avail, as its battery ran out.

"The mayor asked me if he could use my phone, but I left it in my car. So he excused himself and looked for a cell phone that he could use from the crowd. By the time I saw him talking on the phone, I decided to leave the party," Gajilan said.

While he was driving home alone, Gajilan described how uneasy he was in the car.

"I felt like I wanted to come back and give the mayor a ride," he said. "I'm not sure if it was my guilt that I didn't respond to him immediately, or that I saw something different on his face when I looked at him, which is a picture that has been vivid on my mind until this time."

Gajilan said that his heart sank when he learned around 3 a.m. Wednesday that the mayor had died.

Cunningham recently helped secure \$170,000 for a renovation of Rizal Plaza, on Christopher Columbus Drive.

Ludy Corrales, chairwoman of PAFCOM, circulated an e-mail tribute to the Cunningham.

"Our mayor loved and believed in Filipino-Americans. He always gave us the opportunity to progress," she said.

Over the last three years, Cunningham appointed three Filipino-Americans in his administration: Serafina Sengco, director of finance; Ed Toloza, city tax assessor; and Victor Sison, a municipal court judge.

"Mayor Cunningham has been a friend and an adviser to the Filipino community," Corrales said. "We shared the same vision, the same goals for our community."

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