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Malay, Philippines, is on its way to becoming Spokane's newest Sister City

By [Madison Pearson](#)



Erick Doxey photo

Dancers at Spokane's Philippine Independence Day event.

With white sand beaches, sapphire blue seas and balmy 80-degree weather year-round, Malay, Philippines, could not be more different from Spokane.

Our inland location doesn't grant us breathtaking ocean views and our biting winters and dry summers are enough to give anyone some seasonal whiplash. But accepting differences is always the first step to forming lifelong bonds, right?

Jacqueline Babol seemed to think so when she began championing Malay, a municipality in the Philippine province of Aklan, to become a friendship city to Spokane.

Approved by the Spokane Sister Cities Association board in March 2024, the Spokane-Malay Friendship City Initiative aims to foster cultural exchange, mutual understanding and economic collaboration between the two cities.



Founder of the Filipino American Northwest Association, Babol has been working on the Spokane-Malay Friendship City Initiative for two years. Gaining friendship city status is often a precursor to earning sister city status.

Sister City International, an organization based out of Washington, D.C., which was founded by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, is the national membership organization for individual sister cities across the United States.

Nishinomiya, Japan, became Spokane's first sister city in 1961, making the Spokane-Nishinomiya sister city relationship one of the earliest in the United States. Spokane currently has five sister cities: Nishinomiya; Jilin City, China; Limerick, Ireland; Jecheon, South Korea; and Cagli, Italy.

Jilin City, China (since 1987)
Limerick, Ireland (since 1990)
Jecheon, South Korea (since 1999)
Cagli, Italy (since 2016)

Babol and the Sister City Association of Spokane will have to go through Sister City International when it comes time to propose Malay as a sister city to Spokane. In the past, mayors or representatives from the government of the sister city have come to Spokane to sign the sister city proclamation.

"Our Cagli sister city was created because we had Gonzaga students in Cagli for nearly 20 years before we decided to try to be sister cities," says John Caputo, president of the Sister City Association of Spokane, in an email. "Sister Cities International allows a friendship status while continuing the path to a sister city."

Spokane's current sister city associations host exchange programs, annual cultural events and opportunities for cultural education. Each also has a piece of art in Riverfront Park's Sister City Connections Garden.

Though Babol says the Spokane-Malay Friendship City Society is in no hurry to achieve sister city status, they've hit the ground running already by planning upcoming events, concerts and future cultural exchanges.



"Our goal is to get all the Filipinos out of the woodwork so that we can create a legacy here," Babol says. "So that when we're done, there is something that we left behind."



Jacqueline Babol is leading efforts for Malay to become Spokane's next Sister City.

Though there is no standard process for becoming a sister city, the Spokane-Malay Friendship City committee is off to a great start on the cultural events front.

On June 22, the group is holding an informational session at the Riverfront Park Rotary Fountain. Attendees can learn about the initiative's ongoing efforts and future plans. The next day, the Sister City Association is celebrating Spokane's current sister cities and has invited the Malay association to be a part of the event and promote their initiative.

Along with the festivities during the day, Babol has organized a concert featuring Filipino pop singer Piolo Pascual, who Babol describes as a "heartthrob." The concert serves as a fundraiser, supporting cultural exchange programs and joint projects between Malay and Spokane.

In addition to hosting events that promote cultural education, the Spokane Sister Cities Association looks for "a demonstration of grassroots support in both cities."

"Sister cities require long-term sustainability," Caputo says. "If the Filipino societies of Spokane and the leadership of Malay continue to build their relationships and can show a mission of purpose and financial considerations, I am sure they can be successful among Spokane Sister Cities. They are nearly there now."



Babol has plans for a pen pal program between Spokane and Malay for students in grades 4 through 6. The plan is for the children to exchange messages to learn about each city's culture. A long-term goal of hers is to host an exchange program so people from both cities can experience that culture firsthand. She hopes that people from Spokane will eventually be able to experience what it's like to live in Malay by teaching, working or vacationing there.

"The friendship city is about people-to-people relationships," Babol says.

But one part of Filipino culture trumps all the rest in Babol's mind: food.

"A big part of Filipino culture is our food," Babol says. "Spokane doesn't have a Filipino restaurant. And we're foodies! So sharing our food is very important to us."

Babol hopes that through the initiative, strong ties will be made not only between Spokane and Malay, but also between the local Filipino community and other residents in Spokane.

"We've been in this country since 1587," she says. "There are 200,000 Filipinos in Washington, but we don't have a legacy in Spokane. We wanted a voice, so we are doing this sister city because, in the end, what we want is a legacy." ♦

A Celebration of Our Sister Cities: Building Bridges Around the World • Sun, June 23 from 11:30 am-12:15 pm • Free • Riverfront Park • 507 N. Howard St. • expo50spokane.com

Piolo Pascual Benefit Concert • Sun, June 23 at 6 pm • \$70 • Ferris High School • 3020 E. 37th Ave. • filamnw.com