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Group celebrates Philippines Independence Day with dancing, food, games in Riverfront Park on Sunday

June 11, 2023 | Updated Sun., June 11, 2023 at 8:59 p.m.



Jacqueline Babol leads a Zumba demonstration at the Filipino American Northwest Association's Philippine Independence Day celebration on Sunday in Riverfront Park in Spokane. (Elena Perry/The Spokesman-Review) [Buy this photo](#)

By Elena Perry
The Spokesman-Review

Shaded by a canopy tent, Jacqueline Babol sits in the grass and wipes sweat from her forehead with a towel.

In the 80-degree heat, the 60-year-old just got down to Jennifer Lopez's "Let's Get Loud," boogieing and leading a small crowd in a heart-rate-raising Zumba demonstration.

Running on one hour of sleep, a vitamin B12 supplement and a vision, she's the lead organizer of a cookout-style event in Riverfront Park: the Filipino American Northwest Association's second annual celebration of Kalayaan Day, marking the Philippines' independence. Babol is president and founder of the association and the event's Zumba coach, a head chef, traditional dancer and dance instructor. She needs a moment to catch her breath.

The association held the picnic on Sunday to commemorate the Philippines' 125th year of independence from Spain, which falls on Monday.

For more than 300 years Spain had control over the country. Enduring this adversity, Babol said, gave generations of Filipinos an unwavering spirit and unmatched tenacity. Now, they celebrate the history of the holiday coupled with pride of how Filipino-Americans have established themselves in this country while being far from the Philippines.

"What we're celebrating, to me, is the struggle and the people that have fought for their lives and died," Babol said. "And here we are, those that have traveled as immigrants and struggled to come here."

To kick off the event, Mayor Nadine Woodward proclaimed the day as Filipino Independence Day, reading an official proclamation that honored the contributions of Filipino Americans in the Lilac City.

The event featured Filipino food, games and performances by dance groups from the association, as well as the Spokane Chinese Dancers and the Indian Youth Club of Spokane.

Event organizers also led attendees in dance tutorials and lawn games, drawing in passersby and volunteers alike.

Volunteers laughed and danced as they eagerly served plates of Filipino cuisine: aromatic chicken adobo; crispy lechon; roasted pork belly; colorful pancit, a vegetable and noodle dish; and garlic fried rice.

Veronica Bropas, also head chef, said she was excited to be with other Filipinas and serve tastes that brought her back to the Philippines.

“I love being with these people and seeing your own culture in the dance, and of course the food,” Bropas said. “We Filipinos love to eat.”

A desire for community is what led many like Bropas to join the ranks of the Filipino American Northwest Association.

“When you’re with people that speak your own language, it just brings back memories of being a kid in the home country,” Bropas said.

Rowena Sommer, a board member from the association, immigrated from the Philippines about a year ago.

“It’s so nice because even if I’m away from my family, I feel at home because I have Filipinos who are here,” Sommer said. “We welcome each other, and it’s like you’re not really away-away from home, aside from physically.”

Babol started her organization in 2018, initially wanting to form a Filipino dance group. But she saw the opportunity to provide a sense of community among Filipinos she felt was missing in Spokane.

She hopes with more time and funding, the association can offer more social services to its members, such as housing assistance, and expand their community involvement with more events. Babol already has a number of other events in the works, collaborating with other groups to promote unity and solidarity.

“I want to do something bigger before I die. I can’t tell you because it’s a trade secret,” she said. “But something that’s never been done before.”

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