

The Biography of Lilibeth Navarro:

“Disabled or not, we are all called to work,” says Lilibeth Navarro at a recent celebration of Philippine History and culture by the Department of Rehabilitation, “... we are called to contribute to the creative process of renewing the face of the earth with the toil of our hands, the fruits of our thinking and the imprint of our spirit. And even for those who contribute with their inexplicable pain and suffering so perennial in the human condition, we know how to recycle and renew and put these to use for the universe’s higher purpose. Therefore, for all of humanity-- this momentum has come from that deeply ingrained respect for work and the expectation to do it. With work, we the disabled can boldly go to where everyone else has gone before!”

Lilibeth Navarro, who considers herself a person with severe disabilities from the onset of polio as a baby, has been working all her life. She made her indelible mark as a spiritual mentor, advocate, activist, speaker, writer, peer counselor, local and state commissioner both in the Philippines and the United States. In the Philippines she met the Focolare Movement in 1971 and understood her life calling to unity through a life dedicated to transforming suffering of any kind. She led a youth group of the Focolare Movement and her life story was published in the Philippines’ New City Magazine in the 80’s, and in Citta Nuova, the European Magazine of the Focolare Movement in the 90’s. She spoke before crowds of hundreds during the annual Mariapolis gatherings and in her hometown, she started the Bahay Buhay Project, a collaborative center for the disabled between the Rotary Clubs and the Ministry of Social Services and Development.

Through the Rotary International, Lilibeth Navarro got a Fellowship to study Print Journalism in the United States. Through her resourcefulness and industry, Lilibeth completed her BA in Print Journalism and her MA in Public Relations with no school loan to pay for. She met the Disability Rights Movement in Los Angeles and established a reputation as a powerful speaker, an excellent community builder and organizer. She became recognized as a pioneer of the Disability Rights Movement when she helped to lead the Southern California effort to push for access to public transportation and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, getting arrested and suffering deprivation during the 8 years of struggle.

Along with this vocation to make it better for the disabled community, she was also involved in the pro-life struggle, speaking at conferences and making legislative visits to stop the tide of euthanasia and abortion. To her credit and advocacy, many attempts to legalize euthanasia in California have been thwarted.

Lilibeth is also considered a positive force in the US Labor movement, particularly in their campaign in the late 90s for the homecare workers’ rights to fair wages and benefits. In fact, until she started campaigning for them, there was a resistance in the disability community to support the homecare workers out of fear of worker strikes. She also is a friend of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 2015 in Los Angeles as she supported their campaign for higher wages and benefits until they won their campaign late in 1997.

There is still so much more to this lady: her co-founding of the Personal Assistance Services Council (PASC), now totally an autonomous organization, where she served as Chair from 2012 to 2015 and two terms more. In 2001, she founded Communities Actively Living Independent & Free (CALIF), both organizations are currently serving

thousands in the City and County of Los Angeles.

In December 2010, she was given recognition by Philippine President Benigno Aquino, III at the Malacañang Palace, Philippines as one of the Outstanding Filipino Overseas Workers for her works and advocacy to the disabled community here in the USA and in the Philippines.

Lilibeth Navarro, Founder & Executive Director of CALIF, the independent living center serving the 50 zip codes of Los Angeles. She grew the organization and added several programs like the Assistive Technology Recycling Program and its for-profit counterpart, "Positive Wheels"; she opened a Computer Communications Center, a Disability SWAT Team and Nursing Home Transition Program. In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Lilibeth Navarro initiated and got CALIF approved to set up the Emerging Aging and Disability Resource Connection for Los Angeles, serving the Central LA area and through 211 and LA Area Agency on Aging, the LA County. CALIF marshalled the distribution of food boxes and PPE for its disabled and elderly consumers and they are about to start several counseling groups for those now with depression and those feeling suicidal. Another recent program started this year is a pilot program for medical respite and recuperative care for those discharged from the hospital and threatened with homelessness. CALIF provides the housing search and independent living services for the residents needing housing placements in 150 days.

"Despite the darkness and those exploiting it to scare us, we are so lucky," Lilibeth says, "to have the guidance of the Holy Spirit who is always at work transforming the suffering into positive endeavors that bring back the light and the glory to God."

Lilibeth Espinosa Navarro the founder and Executive Director of Communities Actively Living Independent & Free passed at the Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles on September 11, 2023.

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