

National Endowment for the Humanities Site Visit
Northern Marianas Humanities Council
Dr. Keith L. Camacho and Jillette Leon Guerrero
12-14 October 2016

INTRODUCTION

I. Site Visitors and Authors of the NEH Evaluation

On 22 February 2016, Senior Program Officer Leondra Burchall of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) invited Dr. Keith L. Camacho and Ms. Jillette Leon Guerrero to evaluate the Northern Marianas Humanities Council (NMHC) from 12-14 October 2016. As a not-for-profit and private organization, the NMHC is located in Saipan, the island capital of the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). In terms of our background and training, Dr. Camacho is an Associate Professor in the Asian American Studies Department at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is also the Senior Editor of *Amerasia Journal*, a Faculty-in-Residence at UCLA Residential Life, and a Faculty Affiliate at the American Indian Studies Center and the Asian American Studies Center. Ms. Leon Guerrero is presently the President of Guamology, an independent publishing company based in the U.S. territory of Guam. From 1999-2005, she also served as the Executive Director of the Guam Humanities Council, at which time she restored the fiscal credibility and local prominence of the council. Ms. Leon Guerrero is now a member of the Board of Regents at the University of Guam, as well as a researcher and writer of genealogies.

II. NEH Site Observation by Dr. Camacho and Ms. Leon Guerrero

Given our expertise in humanities-oriented research and service, we enthusiastically accepted Senior Program Officer Burchall's request to provide a collaborative and balanced review of the NMHC. In August 2016, we then examined the NMHC's self-assessment report, an 81-page document authored by its Executive Director Scott Russell. A month later, we convened at the Hyatt hotel in Saipan, met Senior Program Officer Burchall, and addressed the review protocols for the NEH. As a group, we then gathered at a private room at the Northern Marianas College where we interviewed the staff, the board, and thirty-two constituents of the NMHC. The latter group represented archaeology and historic preservation, the Catholic Church, K-12 education, non-profit organizations, public libraries, social services, and the tourist industry, to name a few. Members of the indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian community also attended these meetings, as did Filipino, Japanese, and Korean immigrants of the CNMI. In every case, board members, grantees, organizers, and scholars lauded the impact, relevance, and transparency of the NMHC. They especially commended Executive Director Scott Russell for his compassion, foresight, and leadership. Notwithstanding our criticisms, we also concur with their assessment. *For these reasons, we assert that the NMHC is an exemplary model of education and outreach in the humanities. It is a premier non-profit organization whose staff and board foster excellence in critical thinking and praxis.* As the co-authors of this report, we elaborate upon this observation by highlighting the socio-political context of the NMHC; discussing its four programmatic themes; examining its organizational effectiveness and management; and making recommendations for its improvement and sustainability. Please know, as well, that this report has been fact-checked by Executive Director Scott Russell.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE NMHC

I. Historical Background

The Northern Marianas Humanities Council (NMHC) operates in relative isolation from the other fifty-five humanities councils. The eight-hour flight between Hawaii and Saipan, for example, makes it challenging to secure ample resources and to solicit the participation of scholars and cultural experts from abroad. Another logistical obstacle concerns the distribution of programming to all three of the inhabited islands of the Northern Marianas, namely Rota, Saipan, and Tinian. Presently, a majority of the programs take place on Saipan, the most densely populated island. While some programming is carried out on Rota and Tinian, it is limited in scope, a point raised by several members of the community.

Clearly, the islands' political and social histories make them among the more demographically and culturally diverse in the Pacific Islands region. The indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian populations have also survived the colonization efforts of Spain (1565-1898), Germany (1898-1914), Japan (1914-1944), the United Nations (1947-1986), and the United States (1944-present). Whereas the Carolinians migrated to and settled in Saipan in the mid-nineteenth century as part of the Catholic mission's goals to proselytize other Pacific Islanders, the Chamorros have resided in Saipan and the wider Marianas for over 4,000 years. Currently a U.S. commonwealth, islanders and immigrants alike now face new economic, political, and social dilemmas associated with the declining population, the growing number of tourists from China, the increasing presence of the U.S. Department of Defense in the islands of Tinian and Saipan, and the legalizing of casino gambling in Saipan.

II. Political Association

The Northern Mariana Islands have a unique relationship with the United States. In 1978, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI) was established by way of the provisions outlined in the "Covenant" between the governments of the Northern Mariana Islands and the United States. This agreement granted U.S. citizenship and local self-government under U.S. sovereignty to the indigenous residents of the CNMI. Land ownership was also limited to U.S. citizens of Northern Marianas descent. Finally, the U.S. government provides financial support for infrastructure development and public services with the understanding that specific lands can be designated for U.S. military-use only. Restrictions on land alienation, the federalization of immigration and labor, and the increased U.S. militarization of everyday life are issues that residents deal with presently.

III. Geography and Demographics

The CNMI is comprised of 14 islands located in the northwest Pacific. Three of the islands are continuously inhabited with Saipan being the most densely populated at 48,229. Tinian is home to 3,136 residents and Rota is host to 2,527. Geographically closer to Asia than the United States continent, its closest neighbor is the U.S. territory of Guam. With a total of 53,892 residents, the CNMI makes up one of the nation's smaller yet most ethnically diverse communities. Yet the indigenous Chamorros and Carolinians, who in 2010 consisted of 41% of the population, have become a minority in their own homeland with Filipinos accounting for the next largest group at 35%. Of the remaining groups, Asians

constitute 16%, Pacific Islanders make up 6%, and African- and Euro-Americans represent 2%. As a result of the departure of foreign guest workers and indigenous residents, there has been a 24% decline in the population of the CNMI over the last 15 years. And while the remaining foreign workers can continue to work in the CNMI until 2018 by way of a visa program, it is quite possible that the population will continue its downward trajectory.

IV. Economy

The CNMI economy is currently recovering from a deep recession (2009-2014) caused by a significant decline in the visitor industry and the loss of the garment industry. Since this period, the 2014 median income for the CNMI was less than half of the average U.S. national household. On the other hand, the CNMI is experiencing an upswing in the economy due to a significant increase in visitor arrivals from China and Korea, and to the legalization of casino gambling on Saipan. While this change in the economy is generally welcomed, some residents are concerned with the rising costs-of-living that this new industry brings, especially as casino gambling relates to increased fees in food, health, and housing.

THE FOUR PROGRAMMATIC THEMES OF THE NMHC

In light of the economic, political, and social challenges outlined in the previous section, we would now like to discuss how the NMHC turns to the NEH and the humanities to address these matters. In this part of the report, we focus on the four programmatic themes that have played vital roles in the making of vibrant educational programs, raising awareness about the socio-political context of the CNMI, and engaging elders and youth alike in civic engagement. These themes include “Know Ourselves,” “Embrace Diversity,” “Start Them Young,” and “Grow the Grassroots.” As the NMHC Self-Assessment Report indicates, these themes entail “studying and preserving local history, culture and languages, exploring U.S. and CNMI public policy, and reaching underserved communities” (Russell 2016, page 6).

I. Know Ourselves

Given the significance of the indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian cultures and languages, the NMHC is partly mandated to preserve and promote these unique linguistic systems and to make them accessible and meaningful to the wider public as well.¹ In 2012, the NMHC subsequently created the biannual Marianas History Conference (MHC) in an effort to feature studies by and about Chamorros and Carolinians for a broad public constituency. As a result, they have organized two conferences—one in 2012 and one in 2013—with the support of the University of Guam and Guampedia, a non-profit organization specializing in digital education. The third symposium is now scheduled for 2017 since the earlier meeting, initially planned for 2015, was postponed due to the arrival of Typhoon Soudelor. In consultation with the staff and faculty of the CNMI Archives and the University of Guam, the NMHC has also developed the Teachers Institute, a series of workshops, and the Digital

¹ Chamorro language survival is especially relevant. In 2008, for instance, the National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded \$300,000 to a team of educators in the CNMI; this collective also partnered with the Northern Marianas Humanities Council, itself a grantee of the NSF. And in 2013, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service’s Administration for Children and Families and the Administration for Native Americans provided \$207,635 to another research group in Guam. These monies allowed these scholars to develop, respectively, a Chamorro-English dictionary and a Chamorro-language curriculum at the university level.

Archives project in an attempt to provide research and writing skills for any member of the public. The individuals who participate in these activities are then encouraged to share their research at the Marianas History Conference or at related venues. Reflecting on the relevance of these programs, one interviewee related that these events have been “successful” in reaching the public and in “reuniting” conversations between the CNMI and Guam. The latter point is significant given that few critical exchanges occur between these islands. Otherwise, the NMHC seeks to build upon these legacies by partnering with the Marianas Visitors Authority (MVA) to develop the Geotourism Initiative. This program would install interpretive signs along 20 sites in the Garapan Trail, as well as connect potential audiences to digital maps and other information contained in the MVA’s website.

II. Embrace Diversity

With its multicultural community, the NMHC likewise takes great pride in serving its immigrant communities from Asia, North America, and the Pacific Islands. Their programs have explored the meaning of the “American Dream” with high school students at the 1st Annual Humanities Film Festival; featured keynote speakers for the African American community during the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday; and fostered World Café-oriented discussions on diversity with college students. At the regional level, the NMHC has also developed relationships with the Center of Samoan Studies at the National University of Samoa (NUS) and the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL). Whereas the NUS participated in an educational event about the exile of ten Samoan chiefs to Saipan during the German colonial period, PREL organized several storytelling workshops (e.g., film, journalism, etc.) for the CNMI’s youth. The NMHC is now working with the NUS to publish a booklet on the Samoan chiefs for usage in the CNMI Public School System. Another future project concerns the effort to document the history of the U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers and their contributions to the community from 1966 to 1977. As these examples illustrate, the NMHC, as one educator put it, “plays an important role in the public . . . by covering the Japanese, German, Filipino, and American influences in the CNMI.”

III. Start Them Young

Two signature programs define the NMHC’s theme of “Start Them Young,” namely the Junior High Mock Trials and the Sengebau Poetry Competition. With respect to the Junior Mock Trials, this program caters to students in the 7th and 8th grades. With the support of the CNMI Bar Association and the CNMI Superior and Supreme Courts, the Junior Mock Trials specifically train the youth to understand and appreciate the legal, political, and social meaning of the law as it applies to the CNMI, the federal government, and internationally. This is a high-impact program because of its reach across diverse youth audiences in Rota, Saipan, and Tinian and because of its existence since 2003. Equally unique and important is the Sengebau Poetry Competition and its emphasis on creative expression and cultural literacy for students at the 7th to 12th grade levels. In fact, the NMHC not only advertises these programs to the public by way of the local radio stations and the media; the council also features moving stories about the youth, as with a recent news article about the awardees of the Sengebau Poetry Competition in October 2016. Published by the *Saipan Tribune*, the essay welcomed and celebrated the youth’s perspectives. As one awardee exclaimed, “It feels really great! I was actually more nervous about the award ceremony than I was doing my piece. When I heard I was first place, I

couldn't believe it because I really thought that I wasn't even going to place." Another awardee expressed, "My inspiration was my school because it's full of different cultures. I have friends that are Chinese, Korean, and Filipino and they are all very close to me." Further, the NMHC has begun to extend their relationships with the youth by reaching out to the Youth Congresses of the CNMI and Guam in another attempt to bridge understanding between the peoples of these U.S. territories and the socio-political challenges they face (e.g., immigration and labor policies, political reunification and self-determination, etc.)

IV. Grow the Grassroots

With an action-oriented title, "Grow the Grassroots" is an appropriate phrase for the range of programs the NMHC seeks to accomplish under the umbrella of "grassroots." Take, for instance, their weekly radio show, "Your Humanities Half-Hour." This program often hosts visiting educators and cultural experts, records their conversations, and broadcasts their discussions to the CNMI public every Sunday. That the NMHC's radio show targets Sunday is especially noteworthy given that a majority of the community listens to the radio—itsself a venue for popular local music—during a time when families and friends recreate at homes, beaches, and parks (e.g. hosting a birthday party, barbecuing for relatives, etc.). Elsewhere, the NMHC advertises its programs by way of the local media, an email listserve of 350 active participants, and flyers and posters distributed at community venues. The list of programs under this theme is also quite extensive, as with the Community Grants Program, the Community Lecture Series, the Fireside Chat for U.S. military veterans, the Governor's Humanities Award ceremony, and the Motherhead Family Literacy Program. The latter program is a particularly successful program given its multigenerational and multiethnic composition. In this respect, the Motherhead Family Literacy Program caters to low-income families, prisoners at the Department of Corrections, and students at the local libraries. Given its focus on mentorship, the program has likewise created an educational pipeline from which elders and youth alike find inspiration in storytelling. As one parent interviewee remarked, "Korean and Chamorro moms enjoy the Motherhead program." Another educator said, "We are practically family." Finally, one librarian credited the Motherhead program for "bringing in patrons who have never been to the library."

THE ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND MANAGEMENT OF THE NMHC

The Northern Marianas Humanities Council (NMHC) is comprised of a 13-member Board of Directors, a staff of three full-time employees, and four contract employees. The full-time staff consists of the Executive Director, the Program Officer, and the Fiscal Officer/Administrative Assistant. The remaining contract employees then work for the Motherhead Family Literacy Program and the "Your Humanities Half-hour" radio show. In this section, we discuss the organizational effectiveness and management of the NMHC. We then conclude this report with our recommendations for improvement and sustainability.

I. The Board of Directors

During the site visit it became very clear that the combined efforts of the Board of Directors and the council's small but dedicated and hardworking staff are responsible for the community success, high visibility, and overall impact of the programs outlined above. Statements from stakeholders also indicate that the NMHC is a well-respected and a much-

needed resource in the CNMI. As one interviewee observed, “The Humanities Council brings together diverse communities on island which is not an easy task.” Another said, “The council is a highly functioning, highly productive nonprofit in the CNMI with periodic evaluation as part of their regular program.” As one person stated, the NMHC clearly “fills a void” in a humanities-oriented education not otherwise provided by other organizations in the CNMI. Without the NMHC’s direction, we found that numerous community programs would not have been funded. Taking ownership of the humanities, one interviewee put it succinctly: “Funding from the NMI Council gives projects credibility in the community.”

Within this context, the Board oversees the NMHC, sets its policies, and governs its five standing committees. The five groups include the Executive Committee, the Program Committee, the Development Committee, the Strategic Planning Committee, and the Nominating and Bylaw Committee. Comprised of engaged and passionate individuals, the Board represents a cross-section of the community. Six members have backgrounds in the humanities, four in business, and two in education. There is also one representative each from the islands of Rota and Tinian. Currently, one vacancy needs to be filled by the Governor’s Office as only two of the three gubernatorial appointments are occupied. For our site visit, eight of the twelve board members attended our meeting. It was apparent that a warm, collegial relationship exists among the members of the Board, all of whom enthusiastically support the Executive Director and the staff. The Board likewise indicated that while they are involved with the NMHC they refrain from micromanaging its affairs.

Recently, the NMHC completed a year-long strategic planning process with the participation of the Board of Directors, the Executive Director, and the staff. This effort resulted in a 5-year strategic plan. The plan outlines three goals: first, to promote the history and study of the indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian cultures and languages of the CNMI; second, to advance the understanding of and appreciation for the humanities in the CNMI; and, third, to enhance the quality of service and the efficiency of the council’s operations. During the interview, Board members outlined other priority areas such as the emergent casino industry in Saipan and the environmental concerns brought on by increased development and militarization in Saipan and Tinian. Other significant concerns included efforts to improve the Board’s fundraising capacity and the Board’s relationship with Humanities Guåhan—the humanities council in Guam. Members also expressed a need to transition programming from a focus on history to current events affecting the people. Additionally, five members of the Board will rotate off within the coming year. Two will leave in October 2016, and three will depart in September 2017. Executive Director Scott Russell also plans to retire in 2017. Yet the Board does not have a succession plan for the Executive Director. Addressing this matter, one Board member said that there would be an extensive search for a new director. Another member was especially keen on supporting candidates who have strong “multicultural and multidimensional” sensibilities and excellent rapport with the indigenous and immigrant communities of the CNMI and Guam.

II. The Executive Director

The Executive Director administers the policy decisions made by the Board and is responsible for the day-to-day administration and operation of the NMHC. During our site visit, we were pleased to witness the support shown to Scott Russell, the current Executive

Director, by the council's stakeholders with whom we met and interviewed. He is a well-respected community leader, a history scholar, and an admired friend to many residents in the CNMI. In fact, his name has become synonymous with the Northern Marianas Humanities Council. Executive Director Russell also enjoys a good working relationship with the staff, the Board, program collaborators, and project directors. In our conversation with Executive Director Russell, he then identified two areas of concern: that is, fundraising for monies to support programs and raising public awareness about the impact of the emergent casino industry and the increasing U.S. militarization of the CNMI. Given that the Board also flagged these items, we remain confident in the NMHC's efforts to address these economic, political, and social issues in a fair, inclusive, and timely manner.

Indeed, Executive Director Scott Russell has had a long tenure with the council first as a Program Officer in 2001 and then as an Executive Director in 2009. Under his leadership, the NMHC has grown to be the premier humanities organization in the CNMI. After 16 years of serving the council and the wider public of the CNMI, he plans to retire next year.

III. Other Staff Members of the NMHC

In addition to the Executive Director, the Council has two other full-time employees. They include the Program Officer and the Fiscal Officer/Administrative Assistant; they both report to the Executive Director. At the beginning of each year, a work plan for each staff person is then developed in collaboration with the Executive Director. When asked if their actual work matches the plan developed at the beginning of the year, staff members said that typically there were two to four more programs or activities added to their agendas. As such, they described their work environment as "intellectually stimulating" and "busy."

The Program Officer is the primary staff person for almost all of the council's programming—all 18 of them since the last review of the NMHC five years ago. For this reason, the Program Officer reports that the workload and responsibility has steadily increased with time. Given this scenario, the Executive Director organizes at least half of the programs so as to provide some relief for the Program Officer. For instance, the Executive Director was the primary facilitator for the Teachers Institute, the Marianas History Conference, the Digital Archives and the Micronesian Authors initiatives, the history research workshops, the "Cultures in War" conference and the Samoan Exiles community project. In this respect, there appears to be a fluid nature to program development. The staff members even "take advantage of opportunities" especially as they relate to speakers and program collaborators. The Program Officer then submits any proposals that may arise from these and other events to the Executive Director for consideration. The Executive Director then presents these proposals to the program committee of the Board of Directors who then make the ultimate decision to approve the program for implementation. In some cases, the committee members discuss and make program recommendations to the staff.

When asked if the Program Officer was satisfied with her compensation package, she said that she would "like more" salary to compensate for the increased workload. She also expressed an interest in receiving flex-time and/or teleworking. With regard to professional development, the Program Officer attended the Pacific Century Leadership

program which she described as a good opportunity for networking. She then plans to enroll in free classes from Adtech Cohort to learn about computer/Internet programs.

The second staff member, the Fiscal Officer/Administrative Officer, is responsible for the fiscal and administrative duties of the NMHC. She also lends a hand when needed for programs. She was generally satisfied with her compensation package and workload but would like to take advantage of professional development opportunities, especially in bookkeeping. Along these lines, we noted some discrepancies in the budgeting reporting process. We thus believe that professional development for the Fiscal Officer needs to include training in the NEH budgeting and reporting process as well. Further, the Program Officer and Fiscal Officer also expressed a need for new staff with skills in data collection and evaluation, technology, the Internet and webpage building, and online marketing.

In addition to the staff, the NMHC has a cadre of scholars, project directors and collaborators that work closely with them. As with our previous meetings at the Northern Marianas College, we convened separately and privately with each of these groups. Overall, their views about the NMHC were overwhelmingly positive. One project director said, "The council has always been present and supportive." Another person observed that the NMHC is "well-regarded and respected by the community" and is "invested in the success" of the applicants and their projects. One project director also disclosed that it was "wonderful to see the work [of the council] getting into the hands of the people." This diverse body of individuals also recommended that the NMHC bring them together periodically so as to keep abreast of each other's projects and to develop new ways to work together. Many even said that they were not aware of other group projects, but would like to know more about them. They likewise requested more funding, additional staff, a comprehensive orientation workshop for the grant program, budget seminars, follow-up meetings with grantees, a grant cycle calendar, and a sign posting the hours of operation on the NMHC's office door. And while these individuals and groups share these concerns, they should also be commended for seeking extramural sources of funding to support their projects from the Australian Research Council to the Mellon Foundation and to the National Park Service.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has truly been a pleasure visiting Saipan, working with Senior Program Officer Leondra Burchall of the NEH, and interacting with the staff, the Board, and constituency of the NMHC. *In light of our observations, we therefore conclude that that the NMHC is an exemplary model of education and outreach in the humanities. It is a premier non-profit organization whose staff and board foster excellence in critical thinking and praxis.* At the same time, we understand that the NMHC can strengthen its direction, capacity, and reach. As such, we recommend that the NMHC take stock of our following recommendations. First, the NMHC should include two new staff positions to help alleviate the tremendous pressure and workload currently placed on the full-time staff. Whereas one person would have the knowledge to collect and evaluate data, manage technology, and promote online marketing for the council, the other individual would have the skills to conduct programs for the islands of Rota and Tinian. Second, the NMHC should provide additional professional development opportunities for the Program Officer and the Fiscal Officer/Administrative

Officer. Third, the Board should receive new training in nonprofit governance. Fourth, the NMHC should develop programs that cater specifically to the audiences of Rota and Tinian, two communities that are underserved when compared to the larger demographic of Saipan. Fifth, the NMHC should create a fundraising strategy; relatedly, the NMHC should generate a plan that would solicit new and retain current stakeholders, especially donors. Sixth, the NMHC should develop a succession plan for the Executive Director, thereby ensuring as smooth a transition as possible from one leadership style to another. Seventh and finally, the NMHC should establish criteria to sunset existing and future programs.