

# Groups promote Guam at San Diego festival

By **Monica Okada Guzman**

This past Saturday, the Chamorro Hands in Educational Links Unity, or CHE'LU, Chamorro Cultural Festival was held in San Diego. This festival is pegged as the largest gathering of Chamorros on the mainland, attracting thousands of Guamanians from all over the country.

In its sixth year, this one-day cultural event had to move to a larger venue at Cal State University in San Marcos to accommodate the growing number of participants.

The CHE'LU organizers coordinated great entertainment, food, fun and workshops throughout the day. The sights, sounds, smells and tastes of our culture permeated throughout the site. The inviting scent of chicken and ribs on the barbecue, piping hot empanada and kelaguen, and the Chamorro greetings of "Hafa lai!" and "Primo!" were living proof of how alive and engaged our culture is overseas.

A contingent from the Guam Visitors Bureau hosted various media groups to promote Guam and market the numerous 2015 GVB signature events. They also conducted dance academy clinics with Masters of Chamorro Dance Frank Rabon and Eileen Meno. Representing the traditional arts program for the FestPac, Master Blacksmith Frank Lizama and Master Carver Greg Pangelinan displayed their crafts.

Thanks to the generous support from United Airlines, Guam's Council on the Arts and Humanities Agency was able to attend the festival to promote FestPac to the many individuals, groups and organizations that came out for the gathering. James Bamba gave weaving workshops in the use of akgak (pandanus) and niyok (coconut). Bamba is a fourth-generation weaver, having these traditional skills passed down to him from his

mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

Master of Body Ornamentation Jill Benavente provided festival-goers with original, hand-crafted Chamorro-inspired jewelry, utilizing materials and design elements unique to our culture. Benavente displayed items from other artisans and conducted workshops as well. Bamba and Benavente continued their workshops at the Sons and Daughters of Guam Club in San Diego. Both artisans' handicrafts can be found at the Sagan Kultura Chamoru Cultural Center at Ipao Point, just above the Guam Hilton in Tumon alongside other cultural producers.

The FestPac Coordinating Committee has invited members of the Guam communities overseas to be a part of the Guam delegation for our historic celebration in 2016. Of the 500-member Guam FestPac delegation, a total of 115 slots have been allocated to the diaspora. These slots have been broken down into specific artistic disciplines. Should the diaspora be unable to fill any of the slots, the allocation will revert to Guam.

The Guam FestPac Diaspora Committee, chaired by Thelma Hechanova, coordinated the activities for the 2016 FestPac outreach efforts during the CHE'LU festival. This included performances on stage by dance groups and musicians interested in coming to Guam, demonstrations and exhibits by our traditional artists and the first round of auditions for the diaspora.

CAHA was there to oversee the auditions and respond to questions specific to the selection criteria of the various disciplines. There were 55 individuals who tried out to be on the Guam delegation in this first of two diaspora auditions.

Sitting on the panel review was an emotionally charged experience for me. Every-

one who auditioned demonstrated a passion and love of our Chamorro culture. The overarching message was a desire to return home and reconnect with family, our traditions and our heritage.

Many tears were shed, especially from the youths, when we asked what their motivations were to audition and what their expectations would be if selected as a delegate. Many had not been to Guam and they desperately wanted to connect and experience firsthand the places and the stories passed on to them by their elders. The use of the term "homeland" struck deep and once again reinforced in me just how fortunate we are to be living in Guam, surrounded every day by our beautiful Chamorro culture.

Whatever circumstances might have led to the outmigration of many Chamorros, there is still a deep sense of pride and place among the Chamorro diaspora — a sense of belonging and proud identity that is being passed on to the next generation of our people who live abroad. We should all acknowledge and embrace them regardless of where they live or why they left.

We have our work cut out for us in 2016. Not only will we be welcoming the delegates from 27 Pacific islands, we will also be welcoming back a contingent of our own Chamorro family members who live and breathe our culture abroad as part of the Guam Delegation. The name of one of the dance groups in San Diego summed it up for me personally, "Uno Hit" — We Are One. And we must be united no matter where we live.

And as our theme expresses, "Håfa Iyo-ta, Håfa Guinahå-ta, Håfa Ta Påtte, Dinanña' Sunidu Siha Giya Pasifiku — What We Own, What We Have, What We Share, United Voices of the Pacific," we must be united as Chamorros and as Pacific Islanders.

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