

Mr. Anthony Pellegrino
Testimony regarding H.R. 4339
Dr. Rita Hocog Inos Fellowship Act
Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans, and Wildlife
September 16, 2010

Dr. Rita Hocog Inos—A Lady of Vision and Determination

Today you are being requested to entertain H.R. 4339, a bill to encourage students from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to become civically engaged through local and Federal government fellowships. This act is referred to as the “Dr. Rita Hocog Inos Fellowship Act.”

Today more than ever there is a specific need for this act to be considered favorably. Daily the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands is being drawn closer and closer in its ties with the United States. It is being asked to play a greater role in the security and defense of the United States. While it is willing to do so, its youth need to become better acquainted with the government and philosophy of the United States.

It is also vital that our youth understand the similarities and differences that exist between the two governments. By better understanding this, less disconnect and less disagreements should arise. It is imperative that our two nations become better acquainted for we have a mutual need.

Few of the citizens of the CNMI are truly knowledgeable about how the United States government operates. And since its youth will become the future leaders, it is imperative that these young men and women become exposed to the workings of the Federal government. Through this fellowship, qualified youth of the CNMI will have a grand opportunity to be assigned to an internship in the office of a U.S. Senator or Representative in, or a Delegate or Resident Commissioner to, the Congress.

Later in my testimony you will hear how the effect of having studied first hand in American universities influenced the educational philosophy of Dr. Rita Inos. It is this same kind of opportunity that H.R. 4339 intends to provide for the recipients of the fellowship.

But who was Dr. Rita Hocog Inos that this distinctive honor should be bestowed upon her? Dr. Rita Hocog Inos was born May 12, 1954, in Songsong, Rota, one of the Northern Mariana Islands. Dr. Inos graduated from Arlington High School in Arlington, Texas. In 1979, she attended the University of Hawaii, where she obtained her bachelor’s degree in liberal arts. Later she attended California State University where she received a master’s degree in educational anthropology. To prepare herself for the goal of being an educational administrator, she attended San Jose State University in California in 1983, where she received her second master’s degree in school administration.

To further prepare herself, she attended the University of Southern California in 1994, where she was awarded a Doctor of Education degree. The fact that she attended and graduated from an American high school and American universities made a lasting impression and influenced much of her philosophy of education.

Dr. Rita Hocog Inos devoted the next 15 years of her life preparing for her role as a pioneer and leader in the educational public school system in the Northern Mariana Islands. During this period, in addition to textbook learning, she gained hands-on experience as a bilingual teacher at schools on Saipan and Rota. Later she served as principal of Rota Elementary School.

In addition to furthering her education, Dr. Inos became the Director of Programs and Services at the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) from 1990 to 1998. Then in 2004 to 2006, Dr. Inos became the chairperson for the PREL's Board of Directors from 2004 till 2006.

She served as Commissioner of Education of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School system (PSS) from 1998 to 2005. It was during this period that Dr. Rita Hocog Inos implemented many of her ideas to improve the educational system in the Northern Marianas Islands.

Unlike the Commissioners who preceded her, she also reached out to the other Pacific Islands such as American Samoa, Chuuk, Guam, Kosrae, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Pohnpei, and Yap. Dr. Inos believed that all the children of the Pacific Islands must improve their educational level to better adapt to the influences of the outside world intruding upon their islands. She was concerned that all the Pacific children across the region flourish and be empowered through education. Coupled with that desire, she was committed to building the capacities of Pacific educators, parents, and communities. For Dr. Inos education was the gateway to a better economic and social life.

As a regional leader of education and through her work at PREL, Dr. Inos initiated research-based school improvement processes, such as the Onward to Excellence program for the Pacific educators and communities. The impact she had on her fellow educators can perhaps best be summed up from the remarks of Donna Gurr, Assistant Director, American Samoa Department of Education:

It was through Pacific Region Effective and Successful Schools (PRESS) that I learned of Rita's passion to improve the quality of education for our Pacific children by building the capacity of our local leaders. She always reminded us to honor our community leaders, our cultural leaders, our ministers, our parents, and everyone that contributes toward educating our children. She realized that there were "stateside ways" and "island ways" of doing things, and that we must not neglect to honor our culture as we implement stateside programs and ideas.

One of Dr. Inos's loves was to preserve and foster the cultivation of the indigenous languages of the islands. She was very proud of her heritage and took every opportunity to share that with others. Everywhere she went she shared a piece of the CNMI culture.

Education for children was not Dr. Inos's sole passion. She envisioned a better economic and social life for all the people in the CNMI—so much that she became the running mate of two different gubernatorial candidates. In fact, she was the first woman to seek such a high office. Though never elected, she continued her devotion to reaching out to all the people by becoming involved in her community.

Even after her retirement from the Public School System, Dr. Inos continued her devotion to improvement of education by serving on the Northern Marianas College Board of Regents, where she was Chairperson for several years.

I could continue enumerating her accomplishments, but I would like to interject an account of my personal experiences with Dr. Inos while I served on the PSS Board of Education. I recall the many conversations we had on some of the problems the PSS faced, not only in education but in the lack of classroom facilities. Since I was the board member entrusted with creating more classrooms and schools, we planned together how to solve this dilemma.

Under her meticulous guidance and encouragement, together we were able build three new schools, begin the construction of two more, and add sixty new classrooms to the existing schools. All in a four-year period. During all this time she wore a radiant smile. I never recall seeing her discouraged. At one point when we had a serious problem with a contractor, she never relented until the problem was solved. I gained much by having associated with her in my four years as a member of the Board of Education while she was the Commissioner.

Let me sum up why you are being asked to approve H.R. 4339. Dr. Rita Hocog Inos devoted her life to furthering education for all the children and people of the Pacific Islands. She blended “stateside” and “island” ways.

Dr. Inos served as Commissioner of Education of the CNMI Public School System from June, 1998, to December 2005. While Commissioner of Education, Dr. Inos initiated an academic data-based system in PSS which enabled the CNMI to comply with Federal standards. Without her visions and determination all the educational system improvements PSS enjoys today may have been never implanted.

Dr. Rita Hocog Inos passed away in August 10, 2009 at the young age of 55 from cancer. Many have preceded her and many will follow her, but her legacy lives on. I recall this homage to Dr. Inos with Father Jim Croghan's prayer:

Wow, one more shining star looking out for the children of the Pacific.
Let's make sure we honor Rita's memory and give the children the education they deserve and need.

Dr. Rita Hocog Inos was truly a lady with a vision and determination to touch the hearts and minds of thousands of children. All she desired was a better life for the children of the CNMI and other Pacific Islands. This act, H.R. 4339, is a tribute and memorial to a lady with a winning smile and a love of children.

The act hopes to create more visionaries to further the work Dr. Inos started. Thus, by passing H.R. 4339 many qualified youth of the CNMI will be able to better understand the workings and philosophy of the United States. Not only will it bring further enlightenment but a much closer relationship between the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Island and the United States. I hope you agree with the objective of H.R. 4339.