

# Breaking through cultural barriers to health care

BY HEIDI SWILLINGER

**C**OPING with breast cancer is hard enough. But coping with it alone is harder. Esther Macaraeg can't change the fact that it is the leading cancer among Filipino American women, affecting 73 in 100,000 Filipinas. But she has made it her mission to make sure they don't have to go through it on their own.

As executive director of the Pilipino Senior Resource Center in west SoMa, Macaraeg is in close touch with the Filipino community. She founded the center — initially as a volunteer — in 2006 to serve the needs of the neighborhood's large senior population. It's one of the neighborhood's newer resources devoted to Filipino Americans.

At the Senior Resource Center, Macaraeg provides case management, makes referrals for housing and medical care, and offers translation services that range from explaining forms written in English to interpreting during doctors' visits. She also offers support groups for seniors, and when she realized that many who attended were breast cancer

survivors, she formed a group for them. With help from U.C.

San Francisco and a \$35,000 grant from the Avon Foundation, the group began meeting in July.

In focusing on breast cancer, Macaraeg zeroed in on an unfilled need. Just behind Japanese women, Filipinas have the highest breast cancer rate among Asian subgroups, and the highest mortality rate among Asian subgroups in California, according to Nancy Burke, a professor at UCSF's Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Center. Compared with white women, Filipinas are more likely to be diagnosed at later stages and are more likely to die from the disease. Despite this, Burke says research on — and resources for — Filipinas with breast cancer is scarce.

Although most of the members in Macaraeg's group are elders, it is open to women of all ages. They meet every other Monday to learn the latest about issues relating to breast cancer; the group is conducted in Tagalog. The educational component is important, says Macaraeg, because many of the women are immigrants unfamiliar with the concept of preventive medicine. They may not recognize the importance of having regular mammograms, or they may simply be afraid to go to a doctor.

"In our culture, we go to the doctor if we feel something is wrong," she says. "Otherwise, we don't go." She adds that many Filipinas — especially elders — rely on alternative medicines when health problems crop, and may not treat serious illnesses quickly enough.

But for women struggling with the complex psychological impact of breast cancer,



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Women from the Pilipino Senior Resource Center gather to learn the facts about breast cancer at one of the support group's bi-monthly meetings.

## SOUTHSIDE

education alone isn't enough. There also are social and artistic opportunities through the support group. The women gather weekly to talk or make jewelry, candles or silk flowers, which they sell at fundraisers for the center.

With money raised from craft and food sales, as well as donations from San Francisco's 40,000 Filipinos, Macaraeg has turned a modest two-room office in the basement of the Mint Mall building into an oasis for the 10 to 15 women who attend the support group events.

For group members Veneracion Zamora, Celestina Jugo and Romana Elomina, who all faced their illness with little or no support from family members, the group is a valuable respite from their cares.

"I enjoy the laughter and camaraderie of the group," says Zamora, a retired Pacific Bell worker who was diagnosed with cancer in both breasts. "It gives me a reason to get out of the house."

Jugo says the craft sessions help her relax. "I don't think about my problems," says the retired security guard, adding that she particularly enjoys the company the group provides because her family lives in the Philippines. "I'm lonely," she says.

Jugo's situation is far from rare. Ramona Elomina, for example, was diagnosed in 2007 and underwent chemotherapy. The retired hotel housekeeper is a widow whose daughter lives in Las Vegas. Macaraeg says she formed the support group so that women like Jugo and Elomina wouldn't

have to cope with breast cancer all alone.

"Depression is a part of that sickness," she says. "Some of (the women) have support from families, but if you are a senior, you may have kids, but they're busy with their own families." One of Macaraeg's goals was to establish a buddy system, so that members have someone to turn to. "That's important," she says. "Knowing you have someone to rely on in case of emergency." ■

## New ED at SomArts

BY TOM CARTER AND MARJORIE BEGGS

**L**EX Leitheit says that as the new executive director of SomArts, she knows she has "big shoes to fill" — those of Jack Davis, who died in September 2007 after 20 years at the helm of the innovative South of Market arts center.

"Lex's passion for community-based art, artists and their impact . . . makes her an excellent choice to provide the next generation of leadership at SomArts," said Brian Freeman, playwright/director and chairman of the search committee for Davis' successor.

More than 450,000 people a year come through SomArts' Brannan Street doors for its year-round arts classes, theater performances, gallery exhibitions and technical services.

Leitheit visited one of those art exhibitions in 2005 and, she recalls, found it "a magical place," with a mix of patrons from all over the city — "so friendly, talking and laughing, and it flowed into the gallery and showed in art on the walls — people [here] are very expressive."

She joined SomArts in October after 10 years as an arts administrator, the last four as the assistant director of Wesleyan University's Green Street Arts Center in Middletown, Conn. Green Street is a neighborhood arts and cultural center that serves Middletown's population of 43,000 but also draws audiences from the surrounding metropolitan region.

Leitheit initiated more than a dozen new performance, literary and visual arts programs at Green Street, increasing attendance and income for the center. She currently is vice chair of the Emerging Leader Council of Americans for the Arts, which promotes and nurtures new artists nationwide. The council helps the organization develop programs and resources.

Leitheit says she'll try to create a new chapter for SomArts, like "a metal alloy" that joins new and established artists. "It's important that we explore."

That exploration is happening. In November, SomArts Gallery featured "Synthetic Masquerade," an exhibition of Internet artists and how they express themselves by creating an avatar — an embodiment — for a game, virtual world or Website chat.

For SomArts programs and services, visit somarts.org or call 863-1414. ■

## SOUTHSIDE

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Space is still available in many noncredit courses offered this Spring at **City College of San Francisco's Alemany Campus** at 750 Eddy St. and other locations. Instruction begins January 12th. **Noncredit courses are free.** Select courses from the sampling below or visit [www.ccsf.edu](http://www.ccsf.edu) for a complete list. **Then just go to class.**

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CRN#	Title	Days	Times	Location/Room
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42253	ESL Beginning	M-F	8:15-10 a.m.	750 Eddy/302
40883	ESL Beginning	M-Th	6:30-8:35 p.m.	750 Eddy/305
40873	ESL Beginning	M-F	8:15-10 a.m.	750 Eddy/301
40979	ESL Beginning	M-F	6:30-8:35 p.m.	750 Eddy/302
45231	Typing/Computers	M-F	8:15-10 a.m.	750 Eddy/102
40874	ESL Beginning	M-F	8:15-10 a.m.	4301 Geary/Basement
40866	ESL Beginning	M-F	10:15 a.m.-12 p.m.	4301 Geary/Basement
40980	ESL Beginning	M-F	8:15-10 a.m.	4301 Geary/2nd Floor
45583	ESL Intermediate	M-F	10:15 a.m.-12 p.m.	4301 Geary/2nd Floor
40934	ESL Beginning	M-Th	6:30-8:35 p.m.	3151 Ortega/100

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