

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



Let me tell you a true story, at last

Last week, an old friend asked me to happy hour at a nice downtown hotel. Once we settled down, she whispered “how are you?” the way our sisters do. She’d read the news. She’d heard the gossip, about me leaving my position as City Hall’s immigrant integration policy guy. Four worry furrows, I counted across her forehead.

Pero please, allow me a short digression to set three things straight. First, by “old,” I don’t mean she’s antique. She’s not “vintage,” as in what those hip inner eastside boutiques call startlingly expensive old stuff racked and stacked in them. Tentu tidak. Surely not. I mean none of that.

I mean, she’s a local mekanik komuniti, one of about two dozen veteran community mechanics who’ve all endured three wild American mood swings, each barely managed by six U.S. presidents from both sides of our political elites’ invented partisan aisle. On that divide’s right, roils a lot of racialized patriotism. On its left, a lot of indignant speechifying. And aduh’illaah (OMG) what a destructive deluge each next cycle of duelling political spectacle has sent downstream, to where we live. And love. Including River City’s 70-or-so ethnic minority communities. And yet, despite their recklessness, Vanport Lives. We endure, ridiculously optimistic.

Similarly, our elected state and municipal leaders have also failed to demonstrate care for our anxious moms and our humiliated dads, their kids and grandkids. Here too, they’ve delivered plenty of earnest speeches. Exceptions to our progressive political leaders’ slim stake in inclusivity, diversity, equity, all that kind of downtown talk, are Oregon’s uncommonly responsible 38th governor, and Portland’s 50th and 54th mayors.

All right, that’s my loopy 150-word detour about my old best bud’s commitments during our shared four decades of national, state, and City Hall unreliability. Al’hamdulillaah.

Back at Heathman’s happy hour, I said, “Yes, I’m really all right, nonya manis.” Lady dear. To my worried old friend. “And yes, I’m done at City Hall.”

Under the roar of after-hour downtowners, I told her how sorry I am, for failing my promises to mayor Potter’s counsel of community elders and younger

activists. Those folks who hired me. I confessed that after 40 years of trying and trying, three decades outside City Hall, then one in the thick of it, I’m simply out of juice and real close to clobbering the next well-educated, well-paid, well-dressed, well-fed downtown official saying something stupid. Exhausted and angry are two ways of being our elegant ancestors have always made us promise never to be. At least not at work. What’s more, astounding amounts of taxpayer money are always committed to deal with our cities’ exhausted and suddenly angry brown, black, and blue men. Python-armed guys will dispatch inside three minutes. And *will* take me out. For sure.

I asked our elder auntie to understand that I can do no more about Portland’s downtown policy leaders. I cannot give their organization another day. “I don’t need that position, saudara manis saya.” Sister dear of mine. “Pero, I do need your respect and affection. Real bad.”

She reached across our corner table and squeezed my hands, hard. She nodded. She cried. I cried. This was my best happy hour, ever.

I took all that as a yes. And now, because both her kids and mine are already educated and really cool; because our grandkids are so healthy — since I’ve sincerely tried and tried to be true to mayor Potter’s Vision of distributing more kindly Portland’s really valuable city services, since I’m now done helping incompetent or courage-less public-policy leaders feel good about themselves — with what little column-space remains today, then with what years our generous universe gives me, I am now obliged to speak openly.

I’ll begin right now by crediting the commonsense partnerships of our hard-hard working cops and urban planners, our professional transportation and environmental services workers, our fun and funny parks and neighborhood livability staffers with our traditional elders and our savvy younger activists, for the inspired community-building we’ve done over our shared 10 years.

These regular krotjong actually earned River City’s 24 national, state, and local honors for our red-hot community integration practices. With either little help or outright resistance from their bureau



Former Portland mayor Tom Potter.

bosses or city commissioners, these partners have laid down a decade of us directly accountable to us. A good start.

To you saudara-sudara manis, terima kasih banjaak. Dear sisters and brothers, I offer our love. Or: Aloha nui — same idea, short and sweet.

The Asian Reporter’s Expanding American Lexicon a.k.a. Our Portland Patois

Al’hamdulillaah (Arabic. Though central in many non-Arabic communities and nations): Centuries of careful exegesis has been committed to sufficiently understanding then devoutly using this exclamation of gratitude to God. Scholarly exposition is easily accessed by, for example, online inquiry. I cannot know, so I cannot set out meaning for *AR* readers).

Aloha nui (Hawaiian): Love or life-giving breath, lots of that, to you.

Pero (Spanish, Tagalog, Indo patois, Portland patois): Used when English-speakers say “but,” however not with the same exclusionary intent. Culturally more like “Yes and also,” or “That’s okay, however.”

Python-armed guys: Our city’s public safety officers, with big respect and affection to those

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women and men committed to serving our many-many complex ethnocultural communities of Portlanders in ways we understand and practice law and order.

Vanport: Formerly, Oregon’s second largest city. Portland Housing Authority quickly platted a town for Kaiser shipyard’s workers. It was an amazing experiment in inclusionary community. Previously segregated genders and races, had to work, study, and share tidy new neighborhoods. The 1948 Vanport Flood ended all that, but not female or ethnic minority Portlander’s rejection of classroom, market, and workplace discrimination.

Vision: Mayor Tom Potter’s visionPDX was a two-year process, city government-funded and community-led, which deliberately included 17,000 Portlanders of all abilities, generations, and orientations to gender to define in nine languages the values we share as neighbors and the goals our city should secure over the next 30 years. An inspiring example of democracy in practice.

24 national, state, and local honors: New Portlander Programs’ Equity in Practice partners as recipients, are listed at <www.NWCommunitiesCounsel.org>.

38th Oregon governor: Kate Brown.

50th Portland mayor: Tom Potter.

54th Portland mayor: Charlie Hales.



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