

## Face to face with Tom Hanks (oops! the lookalike) FUNFARE by Ricardo F. Lo

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If you were in the vicinity of the Rizal Park last Sunday, Jan. 26, you must have crossed paths with somebody in a Forrest Gump attire who walked like Tom Hanks, who talked like Tom Hanks, who sounded like Tom Hanks, who smiled like Tom Hanks, who looked exactly like Tom Hanks. For sure, you must have taken a second – or a

third or a fourth – long, hard look at him and wondered what Tom Hanks was doing *here*, gawking at the guards of Dr. Jose Rizal's monument, sitting by his lonesome on the seawall (with his ubiquitous *maleta* beside him) and, later, jumping into a jeepney that zoomed around the park.

Sorry, folks, but the guy wasn't Tom Hanks; neither was he Forrest Gump, subject of the Tom Hanks hit movie back in 1994. He was Steve James Weber, the Tom Hanks lookalike in a Forrest Gump get-up, who dropped by for a five-day visit to help draw the crowd into the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. Restaurant & Market (at the second floor of Greenbelt 3, Makati City, tel. nos. 757-5104/757-5105), owned and operated by Bert and Carol Nievera, which had a VIP Night on Saturday (Jan. 25) and formally opened to the public the next day.

As I walked into Bubba Gump last Monday, Steve nearly fooled me into believing that he *was* Tom Hanks/Forrest Gump even if I knew very well that he wasn't. Why, Steve looked almost like the *real thing!* Before he and the Nievera couple ushered me inside, Steve asked me to sit on the bench (the same one Forrest Gump sat on in the movie) at the entrance and to take off my shoes and stuff my feet into the pair stuck to the floor, and then he snapped a souvenir photo of me. Part of the Bubba Gump gimmick, I would learn later.

Inside, the ambience is very Forrest Gump, from the car plates curbed around the posts to the tables and chairs to the old pictures on the walls to all the other memorabilia, with Forrest Gump quotations printed on, among other things and places, the key chains and the menu. Remember *Mama always said, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."*? It's there.

"Everything here was done to the specification of the mother company," said Caroline "Caline" Hernandez-Soller, Carol's

daughter who's the VP for Operations of Bubba Gump, "from the items on the menu to the decor."

An American-looking waiter approached us with a wide smile and turned the "Stop, Forrest, Stop" sign standing on our table to "Run, Forrest, Run" before he asked for our drinks. But first, he said, I had to answer one question if I wanted a free drink and another one for a free dessert. First question: *Name three sports Forrest Gump dabbled in.* Easy does it: Football, running and table tennis! "You get a tall glass of iced tea!" the waiter told me. Second question: *Forrest Gump started running around America. Where did he stop (when he said, "I'm tired; I wanna go home!")?* The answer is, of course, Arizona! "Very good!" the waiter exclaimed. Free dessert for me (but I never got to eat it because I'm not a dessert person).

I went over the menu and the items seemed promising (read: mouth-watering). Two of the appetizers are *Chilly Shrimp* (Bubba's delicious Peel 'n' Eat Shrimp fixed up Southern style) at P250 per order, and *Old Fashioned New England Clam Chowder* at P180 per order. Bubba's Shrimp Specials include *Bubba's After the Storm "Bucket of Boat Trash"* (Tender Shrimp, Slipper Lobster and flaky White Fish cooked Baja style with Creamy Coleslaw and Fries) at P490 per order, and *Forrest's Shrimp Net Catch* (Shrimp steamed in Beer with Potatoes and Fresh Vegetables and your choice of Bubba's Garlic Spice or Secret Recipe Cajun Spice) at P420 per order. Among Forrest's Favorites: *Captain's Fish and Chips* (Beer battered Pacific Northwest flaky white Fish and Creamy Coleslaw) at P350 per order, and *Bourbon Street Mahi Mahi* (Charbroiled Cajun spiced Mahi Mahi with Bourdon Sauce and Shrimp served over Garlic Mashed Potatoes) at P350 per order.

Simply going over the menu was "filling" enough so I just settled for the tall glass of iced tea, sans dessert.

The Tom Hanks/Forrest Gump "clone" was in front of me, telling funny stories about himself, much to the amusement of those at the table, Bert and Carol, and Caline included.

His real name is Steve James Weber, into his early 30s, but he insisted with a poker face that he was the real Forrest Gump.

"I'm the one they made the movie about," he said, still not laughing. "The other one (meaning Hanks) was just an actor they hired to play me in the movie. And I'll tell you a little secret. We hired him because he look like me! He's a pretty good actor, isn't he?"

And so is he. Steve, I mean.

It was in the early '80s when Steve became aware that he looked like an unknown actor by the name of Tom Hanks appearing in the TV series *Bosom Buddies*. The actor, Steve would learn later, was two years older than he was. Day in and day out, four or five times a day, somebody would tell Steve that he looked like *that* actor, until it stuck to him like second skin.

His life took a sharp turn in 1994 when *Forrest Gump* was shown, starring the "unknown actor" who was by then nearing superstar status. Critics, Steve put on Forrest Gump attire during a Halloween celebration and distributed chocolates just like what Forrest Gump did in the movie. In 1996, when Bubba Gump was put up in Monterey, California, Steve showed up in his Forrest Gump attire. He was hired on the spot as the Bubba Gump "mascot."

"After six weeks," he recalled. "They told me to come every week until I was told differently. It has been seven years now."

Tom Hanks has nothing to do with the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. Restaurant & Market, the franchise of which is held by the Viacom-Paramount Company. But the Bubba Gump was inspired by Forrest Gump, obviously. In the movie, Bubba (played by Michael T. Williamson) and Forrest Gump planned to put up a shrimp restaurant once they got out of war they reluctantly found themselves in. But then, Bubba died in combat and the best-laid plan went up in smoke.

Until Viacom-Paramount turned it into a reality.

The restaurant/market combines the names of the two friends, Bubba and Gump.

After Monterey, 10 other outlets have been put up in various parts of the US (Chicago, Colorado, South Carolina, Florida, New Orleans, Hawaii, etc.). The idea clicked – and how!

"Two years ago," recalled Bert, "Carol and I were in Hawaii where we saw a long line leading to the Bubba Gump. We were hungry. Carol loved shrimps and so did I. It took us more than one hour to get in."

An idea hit the business-minded Carol (who, together with Bert, also own and operate the Country Waffles outlets in Eastwood City, Quezon City, Greenhills, etc.) Why not put up one in the Philippines? Carol wrote a letter to the Viacom boss and promptly got an answer a week later. That fast! Last year, she and Bert were invited to Osaka to witness the opening of the first Bubba Gump in Asia (with the one at Greenbelt only the second). And then, Caline and seven others went to Maui, Hawaii, for a six-week training (in serving, cooking, bar-tending, etc.) before the Bubba Gump finally materialized in Greenbelt.

Steve looked around the place, nodding with pleasure.

"I used to sell high-tech products, clothes and office furniture," said the guy from Pennsylvania who finally settled down in California. "Now I'm selling a concept and I love it!"

As Forrest Gump's Mama said, *Life is like a box of chocolates...*

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