

## Marivir Montebon: Author, Blogger and American success story

Cabot W. Peterson  
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For UTS student Marivir Montebon, a native of the Philippines who came to the United States ten years ago and became a naturalized citizen in 2015, getting to the U.S. was just the beginning of her dreams; an instinctive case of "blooming where she was planted," is how she so aptly put it. In an age filled with an endless cacophony pouring forth every day from all aspects of the media, it's refreshing to find someone who believes that news should not only be a force that produces, as she puts it, "positive energy," but is also a vehicle to "encourage people to continue doing good things."

Mother, writer, documentary video producer, magazine publisher and immigration activist are just a few of the titles she wears, interchangeable depending on the day of the week or the time of day.

Montebon, who will begin her second year at the [Unification Theological Seminary](#) (UTS) in Manhattan in August, has recently published her fifth book, "In the Belly of the Beast," detailing the plight of Filipinos caught up in the illegal trafficking trade. Although the subject could hardly be called "positive" by any stretch of the imagination, it's the type of straightforward and honest journalism her writing embodies.

Her online magazine, which she titled [OSM!](#) (Awesome) when she began publishing in 2012, has reached more than 4 million readers worldwide and is founded on the premise that, "OSM! celebrates good deeds of awesome people, while maintaining a critical eye - and not a sweetheart of government or interest groups - bearing in mind that media is the fourth estate."

Her stories are about everyday people performing jobs and activities in their communities that show a positive side of life without being overly sanguine or disingenuous. Nurses, entertainers, educators, accountants, clothing designers, writers and photographers are just some of people she has featured in her magazine.

"My motivation is to be actively involved in and in control of a media platform that will push for positive journalism as a way to encourage people to continue doing good things. I am a believer of positive energy, and as a long-time media practitioner I have come to abhor the media culture of 'bad news is news.'"

Despite Montebon's penchant for viewing the world from a "positive" perspective, this has not blinded her to the reality of the world. While OSM! conveys stories of people who are making positive contributions to their world, her book deals with the all-too-real world of human trafficking and the people who become ensnared in a system in which there is little hope and even less justice.

Her book recounts tales told by people from her native country, but it's a story not restricted to a particular country, religion or continent; it is a story, however, restricted to a particular class: the poor.

Their exploitation is not limited to abuse from just the traffickers who extort thousands of dollars and sell them the dream of America with its riches, but also from government officials and lawyers who are either lazy, incompetent or corrupt and who also profit from the scheme.



Montebon (on left) with actress Mira Sorvino, showing "In the Belly of the Beast..." by Montebon

Montebon and her colleague Susan Pineda became aware of the plight of trafficked people from the Philippines when they worked together for 6 years at an immigration office in Virginia. (Montebon was also pursuing a career in New York as a freelance journalist). During this time, while preparing papers for these workers, they noticed a pattern emerge that would repeat itself over and over.

The workers - who are charged exorbitant fees to come to America – are promised jobs that not only pay well, but are supposed to last for at least a three-year period. When they are let go after 3, 6 months or 12 months, they become exposed to the system and could be deported immediately. The fear of becoming exposed is also how they are controlled; if they do not remain in America and work, there would be no way of paying off their huge debt.

"These people become undocumented, even homeless," said Montebon. "It's a trend seen again and again and it is overwhelming. That was how I came to understand human trafficking in its real sense, from these clients. I developed a rapport and a relationship with them and even after I stopped working at the immigration office they would still contact me."

The stories that she heard became the foundation for her book, "In the Belly of the

Beast," published earlier this year by her alma mater, the [University of San Carlos](#), located in Cebu City, Philippines.

"I'm so very honored and humbled that my university decided to publish this book on human trafficking," said Montebon, "because this is an issue and a reality we all must contend with and confront substantially."

Although work on immigration issues and human trafficking will always be close to her heart, Montebon has also set her sights on other goals and other dreams. Having already produced a 15-minute documentary film on trafficking, she has plans to write a screenplay and turn it into a longer and more comprehensive film on the subject.

She would also like to create a print edition of OSM! with a different theme for each issue: stories on women leaders, immigration, entrepreneurs, and art and culture, for example.

"All these are just in my head now," said Montebon, "but I already have a friend who has offered to be a partner/publisher. So we will see."

In the interim, OSM! will offer regular workshops this fall, providing skills training to those who are interested to write, while also giving an opportunity, as Montebon noted, "to hone the youth to love writing and to write positively and professionally."

In her "spare time", Montebon will continue her studies at UTS, working toward a [Master of Arts in Religious Studies](#) degree .

"My course work will help me look through the lens of religion and culture in understanding the peoples of the world. I intend to be an academic teacher, journalist, and an advocate of cultural understanding in this lifetime."

Currently Montebon's book can be purchased by contacting her at: [marivirmontebon@gmail.com](mailto:marivirmontebon@gmail.com), through the publisher, [USC Press Club in Cebu, Philippines](#), and will soon be available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).