

Written by RYAN SONGALIA  
Thursday, 05 April 2012 09:51

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**Former President Fidel V. Ramos (left), sporting a brand-new fedora hat, in a one-on-one interview with the Filipino Reporter’s Ryan Songalia in Makati City.**

MANILA — You could imagine my chagrin as I woke up in my New York City apartment last October to discover the headline on the GMA News website “Ex-Pres. Ramos beats Fil-Am writer at push-up challenge.”

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I knew they were speaking of me, as I had just the day earlier engaged President Fidel V. Ramos — who is 60 years my senior — in an impromptu exhibition of masculinity at an assembly at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

Of course it was all in fun, and Ramos was very cordial and engaging, and his friendly demeanor helped propel me further in my quest to discover more about my father's homeland, which I had visited just once prior to then.

Before embarking onto his next destination, Ramos told me to look him up when I was in Manila.

So once I made the decision to relocate there on a more permanent basis, I did.

This past Friday, Ramos invited me to his 26th floor office in Makati City for a little bonding time.

Now, if you haven't been to his office before, it's a truly awe-inspiring sight; the walls are adorned with pictures of him with other world leaders like Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela, gifts he had received from notables like Manny Pacquiao, etc.

I entered in quietly, accompanied by fellow writer Carissa Villacorta, as Ramos was finishing reviewing his notes for the Boao Forum of Asia conference in China, for which he was leaving the following day.

I presented him with a fedora hat — a nod to my birthplace of Hoboken, N.J. and singer Frank Sinatra — and he immediately placed it on his head in approval.

The question in most people's minds at this time is, what do you talk about with someone whose stories are far more interesting than your own?

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It's quite simple, you just listen and soak up all of the knowledge and experience you can.

Ramos told me about how then-U.S. President Bill Clinton was so impressed with the technology that enabled a photo to be printed with a greeting from Malacañang Palace minutes after it had been taken that he ordered it to be installed in the White House.

These aren't stories that are likely to make it to your daily paper, but are nonetheless memorable.

After a brief conversation about the phenomenon that is New York Knicks point guard Jeremy Lin, Ramos walked me over to the window of his Mount Everest Room, so named because it houses several momentos from the most exclusive sports group in the Philippines, those that had scaled Mount Everest.

Ramos points out the rust-roofed slums that are in the shadows of impressive skyscrapers.

"There is the gap in income, the gap in education," he said.

"But the worst gap is the *tanggap*."

Limited as I am in Tagalog, I was informed later that he was referring to the endemic bribery that pervades Filipino society.

Moments later, Ramos introduces me to a delicacy called *kapeng barako*.

As a caffeine addict on par with Juan Valdez, I was gracious for the offer.

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I had never tried this form of coffee, which he told me was grown by his wife, but halfway through I suddenly feel overwhelmed by a caffeine sensation I'd never felt before.

It was as if I was drunk on coffee.

I asked him if there was alcohol in the coffee; he assured me it was just very, very strong coffee.

Ramos had a number of books on his table.

He mentioned my essay from last year, following our first meeting in New Jersey.

He asked if I had ever seen one of my stories in a book; I told him I had not.

That's when he opened up his latest book, "Towards Our Better Future," to page 317, revealing the essay I had written last year.

"I hope I'm not going to be impeached," joked Ramos for reprinting the story.

I promised him that charges wouldn't be filed.

Of course, what get-together between us would be complete without exercises?

He brought me to his hallway, which doubled as an indoor putting range, this time for crunches.

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He told me we would do 10; it turned into 100 after we did 10 for Binay, 10 for Gloria, 10 for PNoy, and so forth.

If there was one message impressed upon me by my time with Ramos, it's that the Philippines' greatest resource is its people.

Whether based in Manila or a second generation Filipino-American living in New Jersey, the Philippines needs to draw heavily from its people at home and abroad to enrich future generations.

I left feeling a sense of civic duty and pride, galvanized to carry on a rich tradition of bringing pride to the Philippines, if only by remaining a productive member of society.

That Ramos would take two hours out of his time to impress this upon a 25-year-old Fil-Am sports writer is evidence that this is a lesson to be taken to heart.

***(Editor's note: Ryan Songalia is a member of the Boxing Writers Association of America [BWAA] and contributes to Ring Magazine, GMA News and the Filipino Reporter newspaper in New York City. He is also a member of The Ring ratings panel. He can be reached at [ryan@ryansongalia.com](mailto:ryan@ryansongalia.com). An archive of his work can be found at [www.ryansongalia.com](http://www.ryansongalia.com). Follow him on Twitter: @RyanSongalia.)***

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**Photo shows the two exercising in Ramos' office.**