

In Remembrance: Libertito Pelayo

Written by BERT CASTRO
Sunday, 15 February 2015 15:31



The late Liberito Pelayo, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Filipino Reporter.

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As I sat down at the funeral parlor where we paid our last respects to a great man, Libertito “Bert” Pelayo, founder and publisher of the largest Filipino weekly in the continental USA — I couldn’t help but remember the olden days when we first met some 43 years back.

I had known him since college days when we were both members of the College Editors Guild of the Philippines, himself as the editor-in-chief of The FEU Advocate, the largest student publication in Asia at that time.

As a protégé of the Roces family, whose business empire included the Far Eastern University, the Manila Times and a number of publications, he was offered after his graduation, a job as a journalist for The Times.

He was assigned to cover the National Defense beat which then brought him to the war-torn Vietnam as a correspondent.

Eventually he was sent to New York City as a U.S. correspondent for the Times.

During his stay, he founded The Filipino Reporter on July 1972 with a small office near downtown Union Square.

Then two months later, on Sept. 21, 1972, former President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law and shut down the newspaper.

Thus began the uncertainties of his career.

There was news blackout from the old country except for some underground channels.

It was one of these turbulent times that I paid him a visit at his office.

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At about this time also, the late Feliciano Macaraeg, Bert's former desk editor in the Manila Times came down from D.C. to visit him.

He had just finished his studies as a Fulbright scholar at George Washington University and, like Pelayo, he had no more job to go back to in Manila.

Along with his wife Dr. Linda Pelayo and a network of some supporters including myself, Bert vowed to give a new life to the young newspaper.

I was part of the original staff.

And it was not easy for us, to say the least.

I remember submitting my first interview article with a neighborhood friend, a UP cum laude graduate, Clemencia Wong, who narrated her new life as an immigrant in the adopted country.

Tukayo called me aside and told me: "Tukayo, I can't publish this."

Looking surprised, I asked him why.

"I just want to make sure that this is not just a figment of your imagination. I need her signature, telephone number and photo."

The next day I almost brought the interviewee in person to the office.

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Such is the person that he was — very professional.

The 70s was a different planet.

In that simple and small office, there was none of the latter day's computers, wi-fi, internets, mobile phones, fax machines.

What we had then was a telex machine supposedly to link with Manila news sources but I had not seen it working.

We also had an old model Remington manual typewriter that was already a collectible item at that time.

And the air-conditioner, its noise was trying to compete with the nearby underground IRT subway train.

On some weekends, I would bring to the office my 3-year old son Noriel, and Linda would bring her 3-year-old daughter Joy.

One afternoon at the office I noticed the pained look at Tukayo's face.

He was muttering to Feliciano, "I wished we had this machine," pointing at the advertisement in the Daily News.

As explained to me, it was a new typewriter that automatically adjusts the columns, the fonts, and could do different things, in addition to having a memory that could store the messages.

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The next Saturday morning I handed Tukayo an envelope with \$400 cash.

I said, "Let's go buy that IBM Composer."

He was adamant to take it but I insisted to at least help cut down the printing costs.

Soliciting subscriptions was a hard sell.

One doctor told me, "Why would I pay 75 cents for a FR copy when I could buy the Daily News for 10 cents."

There were very few advertisers then.

One advertiser, Filipino Lou, a popular grocery store along 40th Street and 9th Avenue that catered to many Filipino-American customers, was giving away free copies of the FR.

Naturally, they wouldn't subscribe either.

There were other competing newsletters.

A popular one was the Ningas Kogon by a young immigration lawyer Loida Nicolas who later became the millionaire philanthropist Loida Lewis.

There was also the now defunct California-based Philippine News by the late Alex Esclamado.

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There were a host of others but didn't stay long.

And I thought the FR will go under too.

My friend and kumpadre Fel Macaraeg, an invaluable member of the staff had left to work as desk editor of the Fairchild Publications, a subsidiary of Conde Nast.

All the while, Tukayo was also working as a correspondent of The Wall Street Journal but only briefly because he felt his calling was in the Filipino Reporter.

My share of journalistic feat was one of the biggest scopes of news reporting when I filed a report about Vivian Torrente, a Filipino-American nurse, who died in a tragic fire with billionaire banker Edmond Safra in Monte Carlo.

It was reported first as a small paragraph in The New York Times.

But it was headlined in the FR, all the big media, TV and print, followed suit.

Reporters from The Jersey Record kept calling me for interviews.

Just so happened that the victim Vivian was a member of our group in Bergen County and the family learned it first before the media.

The last time I set foot at the FR office, I was amazed at the transformation.

There are so many offices, air-conditioned rooms, fully staffed, with all the appurtenances of

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modern technology.

It was an amazing feeling to someone like me who had been there before.

All in all, it was Tukayo's perseverance, passion and dedication that made the American Dream all too real.

In our heart of hearts, we thank you Tukayo.

May our Almighty God bless you and keep you in all eternity.