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Philippines

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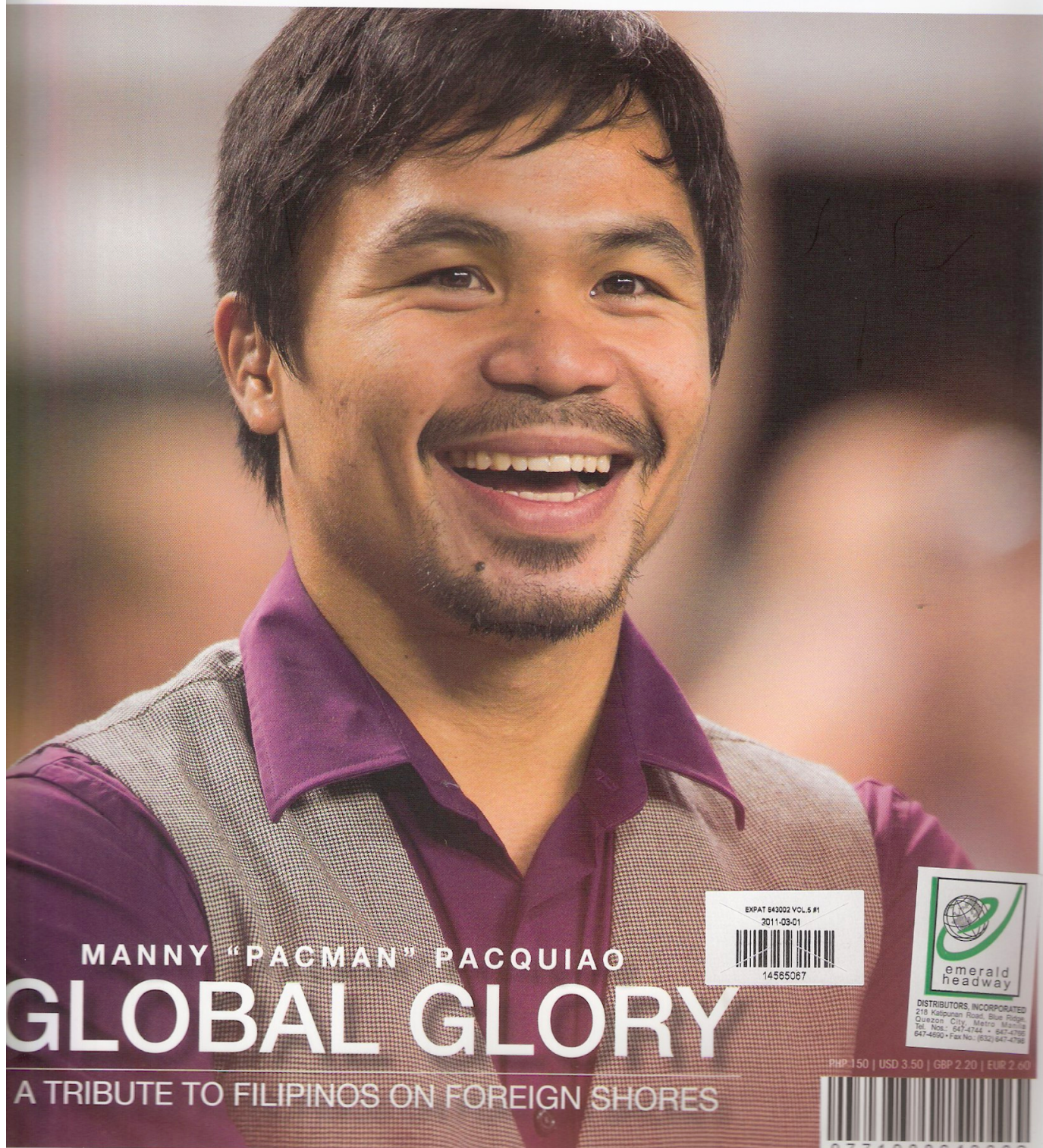
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03/04

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150.00

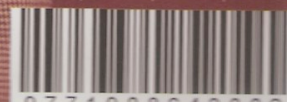


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# A Foreign Face, A Filipina Heart

Text by **SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON**  
Photos courtesy of **SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON**

If it was curiosity and a sense of adventure that brought my 99-year old grandmother, Jessie Lichauco to the Philippines 80 years ago, it was love that made her stay.

Sitting on the covered porch of her family home on the Pasig River in Santa Ana, she explains the roots of this love. "It's not just individual love for one person—it's when you learn to love the nation, when you learn to love the people in it. When you love being where you are..." She continues, "In the Philippines I found nothing but love. It's a loving country and it's always been that way."

When "Nana", as she is often called by grandchildren, arrived in the Philippines after a 28 day boat ride from America in 1933, she was 18 years old. The country's population was eight million and many people still traveled in horse-drawn carriages and streetcars. She knew no one other than the man who had invited and been courting her, my grandfather Marcial P. Lichauco, whose invitation to

"come and see the country where she would live" seemed the most practical way to explore the possibility of a life together. Nana explains, "Whether I stayed or not depended on how I was received..." My grandfather and she married less than a week later, and the seeds of her new life were firmly planted on Philippine soil.

Having spent her early years on an island off the coast of Cuba, and school age years in America, the Philippines was half way across the world but somehow in many ways familiar to her. She recalls, "Most people spoke Spanish as did I, and things like coconuts and mangoes were part of my childhood."

Speaking of her romance with my grandfather, Nana describes, "It was more mutual admiration than love at first sight. When I first met him I found him to be a very interesting person and this is very important. And the more I knew him, the more I admired what he was doing — he was executive advisor for the Osrox

Mission for Philippine Independence. We had great respect for each other. I was very young and he had a great influence on my life. "She advises, "You must remember that there is a difference between love and compatibility... and if you have to choose, choose compatibility." Married 39 years and having been a widow just as long, Nana shares, "I could have looked the world over and not have found a better man."

My grandfather, at the age of 16, was the first Filipino to attend Harvard University College and Law School. Given that he then returned to Manila to join the Department of Justice's Fiscal office, served many years as Professor of Law at the University of Sto. Tomas, eventually became the country's first government corporate counsel, and then had his own private corporate law practice, my grandmother was able to witness the major historical and political events of Philippine history.





One day I found Nana staring at a peso bill in her hand, her eyes dreamy with memory. Pointing to the face on the bill, she said, "These are all my friends..." I looked at her in confusion until slowly the anecdotes of her experiences with each personality unfolded, and I was introduced to a history suddenly brought to life. Meeting every president including President Aguinaldo, living in Manila during the Japanese occupation and the destruction of World War 2, witnessing the first airplane and airmail arrive (the Pan American clipper landed on Manila Bay) and seeing the Philippines gain independence are only a few of the countless unforgettable experiences she has lived through.

My grandmother's greatest gift is her memory, and sharing the breadth of her experiences gathered over seven decades is something she loves to do. Oral history is important, she believes, because "there are lots of little things you don't write down". Believing that everything is for a purpose in life, she feels that perhaps it's part of her obligation to speak: "I don't have many diplomas like others but I have lived. I think it's necessary for people to know better about events that happened in the past and about relationships – it can help people understand. She continues, "And because I have lived through so much, my head is blocked up with much history which I feel compelled to release, verbalize and let those experiences be known "

With fair skin, green eyes and auburn hair (now silver grey), yet speaking Tagalog, English and Spanish fluently and knowing



her way around the country like a true local, she has often been asked "What she is". She says "I consider myself a part of the people of the Philippines – I never considered myself an expat or a foreigner. I have a foreign face but a Filipino heart."

And with seven children, 18 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren spread out through the world, she is happy to have lived long enough to see that her family has joined what she refers to as the "sixth race" – the international race. Referring to what she believes will compose the world of future generations, one where all colors merge into one, she muses, "Hopefully this will lead to a more understanding world to which our marriage has contributed."

Nana recalls what she missed the most when in the early 1960s, my grandfather was appointed Ambassador to the Court of St James in England: "I missed the smile of the children's eyes and the laughter of the people. There was such a difference between them and where I went. Maybe because they have such a hard time most of the time that they have been given the ability to ignore and accept many of the things happening to them."

It was this affection for Filipino children that then led her to devote much of her time in Manila to helping those in need of a better future. Working with the Settlement House (Association de Damas Filipinas) for 35 years, and serving as a very active president for nine years, she was instrumental in its expansion. Getting involved to try and help the country was something that came naturally to her – "I think that whatever you are you have to try to make yourself useful. You can't just sit around and wait for your husband to come back and forth."

My grandmother on what she says is a very sad aspect of the Philippines she adores so much: "Unfortunately we have so many people who do not have proper places to live, do not have enough to eat, children do not have enough schooling, and it saddens

(opposite page) A pre-world war portrait of Jessie Lichauco  
(left to right) Marcial and Jessie Lichauco in St. Mark's Square in Venice in the 1930s.  
Her 99th birthday celebration.

me when I see all the huge big buildings and houses around, which we cannot afford because we cannot afford to look after the children that are born to us in the country. " Nana continues, "Some have too much and many have too little in life – I pray this will change!"

Her work to defend the human rights of children has even led her to become a one woman campaign against calling them "kids". She explains, "Kids is the name used to describe baby goats so unless human mothers are nanny goats, and their fathers are Billy Goats, calling children "kids" is inappropriate – besides, its offensive to both the children and the animals."

But the desire to offer people a "step up" did not stop when she left Settlement House. She explains, "I made a deal with God my father a long time ago. If there was anything I ever needed to do, just send it to me. "And this promise has been the constant beat in the wonderfully unpredictable rhythm of this lady's life.

All of my life, I have seen my grandmother befriend people everywhere she goes, and assist them in whatever way possible – whether helping open the door to work or educational opportunities in the 1970-80s, helping a man with third degree burns on his body receive medical attention or simply just listening to a stranger who needed to talk to someone.

Often called "earth mother" by many of the hundreds who have stayed in her home over the years, Nana also has a natural ability to make people happy and make people feel loved. She says, "Accepting people is very important. And anyone you bump into is really your neighbor – you must think the best of them and not put anybody down. You can love yourself but you have to love others too."

My grandmother will be 100 years old in 11 months. Her body may have aged slightly but her spirit has not, and this I believe is the secret to her ability to still engage in life as fully as she does. When I asked her the other day what it was she loved, her answer came without hesitation, "I love the things that I don't know anything about – because I love the mystery of life..." ■