



# Lady Bountiful

CHITO MADRIGAL COLLANTES was matriarch, friend,  
businesswoman and citizen of her time. BY SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAUL J. TEEHANKEE







**CHITO MADRIGAL COLLANTES** had the mind of a businesswoman but she had the spirit of an artist. She built herself an empire but it was, in fact, her life that was her greatest masterpiece. The spectrum of people whom she touched provided the color, and the mosaic of experiences that brought her such happiness, were the texture.

Like any great work of art, true appreciation comes from both taking a closer look and seeing it from a comfortable distance. Chito was a prism that shed her light on each who knew her in a different way. The intensity of that light varied, but the warmth left behind was always the same.

Perhaps the secret to this woman's powerful presence was her ability to balance personality traits that otherwise might seem contradictory. Chito could be intimidating one second and full of warmth the next, have the "big picture" in mind yet never miss a detail, insist on a daily life filled with "finer things" yet share her table with those from all walks of life. Whatever she did, whether developing a piece of land, or serving a meal, she believed in doing it well.

Niece Jamby Madrigal shares a memory from her early childhood: "She lived beside us and would come with her gloved butlers and the nicest silver and serve us apple pie poolside!" Undeniably honest, fair and straightforward in all her dealings, she lived her life to such an internal high standard that she earned the quiet respect of all those who knew her.

Chito lived her life in stages and in each one she played a different role but always maintained the same graceful balance. Whether she was a law student, socialite, supporter of the arts, diplomat's wife, businesswoman or philanthropist, she focused on each with a determination and confidence to be admired. As husband Manuel Collantes admits, he fell in love with her because she was so "undefinable" and so "wonderfully candid".

Chito's strength of will, passion and energy for life was perhaps fueled by the fact that she knew what she wanted and, most important, she was consistently very true to herself. She would never try to be someone she was not, and made decisions based on what she believed to be ethically correct and which would bring pleasure to her life.

For the Madrigal clan, Tita Chito was more than the matriarch

of our family—she was the very heart of it. She led by example, set a standard and really cared about people's lives. Of all her accomplishments, it was her ability to bring the different generations of family back together in both body and spirit, which made her the most proud.

As niece Mary de Leon says, "I never met anyone who really loved her family the way she did. She had the knack for bringing out the best in all of us."

Understanding Chito's passion in what she believed in was to believe in it yourself, and each member answered her call to love without question. Her niece Ging Montinola explains, "She never asked anything of us but her expectations were high, so somehow you met them without being asked."

Although she had no children of her own, she found herself in a nurturing role to many members of her family, and to grand-nephew Gustav Warns in particular. Warns, now 27, says "I came to live with her at only a few months old. She taught me how to talk, walk—all the things a parent teaches a child to do." He recalls recently finding a cassette tape labeled "Gustav speaks", where he heard the voice of "Tita Coko", as he called her, asking, "What does a cow say?" and toddler Gustav answering, "Moo." Chito was not physically demonstrative with her feelings but Warns says, "the love and attention she showered me with made me grow up feeling like someone special." He continues, "I felt like the luckiest boy in the world and that I could do anything!"

Niece Chuchu Eduque recounts that the only time Chito ever asked her for anything it was in reality an expression of her love: "When I discovered a medical problem I was going to have taken care of in Manila, she said that she wanted to ask me a favor. She wanted me to go with her to America for a second opinion. I was so touched that the favor she was asking me was not even for herself."

Vincent Madrigal, a nephew, remembers, "When my first child was born and my parents were ill, Tita flew to New York and supplied everything she thought a baby would need. She always just assumed that it was her job to take care of you and she would be there with whatever you needed, whether you asked or not. "

Chito was also the aunt that everyone could go to for advice or just someone who would listen without judgment. She would tell people if she disagreed with their decisions but as long as you were not harming people and could accept the consequences of your action, she would be supportive. If you made a mistake, you could discuss it with her and she never ever said, "I told you so." Jamby says, "She knew your weaknesses and concentrated on making them strong."

As a businesswoman, she was formidable, possessing a combination of intellectual, academic and street smarts, which allowed her to excel in real estate and banking in particular. Not only was

she a decisive leader with an instinct for good partners and an eye for value; people liked working with her because she kept her word and made sure there was always something left on the table. Although she had a head start in life by growing up a daughter of business magnate Vicente Madrigal, the extreme degree of material success she achieved throughout her life was very much the result of her own hard work and discipline.

Friend and business partner Peter Jentes characterizes Chito as “a very down-to-earth person who had a great sense of humor but was quite focused when it came to business tasks at hand. She possessed the rare ability to get people to do things which they were initially not prepared to agree to but she did it with a certain grace and style which one rarely finds these days.” Jentes loved the fact that she was soft but outspoken, and never afraid “to call a spade a spade.”

Friendship was something that Chito held as close to her heart as family. Chitang Nakpil, a longtime friend with whom she shared many adventures, remembers how she would send her something special to eat daily and describes her as “thoughtful and generous to a fault.” She recalls many fun times they shared doing things that others considered unexpected just because at their age, they “could do what they wanted.”

It was, however, Chito’s genuine interest in so many different kinds of people, and her ability to treat everyone, regardless of status, the same way, which Nakpil found most impressive. Chito was many different things to different people and each person who she spoke to, whether businessman or socialite or artist, would leave with a different impression.

Nakpil will never forget the positive effect of their friendship. “Chito was very religious when we first met, and I had become less so. Once I went to mass on a Monday instead of a Sunday, and she asked me, ‘What makes you think you can change the commandments of the Church?’” She continues, “Chito called me the black sheep that she recovered, and would proudly say that this conversion was her certificate to go to heaven!”

Although Chito had always helped those individuals who came to her in need, she felt giving piecemeal did not make a big-enough difference and longed to make a bigger impact. When the day came that she felt she had accomplished what she had set out to do in terms of society, business and the arts, the Consuelo Chito Madrigal Foundation (CCMF) was born.

The beliefs that Chito held so close to her heart are evidenced by the nature of the foundation’s work. With a great respect for human dignity, she was against giving dole outs and instead wanted to empower people by helping them to help themselves. All projects, whether sponsoring scholars, providing housing, microfinance or child feeding programs, are long term in view and comprehensive in nature. The first 30 of 75 college scholars in Bi-



col, who are studying social entrepreneurship, have just graduated—19 of them cum laude. They will now be given loans in order to set up their own businesses, which will in turn generate further employment for their communities.

Although she is my grandmother’s sister, I met Tita Chito only 14 years ago, when I was 22. My relationship with her was brief compared to that of the rest, but the effect she had on my life was profound. I had grown up abroad and returned to Manila because I wanted to know the people and places that I had come from. Finding myself a stranger at their door, it was Tita Chito who answered my call and helped me to take the first steps back to my family. I feel a part of them now and this was a gift that will bear endless fruits. She was interested in both who I was and who I would become, and I, in turn, was fascinated with her stories and her wit—she could say unforgettable things that made me blush at one moment and laugh the next!

I was one of the lucky few to be there when she left this world and just as I will never forget her life, I will never forget her death. On the day of her funeral, I was greeted at the crematorium by a beautiful, enormous butterfly, its black and white-printed wings so effortlessly and fearlessly soaring around the foyer. The butterfly landed and, to my surprise, posed elegantly for my camera and was still lingering when I walked into the chapel for a last blessing. About a half hour later, after the cremation process had begun, I decided I was going to look for that butterfly when I noticed she had followed me.

Tita Chito loved music as much as she loved people, and it was no surprise that she decided to make one last appearance, deliver one last message. Her wings were gently flapping to the melody of the choir voices inside, and her movements were less of flight than those of a dance. Some would say she visited in order to make sure that everything was done as she would have wanted. Perhaps, but I think she wanted us to know that she was as happy in death as she was in life.

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