

Ben Guingona: Taking the Cue From Ben

AUGUSTO ALMEDA LOPEZ



The Guingonas trace their roots to the Visayas—to Iloilo City, and to Siaton in Negros Oriental—although Ben himself, as a child, lived in a variety of places in Mindanao, specifically, Lanao, Agusan, and Bukidnon. In the early 1930s, Mindanao constituted the country's hinterland, and for that reason did not rank very high in the government's order of priorities. President Manuel Quezon appointed Teofisto Guingona Sr., Ben's father, the island's High Commissioner, making him the highest-ranking government officer in that vast region. Growing up, therefore, in Mindanao, Ben found wonderful opportunity, given his warm and winning ways, to acquire legions of friends in the Visayas and Mindanao, many of them Muslims, with whom he remained friends for life.

His family relocated to Manila in the 1940s, during the War years. For this reason, Ben and Joe, his twin, lived during their teenage years in San Juan, attending school at San Juan de Letran College. Ben loved to play basketball. That is how he became acquainted with the younger kid about whom he loved to tell the story of how one day, in the middle of a pick-up game with him, this kid abruptly grabbed the ball, which he owned to begin with, and ran home shouting to his wide-open-mouthed and frustrated playmates, "*Tama na, oras na ng Gulong Palad*," a then wildly popular radio soap opera. That kid's name was Joseph Ejercito. The lesson in that story was, Ben would tell us, is that "in basketball, as in all aspects of life, be sure you own the ball you play with, or at least part of it."

Maybe for that reason, Ben decided to become an entrepreneur in trading, lumber, shipping, and mining—seeking in almost every instance to establish ownership over the ball. Throughout his various involvements, he made many friends who stood by him for life. Truth

to tell, if there was any person who could count on the loyalty of his good and close friends, that person was Ben.

Ben was an extremely jovial fellow who relished recounting the stories of both his adventures and misadventures in life. One such story, which occurred not long after Martial Law was declared in 1972, found him in the midst of a poker game (a game he hardly ever played) at the home of the Secretary of National Defense at that time. Because the game lasted until the following morning, he needed a curfew pass to be able to get home, which his host very graciously supplied him with. At home, a few hours after he had gone to bed, much to his shock and dismay, the Metrocom came knocking on his door with an “invitation” for him to go for an “interview” with them at Fort Bonifacio. He was also promised that the interview would not take long. Well, that “short” interview extended out into two years, although the company he kept—and that was the “consolation” of it all, if you could call it that—Serge Osmeña, Geny Lopez, Jesusito Cabarrus, and many others, was outstanding. After about twenty-four months, he was summoned to another “interview”—along with Pepe Diokno, Terry Adevoso, Len Oreta, and many other prominent detainees. They were told by the interviewing officials that they would be allowed to go home, provided that they sign a document entitled, *Bagong Lipunan*. Upon seeing Pepe Diokno quickly rising to his feet to register his vehement objections, Ben’s heart sank quite a bit. Whispering into Len Oreta’s ear he said, “*Len, patay na ang release natin.*” Buti na lang they all agreed to a compromise. The detainees would acquiesce to the document in its generality, but “with reservations.” That way Ben managed to retain his freedom.

Around the middle of February 1986, Ben and I, together with several others belonging to our *barkada*, marched at a protest rally organized in Makati. There occurred a sudden downpour, but being as crazy as we were, we persisted in our march. I remember Baby Lopa saying, *Tuloy ang Martsa!* Completely drenched, we ended up just outside Ernest Rufino’s building. Ernest invited us into his office, where we could hang out our clothes to dry. Ernest took out a few bottles from his wine cabinet and provided us with a deck of cards. And so it was that another poker game and an open bar materialized from seemingly out of nowhere, that lasted until morning. But that was normal for the times. Ben was a *novato* at the game, but he succeeded

in cleaning us all out. Ben, however, was less interested in his winnings than in the bragging rights his good fortune has supplied him with.

The more important and exciting event, however, that followed on the heels of that poker game was Cory Aquino's installation as President. A few weeks later, as Ben sat with friends in his office in Makati, his phone rang. What took his colleagues by surprise was that, upon taking the call, Ben jumped to his feet! To his quizzical friends, Ben whispered, "It's the President!" To the voice in the phone he kept saying—"Yes Ma'am, Yes Ma'am," all the while standing at attention. *Yun pala*, Cory had just asked him to serve in her Administration. Ben became a Member of the Boards at PNOC and PLDT. "*Bumabawi lang si Cory,*" *ang sabi ni Ben*, because on being permitted by the Marcos administration to seek treatment in America for Ninoy's heart ailment, Ninoy and Cory had lived for a time in an apartment in Cleary Court in San Francisco, with Ben and Viring close by them. Many times, early in the morning, in Ninoy's apartment, and upon Ninoy's invitation, Ben drank coffee with him as they spoke about sundry matters relating to the nation. There Cory also would be, making the coffee and serving them all kinds of good things to breakfast on. This time around, Cory felt, "*Ikaw naman ang mag-serve sa akin.*"

While Ben never tried to impress anybody, he had a truly impressive personality. He was a truly gracious Filipino gentleman inhabited by a tremendous sense of humor. He also was an incurable optimist. In the darkest moments of his life, Ben always felt the sun would rise again soon. He also had a soft and forgiving heart. Despite his two years in detention, two years of his life spent on the inside of the gray walls of a prison cell, he showed no signs of bitterness. That is why I have always deeply admired him, and taken from him many of my cues for my own living. Now that he is gone, how much I will miss him!

[Augusto "Jake" Almeda Lopez, is a Vice Chairman of ABS CBN and of First Philippine Holdings.]