Corazon J. Agrava: The Way We Were

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When my daughter, Nelia, asked me to write about mentors, the instant thought I had was of my parents. I remember that industry and simplicity are virtues I learned from my late mother, Catalina Gatchalian-Angeles. I feel comfortable in a tricycle, jeepney, bus, or in a BMW. When it comes to discipline, I remember my father, the late Esteban Angeles. I worked in the government and in private offices for about forty years. I gave my best in the performance of my duties but when the boss was difficult and unreasonable and I was no longer happy with my work, I did not wait for the next day or until payday. I simply said “good-bye” with a smile.

I worked for several years as Hearing Commissioner in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court (JDRC) in Manila, which was abolished in 1983. Our presiding judge then was the late Justice Corazon Juliano Agrava. She was very intelligent, a Fulbright scholar, the first woman judge of the Court of First Instance and the first female Bar Examiner. She was also a retired justice of the Court of Appeals. Organization was very important in a court where there were many cases to decide upon. I remember her for a number of things. She was a well-organized person. Colors were important in her office. By the use of colored envelopes and ribbons, she and her staff could easily spot any case that was needed. She was also strict and punctual during office hours. A lady reporter failed to see her for a scheduled interview because she was late—for only one minute.

I was also a volunteer lawyer for the Tahanan Outreach Projects and Services Inc. (TOPS), a foundation which she founded for the prevention of juvenile delinquency. We would motivate the out-of-school youth to be productive members of the community by encouraging them to engage in micro-enterprises. We would give them seed money every morning to buy bananas in the market, fry
them, and sell as banana cue. At the end of the day, they would return to pay back the amount lent to them without interest and they keep their profits as their earnings for the day. We would provide counseling and free legal aid where needed. She rightfully deserves the accolade “a Filipina pioneer in the area of nation building and dispensation of justice”.

Justice Agrava was a born leader. She had a strong personality, she always looked good and dignified and she could bring out the best in her staff. Inside the court or in the foundation, she was in control and everything was attended to properly. However, during parties she was different; she could climb a ladder for a hidden prize in a parlor game.

I was fortunate to have worked with Justice Agrava when life was simpler and we did not have the benefits of cellphones or computers. From the kareteyla to the BMW, from the post office to email, I can no longer catch up with these changes. Over family lunches, I join discussions about recent news and give my point of view as a lawyer. Using a magnifying glass, I still read Supreme Court decisions from hardbound books and use my manual typewriter (which I used to write this essay), my transistor radio, and will mail greeting cards to my loved ones. My mentors are no longer around but I bring with me the lessons I learned from them and remember them with fondness.

Priscilla Angeles-Villacorta, a practicing lawyer, is a member of the U.P. Women Lawyers’ Circle. She served government for about forty years in the Senate of the Phils., the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court (JDRC), the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), and the Agrava Commission, which was tasked to investigate the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr. in 1983.