

Beta Sigma Fraternity turns 70

(Keynote speech delivered by Brod Victor O. Ramos, former DENR Secretary, during the Platinum Ball of the UP Beta Sigma Fraternity to celebrate its 70th anniversary at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Ortigas Center, Metro Manila on July 16, 2016)

Allow me to first greet our hosts tonight, President Jojo Alfonso Alejar, the members of his board and Brod Boyet Fernandez, chair of the Platinum celebration organizing committee

We are honored by the presence of three of our founding brothers — Greg “Goyito” Abreu, Benedicto “Ben” Arcinas and Antonio “Tony” Lahoz Sr.

I would like to recognize some of our elders from the late ‘40s and early ‘50s — from Batch ’48 - Brod Narcing Lopus, from Batch ’49 - Brod Orly Pena and Brod National Scientist Ted Topacio, from Batch ’51, Brod Jose Abueva and Brod Raoul Victorino, from Batch ’52 - Brod Rolando “Babes” Estrella and Brod Cecilio Felix.

Distinguished Platinum awardees who will be properly introduced later,

Brods, your beloved wives, girlfriends, members of the Ladies Corps, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Age of completeness

First, I would like to congratulate the officers and organizers for a very successful and memorable celebration of our 70th year as a fraternity.

Seventy, according to Genesis, the first book in the Bible, is the age of completeness.

For seniors like some of us, it is when we have done our family duties: we have raised our children and let them fly out of the nest. We can now enjoy the fruits of our toil.

For a social organization like our fraternity, we have matured and now bask in the glow of our collective achievements.

We are gathered here tonight to celebrate the glories of our beginnings, affirm our gratitude to our founders, rededicate ourselves to the core values we have inherited from them, and commit ourselves to keeping the fraternity relevant and useful.

Beginnings of the dream

Let me relive the circumstances of our founding as a fraternity.

Beta Sigma started out 70 years ago as a dream in the mind of one young man, Jesus Jaime. Fondly called Jesse James, he envisaged a fraternity made up entirely of scholars who would excel in academics, win campus contests and elections, become leaders on campus, and prepare for leadership in a country just recovering from a devastating war.

Born in Bacolod, Jesse James was a math wizard whose report card at the College of Business Administration was studded with 1's. He headed a *barkada* made up of bright but hard-drinking and tough-talking graduates of UP High. They called themselves "Gay Varsitarians", when gay only meant "joyful and fun-loving".

Armed with a list of names of the members of his *barkada*, Jaime went to see Prof. David Wico, then the dean of student affairs, to ask if they can be organized as a university fraternity. Tio David, as we later liked to call him, was a history professor whose students considered to be "too strict". Brod Rico Arranz called him a terror. But Tio David was kind and caring to students who were poor but deserving. He himself came from a poor family in Laguna. According to his daughter Belle, he left for the United States while still a young man, stowing away in a boat and getting off "without even a passport." He worked odd jobs just to earn enough to enroll and get a US education. He was able to get a liberal arts degree from St. Mary's College of Maryland and even a master's degree from the University of California in Berkeley. His U.S. education exposed him to the positive role of fraternities in building the character of young men for greater roles in life.

For seeing the value of Jayme's dream, for acting as the first adviser of Beta Sigma, and for suggesting that name to signify the fraternity's identity as the "Brotherhood of Scholars," we Beta Sigmans consider Tio David as our Founding Father. The 35th chain in our fraternity pin was added in his honor by Brod Wahlee Rodriguez during our 60th anniversary.

To go back to our story, Tio David advised Jayme to invite another *barkada* that hanged out with them at the bomb-scarred Cancer Institute building to come up with 50 members required for recognition as a new fraternity. That other *barkada* was headed by Nicanor Jacinto Jr., son of an old and influential family in Manila that traces its lineage to one of our national heroes. Calling themselves UP's 20, its members were graduates of Ateneo and La Salle high schools.

The merger did take place but it gave rise to the issue of leadership: who would head the new fraternity?

Brod Rico Arranz recalls that the process of resolving the question was long and contentious. He said, “The newly fused brotherhood met every day for discussions at the second floor of the Cancer Institute, sometimes for two to three hours. *Gusto ng Gay Varsitarians, sila captain. Gusto namin, kami captain. Ang thinking namin, superior kami.*”

“Jesse James was tough-talking. *Sabi niya, “Matagal na kami dito sa UP. Kapapasok lang ninyo”.*

The issue was resolved when both sides realized that they were bound by one common denominator — the pursuit of excellence. It was decided that Jayme would be the first president, to be followed by Jacinto and then Arranz.

With that, both *barkadas* agreed to fuse and become a new fraternity. But their numbers still fell short, so they brought in more bright young men from other schools in Manila and from the provinces. The recruitment of *probinsyanos* would presage the profile of Beta Sigma as egalitarian and inclusive, instead of elitist.

Though Jaime finally formed the Beta Sigma fraternity, he still had one more problem: he was already a member of the Upsilon Sigma Phi but he wanted to leave that fraternity because it was not made up of scholars. Hearing this, the head of Jaime's group in Upsilon, Gerardo Roxas, son of the incumbent president of the Republic at that time, moved to have Jaime expelled. But Roxas was strongly dissuaded from doing this by Jaime's group mates in Upsilon. They held Jaime in such high esteem that they all threatened to join Beta Sigma if he was expelled. A few others, like Tomas Cosio, now known as the father-in-law of Brod Nonoy Bautista, joined Beta Sigma anyway.

Beta Sigma made its mark quickly

The birth of Beta Sigma threatened the political supremacy of the older fraternities. Immediately, it won the first competition that it entered — an inter-fraternity-sorority oratorical contest. During the post-war years, orations on democracy were the big thing and the usual way by which young talents could show their worth as future leaders.

Since many of the founding members of Beta Sigma were trained orators at the Ateneo, they had to internally compete among themselves to decide who would represent the fraternity in the contest. Rico Arranz emerged as the fraternity's bet and, during the contest, easily won the gold medal -- the first honor garnered by Beta Sigma. He later said it was more difficult competing in the internal rounds with brods.

This victory meant the world for Brod Rico. For the first time in his life, he was able to escape the long shadow of his father who was at that time Majority Floor Leader of the Philippine Senate. For the rest of his life, Brod Rico kept in his wallet the

note written by his father on a *Manila Times* news clipping about his victory. On the clipping was a handwritten note that said, “My warmest congratulations to Junior.” March 14, 1947.

Then the fraternity captured the UP student council. Brod Ted Topacio, the National Scientist but at that time a young scholar at the College of Veterinary Medicine, was instrumental in the victory of Brod Teddy Padilla as council president. Brod Teddy Padilla is remembered as the best Chief Justice of the Supreme Court that we never had.

Thereafter, the founding brothers took over most of the top leadership positions on campus — the editorships of the *Philippine Collegian*, *Philippinensian*; *Law Journal*, and the presidencies of other campus organizations.

This pursuit of excellence and leadership embodied by our founders would reverberate throughout the life of the fraternity.

We saw it in the late ‘50s when President Magsaysay threatened to abolish all fraternities because of a death from hazing caused by an old fraternity. Student leaders trooped to Malacanang and turned to Brod Prospero Crescini to present their case before the president. People who were there could not forget how Brod Pros used his stentorian voice and eloquence to exceptional effect. When he murmured “Mr. President” on the microphone, they said they could hear a pin drop.

Brod Pros did not apologize. He convinced the president that he needed these student leaders to carry on the mantle of leadership that he valued. Brod Pros' arguments saved the fraternity system from extinction.

Expansion to Los Banos

We saw it again in Brods Rudy Ylarde and Ed Mabesa when they took the lead to form the new chapter of the fraternity in the College of Agriculture and Forestry in Los Banos.

In 1950, the many successes of Beta Sigma in Diliman came to the attention of Rudy Ylarde, a dynamic student leader from Nueva Ecija. He happened to be an old friend and province mate of Manuel Alino who was the president of the Diliman chapter at the time.

Ylarde and Mabesa started the tradition in Los Banos of providing assistance during enrollment to new students in the college. They used this project to identify the most promising freshmen year after year and to make sure about which fraternity they joined. This way, they drew the best and the brightest recruits for the fraternity.

Because of this, Beta Sigma in Los Banos far exceeded the expectations of the Diliman brods. It quickly became the dominant fraternity on campus. While the Diliman

chapter had to compete with law fraternities for the bright law students, the engineering fraternities for the engineering students, and with Upsilon for students from the other colleges — Beta Sigma's Los Banos chapter was the only bright star in the firmament. Predictably, the student council, the editorship of the *Aggie Green and Gold*, and the leadership posts on campus would be taken by a Los Banos Beta Sigman. These future farmers and foresters even regularly presented stage plays and Broadway musicales!

During my student days, I saw similar levels of dominance of Beta Sigma in the College of Veterinary Medicine, College of Fine Arts and the Corps of Cadet Officers. These gave rise to the conviction often voiced by Brod Raoul Victorino that there were only two fraternities in UP — Beta Sigma and the others.

There is yet another factor that differentiates the Diliman and Los Banos chapters. While the Diliman brods quarreled often with their sorority sisters (first with Phi Deltans who were our first sisters and, later, with the Sigma Betans), the Los Banos brods were marrying their sorority sisters, the Sigma Betans. My elder sister Nena, a Sigma Betan, found her Beta Sigman husband in Los Banos.

The Golden Years

The best years of fraternity life in UP could be dated from after the war until the 1960s. Arguably, the golden years were when Carlos P. Romulo was president of the university. He brought fresh winds of change to the campus. He encouraged student activities and competition. He wanted a university life where 25% of the students lived on campus, following the pattern in the United States, to promote active campus life. He sent almost all faculty members for further studies in the United States, dramatically improving the level of scholarship and instruction. He brought the ultimate in world culture like the Bolshoi Ballet to Diliman. We met world leaders like Robert Kennedy, Indonesia's Sukarno, the King of Thailand and Queen Sirikit, Jonas Salk, Madame Pandit, Abba Eban and many others. Also, the girls from Smith College were allowed to spend their junior year in Diliman. Inevitably they would all fall into the waiting arms of Beta Sigmans, making Beta Sigma the only fraternity that was talked about in that famous school in Massachusetts. Brod Eding Hizon, who was one of the favorites of the Smith girls, will confirm this.

During this golden era, the fraternity asserted its leadership position on campus. Brod Horacio “Boy” Morales was Corps Commander. The following year, he became Grand Princep of the fraternity and head of the Inter-Fraternity-Sorority Council. A consummate organization man, he developed a tripartite approach to get the best and the brightest students to join the fraternity. He would look for the natural leaders in every field of activity, like athletes, artists, ROTC officers, political activists, etc.

He asked Brod Lito Imperio, then editor of the *Philippine Collegian*, to attract writers and other intellectuals. And then he assigned Brod Johnny Chiuten to transform them into men of character through martial arts. The result was the full flowering of the

fraternity. We had Folkways, the *harana*, red roses on Valentine's day, and the deep admiration and respect of the community.

Martial Law killed the normal frat life

The good life of fraternities ended when President Marcos declared martial law in 1972. He abolished all the fraternities and sororities to defuse student activism against his regime. The radical left replaced the fraternities as the sources of leadership in campus organizations.

For student leaders, this was a time of living dangerously. While many took the easy option of avoiding trouble, many Beta Sigmans went underground and fought side by side with the poor in the countryside. We salute those who made the ultimate sacrifice like Brod Butch Landrito whose name was the first to be consecrated in the Bantayog ng Mga Bayani. Brod Boy Morales who gave up a top government position followed later. They showed that, when the country needed its young men to offer their lives for a great cause, Beta Sigmans could be counted on to come forward, ready to make the sacrifice. When freedoms were lost, brods stood up to be counted instead of cowering in fear.

During those years, our fraternity became almost extinct. We are told that, at one time, we were down to just seven members. But our residents during the 1980s refused to give up and persistently built up our ranks and status. Through grit and creative leadership and with help from concerned alumni, they saved the fraternity from oblivion. May I call on those responsible for this great feat to stand up — Raffy Hidalgo, Philip Marfil, Manny Casaclang, Jerry Lacson, Adrian Policarpio, Julius Villanueva, and Carl Zabat. We are still here today because of what they did.

Expansion to other schools

Because a great idea will always find its own missionaries, we saw Beta Sigma chapters expand across the archipelago. The honor of hosting the first chapter outside UP belongs to the Manila Central University where UP Diliman brods who transferred to that school completed their medical education there. Then followed the FEU Medical School, and thereafter to more than 90 schools. They have gifted Beta Sigma with doctors who continue to serve in our medical missions and with the most number of public servants in local governments and in Congress.

Our non-UP brods have excelled in many other fields. One outstanding brod is Napoleon Nazareno, who joined the fraternity at the University of San Carlos in Cebu City. Before his retirement from PLDT, he was adjudged the best Telecom CEO in Asia/Pacific. We and our non-UP brods are bound by our common adherence to the principles spelled out by Brod Pros Crescini in the Betan credo, and share a common identity in Malmon, the iconic mascot created by Brod Bernardo "Banz" Banez.

Beta Sigma today

Broads, the road that we have travelled these past 70 years has been studded with milestones and collective achievements.

Today, Beta Sigma is the largest Philippine-based fraternity in the world. We thank the International chapter and the Federation of North America for gathering under their respective wings the alumni members abroad. We also thank the National Assembly for systematically organizing our brods in the provinces.

We are the only fraternity that has achieved excellence in both the fine arts and the martial arts. Our brother artists have never failed to present the fraternity in the best light. In the 1960s, political groups competed to ally with Beta Sigma because it assured them of the best posters and billboards. I also know many brods who joined the fraternity because of Brod Grandmaster Johnny Chiuten. His legacy has been kept alive by his loyal disciples, namely, Brods Noli Nolasco, Jopet Laraya, Ollie Jumao-as and Freddy Fajardo

Third, we are the fraternity that has contributed the most to the environment not only in the Philippines but in the whole world. Beta Sigmans not only dominated the top echelons of the DENR but the top official of the United Nations in charge of extending assistance to communities to conserve the environment in more than 100 countries in the world today is also a Beta Sigman. I am referring to Brod Delfin Ganapin Jr., a grand princep in Los Banos during his time.

More than any other fraternity, Beta Sigma has contributed the most number of TOYM awardees who have excelled in a wide range of expertise. This spans from agriculture and forestry to creative and culinary arts, diplomacy and education, law and justice, martial arts, veterinary medicine, journalism and the fine arts, private enterprise and banking.

I realized how much this meant when I visited China for the first time in the 1970s when it was still a closed society. I visited a poor farmer's small plot of land where, on rice paddies were planted a row of bush *sitao*. These are beans that do not require poles which are not easily available to farmers there. To this poor farmer and his family, that meant the difference between hunger -- and food on the table. I was very proud to tell him that those beans were the result of plant breeding by a Filipino scientist by the name of Jose Deanon Jr., who was the first Beta Sigman to receive the TOYM award in 1959.

The journey continues

As we continue with our journey, let us always remember that our purpose for knowing our collective gifts is to be able to share them with those who need them most. That is how we can become the good and noble men demanded in our credo.

We must continue to make ourselves useful to our grassroots communities, following the personal credo of Brod Anggie Angliongto that “service to humanity is the best work of life”.

I admire the brods who have already done this. Brod Ted Topacio, the National Scientist, has formed a foundation that provides continuing service to the UP community by cleansing their stray dogs of rabies. Brod Lito Tadena, mayor of Sto. Domingo in Ilocos Sur, after a long and illustrious career as CEO of a pharmaceutical firm in Southeast Asia, now provides best governance services to his town mates. The late Brod Ely Santiago, after retirement as an artist, went back to his native roots in Negros Occidental to start a cultural festival called “*Maskara*” that continues to unite residents and draw tourists until today.

I endorse the idea of Brod Pepe Abueva, former UP president, for retired brods to group themselves according to their specific specialties and act as think tanks. Only by knowing what is happening in our fast changing world and knowing where we should be going can we assure ourselves that we will not be left behind. Brod Ike Araneta, an internet guru, can tell us that only those who can adapt quickly will survive this new world.

For service beyond the call of duty, I am endlessly inspired by the bravery of Brod Antonio Bautista, an air force hero in whose honor the military camp in Palawan has been named. When he was called in to save his comrades from being encircled by moro rebels in the south, he did not follow the safer way of flying high and then dropping his bombs. Instead, he flew low and braved the hail of bullets meant for his comrades. He lost his plane and parachuted but was blown by a strong wind toward his enemies. Armed with his .45 caliber pistol, he fought gallantly to his last breath.

Remembering those who made a difference in our lives

During moments of remembrance like tonight, we call to mind those brods who made a difference in our lives. Brods who mentored us, gave us the break in our first jobs, helped us in our careers. We pause to give thanks to them. In my case, I will always be grateful to Brod Frankie Llaguno who insisted that I work with him for Executive Secretary Rafael Salas who opened a lot of doors for me. I believe I would not have done as well in public service if Brod Frankie had not come early into my life. The same goes for Brod Franklin Luzurriaga who taught me the rudiments of marketing when I shifted from journalism to business management. I also often ran to Brod Ely Santiago to lighten up my marketing presentations that always impressed my Swedish principals. May their souls rest in peace.

Conclusion

There are some who believe that Greek-lettered societies like ours have lost their relevance. I strongly disagree. I have not experienced another social enterprise that has allowed me to sustain, for the full length of my life, the friendships I made in my youth.

So I strongly believe that we will not only survive; we will prevail. And when we finally face the sunset and begin to see the shadows lengthening behind us, our steps will be heartened by the words from Brod Johnny Moreno's song: "Beta Sigma Beloved, Hear thee thy sons who pledge once more to thee..."

Thank you and good night.

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