

INTERVIEW

BETTY GO-BELMONTE: A FILIPINO CHINESE BREAKING BARRIERS

Jade Lopez

Mrs. Billie Mary “Betty” Go-Belmonte is in her fifties. She is married to Rep. Feliciano Belmonte, Jr. of Quezon City’s 4th District. She has four children, three boys and a girl. By her boys she has four grandchildren. She earned her A.B. in English from U.P. Diliman and her Masters Degree in English and American Literature from Claremont Graduate School, in California, USA. She is the eldest child of the late Go Puan Seng, founder, publisher and editor of the once biggest Filipino Chinese newspaper in the country, the *Fookien Times*, where she learned the newspaper business inside out. Her mother, Felisa Velasco, is the great granddaughter of Mariano Velasco, one of the most prominent Filipino Chinese businessmen of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Betty Go-Belmonte did not only inherit the newspaper business from her parents, she was able to found her own paper. Years after Martial Law closed down the *Fookien Times*, Betty founded the *Philippine Star* from whatever facilities she could salvage from the *Fookien Times*. Today she is publisher of the *Star* and its sister publications, writes a daily column for the *Star* and finds time to edit the *Fookien Times Yearbook*, an annual magazine which reviews Philippine events. Despite the heavy demands of the publishing business, she is an active member of many civic, humanitarian and religious organizations.

Her appearance and demeanor do not fit the stereotype of a journalist-publisher-businesswoman of one of the country's leading dailies and publishing companies. She has a small delicate frame and moves like the way she talks, softly and gently. Her beauty comes as much from inner calm as from her soft features and smooth skin. She wears a minimum of makeup and jewelry, her taste in clothing always understated.

Betty Go-Belmonte always tells people that she is a Filipina, first and foremost. She is more Filipino than most born to natural born Filipino parents. Born in Sta. Mesa, Manila, and educated in Filipino schools, she was raised with firm convictions of love for country and devotion to the Christian faith. It is a faith tested during the Japanese occupation when her family had to flee pursuing Japanese forces. During Martial Law when Marcos closed down her family's businesses, everyone in the family except Betty sought other business ventures outside the country.

The story of Betty and her family is indeed extraordinary and yet in another sense typical of many successful Filipino Chinese. Her ancestors came from Southern China. They were poor and came armed only with the determination to succeed in business. "My mother's family was adopted by a priest named Velasco who helped my Mom's family acquire most of Carriedo street. Besides real estate, the Velasco family was one of the first to open a department store which sold high quality goods. My Mom was sent to St. Stephen's High School and later to Centro Escolar. She became an Episcopalian in high school. She is the only Protestant in her family who are all Roman Catholic." During Spanish times, Chinese residents in the Philippines, whether long term or not, were not entitled to any of the rights of citizens. It was only through conversion to the Catholic faith and the sponsorship of a prominent and powerful baptismal sponsor or *padrino* that a Filipino Chinese could hope to gain privileges in business. Following Catholic tradition, a Chinese would take on the name of his patron. This arrangement was equally advantageous for the *padrinos* for they benefited from the industry and money-making talents of the young immigrants.

Betty's father, on the other hand, came into fortune and later on gained social prominence through the newspaper and publishing business. "My grandfather on my father's side was the first editor of the first Chinese newspaper in the Philippines. My grandfather Go died of tuberculosis at 35. But before he died, grandfather managed to bring my father and my uncle to the Philippines. He was so poor he could only afford one first class ticket for his brother, my uncle, and one third class ticket for my father. My father was actually 12 or 13 but by Chinese reckoning a person gains an additional year by the time he or she is born.

"Father worked his way up from newsboy to founder and publisher in 1927 of the *Fookien Times* and worked to make it the leading Chinese language newspaper till it was closed by Martial Law in 1972. Father was a Buddhist, but because of the influence of my Mom he became a Christian.

"I'm proud of my Chinese ancestry, for they are hard-working people. They have helped build the country. I myself never went to China until after the EDSA Revolution in 1986 when I went there to sign a contract for the publication of my father's book *Refuge and Strength* which he translated into Chinese before he died. I would like to think that its publication would sow the seeds of Christianity in China.

"I am the eldest of six. I have four sisters and one brother. One sister, Felisa Martha died at childbirth. We were named alphabetically. I was named Betty, my sisters are named Cecilie, Dorcie, Elsie and our brother was named Andrew because A was reserved for the only boy. The youngest Grace, was born after the war.

"I had a happy childhood, although we were not well-off then and it was wartime. When I was born, my father could not afford the hospital; my mother had to give birth in an old house we rented in Sta. Mesa. I had my first birthday celebration when I was already 6 years old. Just before World War II we moved to Eulogio Rodriguez Ave. near Kamias, the house we live in up to today. We were one of two houses on the street. Shortly after we moved to this house, the war broke out. I remember the military trucks and cars going by; people said the trucks were going to

what was then Camp Murphy. I was in Grade I in Saint Stephens (a Protestant elementary and high school in Manila) then.”

Betty Go-Belmonte has been deeply influenced by her parents’ strong faith in Christ. Having survived through many hardships and harrowing experiences during the Japanese occupation strengthened her faith even more. Although Betty’s family had some money and powerful friends, her father had to flee from pursuing Japanese forces in December 1941, and later in June 1943 the whole family took refuge in the foothills of the Sierra Madres where they stayed up to the end of the war in 1945.

“All his life, my Dad stood up to his principles. I remember he spoke and wrote strongly against the Japanese military designs in Southeast Asia, the Philippines included, long before the war. When the Japanese invaded the Philippines, he was on top of the most wanted list of Chinese who were to be beheaded. While Dad sought to protect us from the enemy soldiers, he sought most of all God’s guidance. Dad took us to a hiding place in the Sierra Madres near Ipo Dam. Life was extremely difficult. We ate mostly *butuan* (seeded saba or plantains) and *panocha* (caked brown sugar). There was no rice to be had. Once we did have the opportunity to have rice, but Dad learned the man who was going to sell us the rice was a collaborator and refused to buy anything from that man. As children, we could not understand why our father denied us rice just because he disliked the seller. Looking back, I’m proud of what he did. He was a rare man who stood up for his principles. Despite hunger and danger we survived. My father attributed our survival to God’s care. I learned faith in God from my father and I have kept my faith in God up to now.”

In his book *Refuge and Strength*, Go Puan Seng related how, in their flight during the war, the children had to cope with all the hardships, deprivation and dangers of war. Always, food was a problem, “Our children’s dresses were bartered for corn and livestock...we had to ration rice and camotes (sweet potatoes). Often, we had nothing to eat but *butuan*, a sour banana full of seeds as big as beans. It was hard to swallow for it irritated the throat. Our children would ask for a small piece of *panocha* to help them push the ‘stony bananas’...down their little throats. There

were times when hunger would drive us to dig and scratch the soil for any trace of camotes left unharvested until all hopes of finding even a small piece were gone. All the children...would trail after me in this 'camote hunt'." Several times during their self exile Betty and her family encountered stray Japanese soldiers who would steal their food and belongings, but did not harm them. The children would often get sick from dysentery, fever and later chicken pox. Without adequate food and medicine, their desperate parents turned to herbal medicines and prayer and were continually amazed at how their children, amidst all the death and destruction, survived.

Although their school days were interrupted by the war, Betty and her sisters were able to continue their English lessons with the help of a family friend Araceli "Lily" Marcelino Carreon. After the war, Betty and her siblings were sent to Kamuning Public School and Hope Christian High School for elementary, and the Philippine Christian Colleges and UP High School.

It was in college that Betty experienced prejudice for being a Filipino of Chinese ancestry. In the 1940s to 1970s Filipino Chinese were put through great difficulties. Exorbitant fees were imposed on the Chinese in order to become Filipino citizens. Their children, though born and raised as Filipinos were treated as aliens. Betty's mother was a Filipino citizen but since the Philippine government considered her father's dual citizenship the determining factor in their children's citizenship. Betty was given dual citizenship as well. Rather than getting bitter and angry at the shabby treatment of Chinese, Betty chose to become active in student organizations and activities which made her interact more closely with other Filipino students.

"What I did not like about UP then was that I was always classified with the foreign students, just because I had dual citizenship. I experienced prejudice from both Filipinos and Chinese."

There were subtle forms of prejudice, like the stereotype that all Chinese are by nature good in numbers. "But I was lousy in Math. Once when I made mistakes in my computations, my Math teacher said, 'Miss Go you are a disgrace to your race!' To break

the tension, I answered back, 'Sir, what you just said rhymes.' After that the Math teacher appointed someone in class to tutor me."

There were more blatant displays of prejudice. "During the lantern parade, I was always placed on a float with foreign students, and I always felt strange because I consider myself Filipino. I thought that was terribly unfair. When I joined a sorority (Sigma Delta Phi), I agreed to run for the student elections, first because the organization asked that I run, and also because I wanted to prove a Filipino of Chinese ancestry could run and hold office. No one expected me to win. The other students of Chinese ancestry said I was foolhardy for even joining the elections. They said I would lose because of Filipino prejudice against Chinese, but I persisted. I remember how, in the middle of the counting, I was sent home. I wondered about this, until later that night they called me up to tell me I won. I realized that I had been sent home because they expected me to lose the elections. Instead, I topped the elections, I won three times for three successive years. After that, many students with Chinese names began to run for student elections. I was glad I won, I felt I had done something to remove the prejudice from both sides, Filipinos and Chinese."

The most blatant show of prejudice came when Betty decided to marry a Filipino, Feliciano Belmonte, Jr., a struggling young lawyer then. Betty's father and mother were very supportive of the relationship, but many in the Chinese community opposed the marriage. During the 1950s the prejudice of the Filipinos and Chinese against each other was very strong, and intermarriage was frowned upon. Many a Chinese mother would threaten suicide if her son as much as hinted marriage to a Filipina while Chinese daughters risked disinheritance and ostracism for marrying a Filipino. Filipino families on the other hand tended to ostracize children who married into Chinese families. Betty, the eldest daughter of a prominent Filipino Chinese businessman risked much more.

"It was my *Ama* (Chinese *yaya* or nursemaid) who noticed that Sonny and I were always talking to each other over the phone. I remember she said, 'I think number one', (she called me that since I was the eldest,) 'I think number one is falling in love with the

Filipino boy.' So my father asked me if I was in love with Sonny and if I wanted to marry him. My father said he approved of Sonny, that he found Sonny very intelligent and that he could even become President of the country one day.

"But my father made Sonny and me wait for five years before we were married. My father was pressured by the Chinese community not to allow the marriage. Even Filipino Chinese who considered themselves to have the most progressive views were against the marriage. The Yu Yi Tung brothers, publishers of *The Chinese Commercial News*, the rival of *The Fookien Times* said that I would be selling my birthright by marrying a Filipino. I think that part of the reason for the Yu Yi Tung's stand was to sell their newspaper. I don't think they were really that prejudiced. Because of all the ruckus we were married in Taiwan.

"Dad and Narciso Ramos (father of President Fidel Ramos) then Philippine Ambassador to Taiwan arranged everything. Sonny's parents went to Taiwan but I was alone. Because of the pressure from the Filipino Chinese community, not a single member of my family came to the wedding. I can't blame my father for staying away from the wedding. And those who did attend were all strangers, since they were all friends of Ninong Narciso Ramos. At first, even my mother-in-law was against the wedding. She kept crying in the church and one of the missionaries had to make her stop. As it turned out, my mother-in-law and I get along very well. Other Filipinos and Chinese were understanding and tolerant, some even cited me and Sonny as a good example of Filipino-Chinese intermarriage."

Although Betty's parents were more liberal than most other parents of the 1940s and 1950s, they were nevertheless quite conservative, particularly with their daughters. She remembers her father as being kind and fair but strict, having been raised with many traditional Chinese values.

"I believe I was quite well adjusted as a child. Although my father, the benevolent dictator, tended to be too protective. I think he was overly concerned because we were girls. I was not allowed to join the Girl Scouts, I was always accompanied going in and out of my home in every outing. The movies we were allowed to

watch were mostly cartoons like Mickey Mouse. In UP High School I did not join in the dances because my father did not want me to dance. Being Chinese, my father couldn't help favoring the only boy. He even reserved the letter A for Andrew who came after four girls. My father, following Chinese tradition, reserved the letter A for Andrew. In fact my real name is Billie. It was only after I came home crying one day because children teased me over my name that Dad nicknamed me Betty. We girls felt like Anastasia and her sisters, the daughters of the former Tsar Nicholas and his wife Alexandria of Russia.

"I raised my children differently. I trust them and allow them a lot of liberty. I allowed my own daughter to do many things I was not allowed to do. I felt I was sort of held back from doing a lot of things. I don't take it against my parents because I know that they loved me. But I don't want my daughter and sons to miss out on anything. Recently, I let my daughter Joy serve in Kadilingan, Bukidnon as a JVP (Jesuit Volunteer for the Philippines) where the only source of water was rain and there was no means to call her."

While she encourages her daughter to be more outgoing, Betty herself chose to keep to the traditional role of wife and mother. "I have always felt it was more important to be a good mother, a faithful wife and to know I brought up the kids to be God fearing, good spouses and good parents. When I got married I did not have to work, and I only agreed to help edit the *Fookien Times Yearbook* and later help Dad manage the newspaper because Dad promised I could arrange my work hours around the children and household. Sonny did not impose this, he was very supportive of my work; I just felt instinctively I had to take care of the children. In fact, when [the imposition of] Martial Law closed the newspaper, and I only had the Yearbook to manage, I found it sort of a blessing in that it gave me more time with the children. I could take them personally on zoo trips, tutor them. Until now, when we are together, we hold a family devotion, Bible and family discussions. Now that I'm a grandma and the children are grown I am more willing to help manage the newspaper. Now I have more time for things other than my family."

It was Go Puan Seng who encouraged Betty to enter the newspaper business. He even chose his daughter's course in college, most probably with the strong intuition that one day, Betty would be a very capable newspaper manager. "I wanted to be a missionary when I was 19 and stay single, but this upset my grandma who wanted me to marry. In college I wanted to be a painter and was thinking of taking a course related to art, but my father thought I would not be able to make a living as a painter and got me into the newspaper business. Dad was the one who insisted I enroll in Literature. He was the one who first asked me to help in the *Fookien Times*. One of my first jobs was to assist his editor proofread. Later I helped edit and manage the paper. So if I'm somebody known in journalism, it is not by my own doing."

Although Betty never intended to enter the newspaper business, her father's intuition was correct. Betty not only proved to be a very capable newspaper manager-publisher, but one with a deep sense of commitment and ethics. She usually takes a supportive stand on government programs which she feels will do the most good for the majority of the people. But she can be critical when she feels that government programs are wrong. Some have accused her of imposing her personal religious beliefs on the newspaper. Admittedly Betty's faith is reflected in the *Star's* editorial policy and news emphasis, but it has nevertheless brought to the paper a sense of balance and fairness in covering news. Betty's faith is reflected in the form of journalism that not only criticizes for criticism's sake, but tries to help people think of solutions to problems.

"A sorority sister of mine once laughed at me when I was managing the *Yearbook* and *Fookien Times* because I tried to emphasize the positive side of things, which was unthinkable since the trend then and now is to be critical and cynical. But even when we try to be positive, we still expose things that are wrong. I remember, the *Manila Times* reported how the Chinese General Hospital neglected a man who could not pay his bills immediately. The hospital let that man bleed to death. When I learned about it I had the story confirmed, then had it translated into Chinese and only then did I print the story in full. After that the CGH had to

apologize; they were angry at us, but they apologized. Another time, my father was sued for exposing a white slavery ring where some important people were involved. Fortunately Judge Malcolm, who penned the decision, said it was wrong to imprison a journalist who was only doing his job. Exposing anomalies and corruption brought my father and the *Fookien Times* many enemies. People angry at us pushed for the closure of the paper during Martial Law. My father went into self-imposed exile after Marcos closed the paper. He went to Canada and the US to live with my brother and sisters. The paper was closed for 14 years; the *Yearbook* was not banned, but that was published only once a year. Sonny and I stayed in the country throughout Martial Law. We had to depend on Sonny's earnings as a lawyer to support the family. I remember Imelda Marcos had asked someone else to tell us she'd kick us out of the country, but I don't scare easily. I am a Filipino and I have a right to live here.

"When Marcos eased restrictions on publications we opened a small monthly magazine, *The Star*, which I edited. We did our best to keep Ninoy's memory alive. We followed the Agrava commission and interviewed members of the Aquino family. Because *The Star* was written in Pilipino, we were able to sell more copies than *Mr. & Ms.* In a way we were more successful than *Mr. & Ms.* because we had no powerful political backer. *Mr. & Ms.*' backer was Juan Ponce Enrile. I would like to believe we had a stronger backer, the Lord. I remember we published an article by Jaime Ongpin which attacked Marcos. One supporter of Marcos asked me if I was scared since I had no backer. I said I was not, the Lord said it was the right thing to do even if I had to do it on my own."

One of Betty's biggest handicaps is her assumption that others, especially avowed Christians and journalists abide by the same principles as herself. Betty's friends tell of how many times Betty has helped many people through her paper and resources only to be betrayed and even slandered in the end. As co-founder of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in 1985, Betty was not only cheated out of money she had invested in good faith, but was forced to leave by the very people who pretended to be her business partners. "I was told to leave the *PDI* because they claimed that I was affecting 'the

credibility of the newspaper.' So I left. I was furious over the raw deal; so was Max Soliven. He was angry over the way his columns were cut without consulting him, especially since he was the publisher. My former partners in *PDI* still owe me money, but I have not sued them, for I believe Christians should not sue each other." Betty admits that in some cases, she was foolish to believe in some people's promises, but nevertheless she will continue to help others in any way she can. "When I can, I always try to help someone to keep up hope...there have been a few who disappointed me, but I'm glad to say I have been rewarded in knowing so many good people. And I've learned my lesson.

"When Chino Roces, Art (Borjal), and Max (Soliven) asked me to put up the *Philippine Star* in 1986, I agreed on certain conditions. First, that our paper should not follow the prevailing scoop mentality, but strive to be accurate and fair. I am supportive of Cory, and Max said he would agree as long as Cory did not steal on her own. Another policy I asked for was that we always present two sides to every story, and that if the paper was successful, we should not scream about it. I've always disliked papers which put up as their banner [the fact] that they are number one. *The Star* is sometimes late in exposes because we always want to present two sides, but there have been many occasions when I was glad we were a bit late because our stories were more fair and accurate. The *Star* is cautious with stories that involve the reputations of people. But when it comes to standing up to principles, we are bold. When other papers refuse to name the victims and suspects, particularly if the suspects are important people, the *Star* makes it a point to do so. In the Cochise-Beebom case, the other papers, scared that the police involved might harm them at first did not name Cochise and Beebom, calling them only "The Lovers", and did not want to name those in the Quezon City police department suspected of having been involved in the killing. It was the same with the cases involving the murder of Maureen Hultman and wounding of her friends by Teehankee, the 17 rape-slayings in Marikina and the case of Eileen Sarmenta in Los Baños. I make sure we also follow up all these cases, and that we do not stop following them up until they are solved.

Unless someone keeps following up and asking questions, people and the authorities will forget.”

Betty is supportive of Flavier’s program in the Department of Health, particularly of his family planning program. “I asked Flavier what his program was about, and he replied that he was offering every mother a choice. I had no quarrel with this and did not take a critical stand. What helped me make the decision to support Flavier was when I found out that Fr. Reuter discovered that abortions in the province are rampant, and for me abortion is totally out of the question. I feel contraceptives are a better alternative to abortion, as long as they are not harmful or threaten the life of the mother and child. I do not agree with the Catholic Church when it insists that Flavier’s family planning program will automatically lead to abortion.”

Betty is supportive of the death penalty for those guilty of heinous crimes. She says she was at first against the death penalty, but after years of reporting on crimes, investigating the instigators, interviewing and helping victims and their families, she had a change of heart. It must have been a difficult decision for such a religious person. It is an issue she thought over long and hard. “People who say that Jesus was against the death penalty are naive and are very literal in their interpretation of the Bible. Jesus is not just a God of love, he is a just God as well. The Bible is not just about love. When God sent Jesus here to save the world from sin, it did not mean people had a license to commit sins. There were punishments imposed on those who committed terrible crimes like murder, torture and rape. People say that the death penalty will not solve the problem of heinous crimes. In a way that’s true, but what about justice for the victims? For their families? And what of the killer-rapist who can escape to rape and kill again and again? Is justice and peace in the community served by keeping these unrepentant criminals alive?”

Betty has many plans for the newspaper and publishing company. Despite an accident which has kept her in a wheelchair for months she remains active and enthusiastic over her family, her friends and her work. She continues to write and run the business from her home. The phone and fax lines remain busy even at

night. She has recently acquired two more presses and is thinking of publishing other reading materials that can inform and educate as many people as her resources can reach. Rather than bring her spirits down, the painful accident has only slowed her physically. "In my present situation, the Lord has promised I will walk one day. I don't know when, but I will walk. I have prayed to God and I know that this is an experience which can help me glorify God. I'll walk when the time is right. I believe that."

References

1. Go Puan Seng (James Go). *Refuge and Strength*. Englewood, New Jersey, USA; Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973.
2. Carlos Palanca Tan Quin-sien, *A Case Study of a Chinese Cabecillo in 19th Century Philippines*, by Jade Roxas Lim. Term paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a class in Philippine Spanish Colonial History. UP Diliman, QC. First Semester, 1993.

Postscript

Betty Go-Belmonte died last January 28, 1994 at 2:00 in the morning. She died of bone cancer. To the very end, only her husband and immediate family knew of the disease and the pain she bore with characteristic strength, serenity, patience and faith. She did not allow her illness to get in the way of her family, friends and work. She continued to run the *Philippine Star* and its sister publications from her home. I would often come across Auntie Betty verifying a story, writing her column or discussing an editorial with her staff over the phone. My mother recalls on one visit how the bedridden Betty tried to entertain a grandchild from her bed while mobilizing her staff and other influential people to help a father whose daughter had been murdered. Most of all she never allowed her personal pain and loss to make her bitter and angry at the world and her faith in God.