

Bentang bente: Pride Speaks of lesbians (1 of 2)

By Libay Linsangan Cantor

In this 20th year of celebrating the first LGBT Pride March in the Philippines – and in Asia, to be exact – many voices are being heard, voices that were there in the beginning, and voices that are joining the movement recently. This assures us that, no matter what, people will always be there to speak up about pride and against prejudice.

But before any kind of formal organizing happened to have this big event take place back then, it was the lesbians who were speaking loudly during that era, voicing thoughts regarding different kinds of oppressions felt by being a woman-loving-woman. It is recognized that the Philippines had a very active women's movement after the fall of the dictatorship in the late 1980s, and from this formation, the lesbians started to emerge with their own issues concerns, and struggles against identity-based discrimination. From the throes of the feminist movements, these lesbians emerged to continue the fight outside of these movements, starting a strand of advocacy that would later be interwoven within the grander quilt of queer pride. And it was important to have this kind of lesbian herstory be put out there for current advocates to hear and take note of, for sometimes, we Filipinos have this tendency to "neglect" the lessons we learn from our own history.

A longtime lesbian-feminist who was there in the beginning delivered this historical overview, back when it was still not "chic" to label or come out as queer. The early 1990s were like that here in the country, and lesbian advocate Giney Villar enumerated this historical account. In tandem with yours truly, I supplied the various lesbian formations I encountered when I myself joined the lesbian feminist movement in the late 1990s. And in one piece of a monologue – or a "dialogue" as a feminist advocate aptly called – Giney and I recalled this journey and what it meant then, and what it means now, for all of us. This monologue was delivered as part of the pre-LGBT Pride March event last November 29 in an event called Pride Speaks: Bente and Beyond.

Pride Speaks was a good pre-pride event by this year's volunteers comprising the Task Force Pride network of LGBTQ allies, individuals and organizations. It was held inside Miriam College where the afternoon program was divided into three parts (aptly subdivided into the Bente and Beyond theme), with each part having speakers deliver statements, mini-lectures and monologues that make up the varied thoughts regarding LGBTQ organizing, advocacy and ally support.

For our part, Giney and I were part of the “Bente” program that outlined the various histories of the diverse identities in the local advocacy circles. Bente was about looking back on what has happened in the early 20 years of LGBTQ advocacy in the Philippines, notably in Metro Manila. Speaking from personal narratives were a handful of advocates that characterized what it was like in those past years, and in these recent years.

To begin the program, Giney Villar and I were the ones who enumerated the various lesbian-focused organizing moments that we’ve personally encountered and experienced. We mentioned the various formations, networking and organizations that happened not just in Metro Manila but also in various parts of the Philippines like Davao and Baguio. Ours was a humorous kind of monologue/dialogue and we spoke in Filipino and English.

Two distinct voices also spoke in the Bente program: that of a transwoman (Brigite Salvatore) and a transman (A.R. Arcon). The transgender movement has been actively organizing this past decade, and it was great to hear these two individuals narrate their personal stories of struggle, identity and coming out as trans in the Philippines. Meanwhile, another often misunderstood identity, the bisexual, was represented by the monologue of Fire Sia.

Part of the Bente program was Percy Cendaña, himself a distinct gay achiever in the history of the LGBTQ movement. As the first openly out gay chair of the University Student Council in UP Diliman, his win was quite symbolic and epic in terms of having LGBTQs recognizable and credible in the usually hetero-dominated spheres of society, whether in huge mainstream or localized arenas. A win is a win, and it is important also for society to see that his win was also backed up by the organization he belonged to back then, UP Babaylan, which was also a pioneering body in terms of having an openly queer student organization in a university. And this early foray into the political arena brought Percy the practice in exercising his current opportunities, namely being the current commissioner of the National Youth Commission.

A formidable ally of the queer movement also spoke – Dr. Guy Claudio. She also narrated her own experiences of helping out the LGBTQ movement by being in the feminist movements, the NGO and the academic circles. As a prime mover of the reproductive health advocates, Doc Guy has always spoken about issues with a very inclusive standpoint, as she always included the LGBTQ movements in her feminist advocacies as well.

The second part of the program was entitled “And” which stated that it would “appraise the current landscape” of LGBTQ activism. Those who spoke in this part was the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Quezon City, Kakay Pamaran, actively speaking out regarding religious/spiritual issues in connection with LGBTQ advocacy. Other advocates who characterized current issues and struggles spoke on the HIV/AIDS issue (Jonas Bagas) and the

representation of transwomen in media (Naomi Fontanos). Legal issues were also briefly tackled.

The third portion of the program was labeled "Beyond: The gaps we need to fill" and this was very interesting for it addressed certain issues not usually tackled by queer activism. One of the concerns here was aired by deaf queer advocates who spoke on more inclusivity regarding queer people with disabilities. Another concern was about the social divides often overlooked, especially when it comes to urban poor organizing and lesbian lives affected by poverty. A spunky 10-year old daughter of an openly out lesbian mother also spoke of her love and acceptance of her mother's sexual orientation.

The last part of the program was a talk show-like portion which involved the trailblazers of the queer pride movement in the Philippines, specifically the organizers of the first LGBT Pride March in Manila 20 years ago. Fr. Richard Mickley was there among the trailblazers interviewed.

Indeed, that was one afternoon full of queer pride moments, stories, wishes and thoughts. Let's hope these would be carried over to the next 20 years of queer pride. //

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