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THE ACADEME Giving Education the Royal Treatment

Posted 08:10am (Mla time) Mar 13, 2005
By Ruel S. de Vera
Inquirer News Service



NATIONALISTIC young professionals
CP David and Ani Almario

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ANYONE with a passable sense of irony can appreciate how the idea for a school that emphasizes Filipino identity could have started in, of all places, Palo Alto, California, home to Silicon Valley and the dotcom experience. But it was there, in prestigious Stanford University, that the seed for the Raya School was planted. A new school that promotes nationalism, reading and the sciences, Raya is the product of much thinking-and dreaming.

Though sparked by a fateful meeting between people, this is not a love story, though it certainly is about passions. Ani Rosa "Ani" Almario was then working towards her Masters in Education as a Fullbright scholar two years ago. Ani, youngest daughter of National Artist for Literature Virgilio Almario, met the President of Stanford's Filipino Association, Carlo Primo "CP" David, who happens to be the eldest son of sociologist and multi-awarded columnist Randy David. Ani was also e-mailing Basil Wuson (currently taking his MBA at Duke University), who broached the idea of a different kind of school, something that CP had similarly thought of.

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"Everyday, I encounter something or someone who convinces me that Raya should exist," Ani explains. "I've encountered parents who really don't care if their kids speak Filipino or not, kids who don't know Filipino songs or look up to Filipino heroes, teachers who teach in such uninspired ways and students who think school is only about rote learning. I read the papers and all I see is crime and corruption. If Filipinos really cared about their country, there wouldn't be all these horrible headlines."

Elevated learning

After returning to the Philippines and her job as Product Development Officer for Adarna House, the pioneering children's book publisher that her father started in 1980, Ani thought about the school some more. Lawyer Melvin Rillo then joined the mix. Together, the four-Ani, CP, Melvin and Basil-founded the Raya School, deriving the name from the old Malay word for "rajah" or "nobility," and seeking a place of elevated learning.



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Raya's curriculum revolves around eight thrusts: sense of country, discovery-based, play-oriented, a four-pronged approach to reading, meaning-centered, child-centered, culturally-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate.

"Raya is trying to help raise Filipino kids who have a true sense of their own, a true sense of country," says Ani. "These kids will be totally immersed in their culture and heritage and be proud of their roots. In the future, they would devote themselves to making their country better." Adds CP: "It will try to offer a different learning experience for kids, starting with a unique school building that will have a museum feel to it. It will be grounded on a well-planned curriculum that centers on reading and discovery-based learning, with emphasis on the natural sciences."

The new school building, rising on busy Scout Limbaga in Quezon City, will open this June with a pilot class in Junior Kinder (ages 3 to 4) and a year's tuition of about P35,000; Raya eventually intends to offer Senior Kinder and Prep. It also is effectively the lab school for Adarna Books, though Adarna itself has no financial stake in Raya. With its unorthodox designs (the classrooms are dominated by multiple blackboards for the students to express themselves, for starters), Raya is not your usual center for learning. For the summer, Raya will already be offering a rotating schedule of class in--naturally--the arts and sciences.

Raya's pioneering spirit takes a cue from its founders. The gregarious and quick-to-laugh Ani, 27, made the jump to publishing after a brief stint in the corporate world of Sycip, Gorres & Velayo. The middle child of her poet father and consultant Lyn Almario (older sister Asa is an architect and younger brother Agno is still studying), she hesitated before joining Adarna because she didn't want to compete with her father's formidable resume. An Economics graduate of the University of the Philippines, Ani enjoyed working with children and thus grew into her role at Adarna. "He told me maybe I should try out all other options before I go to Adarna," Ani remembers. "It was a sudden epiphany." Despite the hectic requirements of her Adarna job and the preparations for Raya, Ani finds the time to play Bach on the piano or curl up with a Haruki Murakami novel or do some boxing. Yes, that kind of boxing.

Something different

Similarly, CP gravitated to something different from the world of sociologist parents Randy and Karina David, though he did grow up very well informed. "Every night, the discussion at the dinner table would be about politics and sociology," he recalls fondly. The reflective 34-year-old CP graduated from UP with a BS and MS in Geology. "We all wound up doing something different from our parents," he says; sister Kara is a broadcast journalist, Nadia is an interior designer and youngest sibling Jika is an accountant who is currently volunteering her time in Palawan.

As a UP-DOST-Stanford scholar, CP went to Stanford to take his PhD in Geology and Environmental Sciences. When his scholarship ran out before he could finish, CP worked for the United States Geological Survey in Menlo Park. "My first year there, I didn't think I would be staying so I didn't take my clothes out of the suitcase for a whole year," he recalls. Upon finishing his doctorate he returned to UP, where he is teaching at the UP Institute of Geology and Institute of Environmental Sciences. He travels a lot, overseeing projects in water quality. In his own time away from his research projects, CP enjoys diving (he's certified, plus it's pretty much a requirement in his line of work) and recently began taking up extension courses in flute at the UP College of Music. He just felt like it, he says with a laugh. "I'm enjoying myself," he explains, "except that I'm the only adult in class and all the kids are much better than me."

Raya reflects many of its founders' own ideas about what a school should be about, a daring mix of nationalism and sciences. Teaching kids about Filipino requires more than just teaching them how to speak Filipino or token Linggo ng Wika celebrations. Ani explains that Raya "embodies all that I love and believe in. I'm deeply nationalistic, I love children, and I always try to institute change." For CP: "Learning the natural sciences equips the student important skills such as logic and reasoning, hypothesis building and testing, use of math as a language, etc. More importantly, because science can be a very, very cool subject in school!"

The partners braved the avalanche of paperwork that was needed to put up



the school (indeed, CP says that the most difficult part of the entire enterprise was "having to deal with securing the 1,000 permits needed to open up a school") and pooled their funds and resources. Right now, they're looking forward to the school's opening. "I'm only worried about enrollment," Ani says. "I hope to get a class of eight or 10 for our first year. I'm not as worried as I am excited."

It's their own form of activism, something in their blood, their own way of making a difference. The Raya School is the fulfillment of what Ani Almario and CP David describe as a new approach to Philippine education, something they absolutely believe has to be attempted. Ani says that's what they're doing, "getting closer to the dream of helping change the Philippines, doing our part to make Filipinos more culturally aware and more concerned about their country." Now that sounds exactly like the new Philippine dream.

For inquiries regarding The Raya School, please call Ani Almario at 372-3548 local 105 or e-mail ani@adarna.com.ph

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