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Kevin O'Hara: Fond memories of Mindanao's St. Nicholas

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By Kevin O'Hara

MINDANAO >> This Christmas, I find myself on an orchid farm outside Davao City, on the tropical island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. I'm here with my wife, Belita, visiting her family, natives of this far-flung archipelago.

My first visit here was in 1975, when Belita brought me home to meet the family. Due to martial law at the time, her parents were unable to attend our Pittsfield wedding. That was fine with me. Belita had courted the upper crust sons of Philippine society before she enrolled at BMC's School of Medical Technology. But during her year-long program, she'd fallen for a rather cunning (and lucky) night orderly. Not what her parents had in mind for their lovely daughter, I'm certain.

Nonetheless, I was accepted graciously by my new in-laws. I also became fast friends with Belita's brother, Bob, my own age.

One day Belita's father excused himself to go up to his mountain retreat to pray for President Marcos, "that he might see the corruption of his ways." During his two-day absence, Bob told me about their extraordinary dad.

Rafael Suarez was born into a family of plantation owners. Inspired by the example of Mahatma Gandhi, he became a benefactor of the poor, and an outspoken critic of the Marcos regime. He donated large tracts of land to squatters, and would often arrive home barefoot, having given his shoes to some

unfortunate along the roads.

"Everyone calls my dad Lolo Paeng, which means Grandpa Rafael," shared Bob. "They love him for his pesos, yes. But they love him more for who he is, and the good he represents."

When Lolo Paeng returned from his hermitage, he asked if I'd like to go where no white man had gone before. "Sure, why not," I said, hopping on the back of his Harley toward Mount Apo. Once on foot, we hacked through the jungle with machetes, until we came to a tree-dwelling tribe living in grass and bamboo huts. A tribe Lolo had stumbled upon on one of his solitary expeditions.

Indeed, the women and children acted as though I was the first white man they'd ever seen. The kids delighted in pinching my exposed white legs, to watch the pink rise. Upon leaving, one little boy pointed to my white shanks and exclaimed, "Johnson's Baby Powder!" Talk about brand recognition to the ends of the earth.

Next day, Lolo took me to the Lanang Golf Club, where 30 young caddies vied for the privilege of carrying his bag. He accommodated all by giving each caddy one of his 14 clubs to carry. Ditto with my clubs. Add two empty golf bags and, presto, 30 happy caddies followed us around like a Sunday gallery at St. Andrew's.

Shortly before Christmas, Lolo drove me to a desolate beach to teach me how to meditate on water. First, he instructed me to float on my back, "like the Phoenician sailors of old," head tilted back, chest expanded, and limbs dangling at my sides. I soon got the knack of it, but found it difficult to mediate while drifting dangerously out to sea.

I soon gave up, but Lolo slipped into the waves and floated away, telling me he'd be back in the course of time and tide. From a shady spot, I watched him bobbing away, until he disappeared beyond the horizon. Hours went by, and I began to fret. How far could the tide carry him out? What about sharks? What if he didn't come back and I had to tell the family?

Dusk was coming on when I spotted a faint speck in the distance. Could it be Lolo, or just a floating log? The incoming tide brought it closer, but I still couldn't tell. I was staring intently when I saw a wonderful thing — three fish leaping over the floating object in one glimmering silver arch. At that moment, the log stirred to life. It was Lolo, awaking from his deep trance and swimming effortlessly to shore.

This Christmas, we'll be attending Midnight Mass once again at the Cathedral of San Pedro. But, sadly, there'll be no Lolo this Holy Night. He's gone now, but I'll never forget my first Christmas there.

When we left the cathedral after Mass, Lolo was swarmed by children: indigenous children from the mountains, Muslim children from the waterways, and street children from the barrios. Lolo was ready for them all, and handed each three silver coins, their pasalubong.

The happy entourage continued to clamor around him. Not for more coins, no, but simply to remain in his company. I followed their festive parade, along with Belita and Bob, toward the coolness of the city's fountains. There, the children joyously chanted, "Lo-lo Pa-eng! Lo-lo Pa-eng!" A chant as sweet as any hymn from an angel's choir.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual Christmas story for The Eagle.

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