



Remembering Cecilia Datu, RN
Operation Brotherhood (OB Laos)
January 12, 1937 – July 31, 2020

On November 11, 2008, about 8:10 pm, Lao Airlines flight QV 425 landed at Vientiane's Wattay International Airport from Bangkok. Each time the terminal's passenger arrival doors swung open, two Lao women – Sivilay Sivongxay and Bounthan Oudom – stood nearby, their sights zooming in as a passenger or two would emerge. Bounthan held a bouquet of red roses. “For Madame Cecile,” she said. Cecile was one of the arriving passengers they had come to meet. As young nursing students at the OB School of Practical Nursing in Vientiane, then as staff nurses at the Operation Brotherhood (OB) Vientiane Hospital, they waited expectantly for their teacher, supervisor, mentor, confidant, companion. She left Laos 33 years ago, and this was her first return to their country.

“I dream always of going back for a visit,” she had remarked. Finally she emerged. And they rushed her, smothered in an outpouring of hugs, caresses, touches.

In the 16 years that Cecile served in Laos with OB, beginning in 1959 and up to the very last month of the program's termination in 1975, she held several job titles – staff nurse, ward supervisor, head nursing service, nursing education head, senior nursing consultant. But her lasting legacy has been her stewardship of the nursing school. Together with Nursing Director Vicenta “Toots” Calderon and a staff of Filipino nursing educators, they shepherded Lao teen-aged men and women, all with only a six-year elementary education, through a two-year course that produced the country's first batch of fully qualified practical nurses. Their Filipino mentors were four-year college-degreed nurses who had to cram into two years a curriculum, heavy on ward skills, to address a severe shortage of bedside nurses for OB's clinics and hospitals all over the kingdom . (The few Lao nurses practicing in the 1950s were trained in Hanoi, Saigon or Bangkok, to complete a one-year auxiliary course). Six OB classes graduated more than 140 nurses. They still remember their teachers, among them Joji Naranjo, Ampie Malolos, Fely Montoya, Minerva Erese, Lolit Delaon, Pat Garde, Jovit Revilla, Vilma Valenzuela.

More than 35 had settled in the USA after a new government took over the country in 1975. Said Cecile “Our nurses who settled in California started out as nursing aides and excelled in those jobs. When they showed our school transcripts to the California Board of Nursing to apply for their practical nurses licenses, the Board was surprised to see that our Lao nurses had more classroom and ward credits than the US LPN program. On that basis, the Board allowed them to sit for the licensing exams.” A number proceeded to earn their RN degrees in the USA. “I am not what I am today if not for the OB nursing course,” said 1967 graduate Chanthalom Phouangmalay, RN, now living in Aurora, Illinois, USA.

Those who opted to stay went on to scale career ladders after OB left. Bounthan became chief nurse at Mahosot, the country's premier general hospital in Vientiane. Another graduate Sivone Urai Chandara became a nurse manager there. A 1969 graduate Phengta Vongphrachanh earned a medical degree. Little wonder then that at our 5th

Mekong Circle reunion in Chicago in 2004, when 30 of these graduates gathered for their first school reunion (oh, gosh, golly, a reunion within a reunion !) they clustered around her, like bees to their mother queen. Well, she was our second mother in Vientiane, one graduate said. During their two-year schooling, they boarded at dormitories behind a large residence in That Luang that served as the communal home of the Filipinos. Hence they lived just a few steps away.

During her 2008 visit, the dormitories had been torn down sometime after the graduation of the last class in 1969; the hospital and classroom were bulldozed in 2002. Those gone, she insisted to see instead a cherished marker, the mighty Mekong River, of her extended sojourn in Laos (the standard two-year service contract was renewable). There, along Buddha Park, she stood on its banks, in silence, contemplating its flowing waters, as muddy brown as ever.

Cecile graduated in 1958 from the St. Paul College of Nursing in Iloilo city, in the Philippines, then worked as a staff nurse at the Manila Doctor's Hospital in Manila. In 1959 she joined the OB field teams in Sam Neua and Paksong. The Sam Neua field station was officially opened in August 1958, one of eight that was established that year. Located in mountainous terrain in Houa Phan province, this tiny capital town of mud huts is accessible only by air; from many of the villages, only on foot or on horseback. It was OB's remotest northern station, noted for its bitter cold winter. Its unfinished hospital (if you can call it that) was a roof with four walls and an expanse of gravel for a floor. Cecile joined a team composed of a physician, a dentist, two nurses, an engineer sent to supervise the building of the hospital, all of them males.

When OB administrative officer Rod Severino arrived for a visit, there were some 26 patients lying on wooden beds and plywood boards. He carried a message for 22-year old Cecile, the only female in the team. "We had thought that Cecile might want to spend her Christmas in Vientiane where it was gayer and she would have feminine companionship. She looked at me as if I had suggested something preposterous. Half-smiling, half-indignant, she replied, "No, no, of course not, I want to stay here." For standing up against bone marrow freezing cold and precarious life in a frontier war zone exposed to Communist attack from neighboring North Vietnam and home-grown anti-government Pathet Lao insurgents, the Ministry of Interior awarded her in March 1960 a Certificate of Appreciation. Paksong, her next assignment in southern Champassak province offered, what else, more inhospitable weather.

In 1963, as head of nursing service in the OB Vientiane Hospital, she was a strict mentor of the nursing students on the ward floor. As one of them remarked, learning life-saving skills meant that if you forgot to bring with you during our rounds, let's say a pen or your notebook, expect a playful pinch in your behind.

On November 8, 1965, the King of Laos Savang Vatthana awarded Cecile the Bronze medal of the Order of the Kingdom of Laos. She was one of ten OB nurses honored for their humanitarian service over the 18-year OB tenure in Laos. Her sister, Violeta Salarda, also a nurse, was given the Order of the Grieving Heart after her drowning death in Attopeu province in April 1966. (Of the more than 600 Filipino OB volunteers, almost a third were Registered Nurses).

In 1976 she and her husband Manding immigrated to California where she worked as a staff nurse in various hospitals -- Morningside Hospital in Los Angeles; Hollywood Community Hospital in Los Angeles; Doctor's Hospital in West Covina.

She met her husband in Vientiane, an engineer with the Office in Charge of Construction of the U.S. Navy , assigned to help supervise the construction of the Wattay airport as part of Japanese economic aid. OB President Oscar Arellano tried to convince her to stay longer. “Please continue with us and carry on the wondrous work you have done and are doing so well. We need you,” he wrote her.

She was also recipient of certificates and plaques of appreciation from various Philippine hospitals who received donations of hospital supplies that she solicited from her hospital employers. Surgical packs, crutches, unused sutures, towels, dressings and the like are packed into “Balikbayan” freight boxes, and off they go to places like the Philippine Heart Center and the National Kidney Transplant Institute in Manila, Fort Bonifacio Hospital in Makati, J.P. Memorial Hospital in Cavite, Our Lady of Peace Hospital in Paranaque, St. Paul’s Hospital in Iloilo City, Aleosan Hospital in Alimodian, Iloilo, Perpetual Hospital in Cebu and to numerous clinics. She recruited teams of Filipino nursing colleagues in Los Angeles to provide the still usable supplies. “As long as they keep on collecting and giving, and as long as the Atlas Shippers International Inc. keep granting me discount shipping rates, I shall keep sending them,” she said.

Los Angeles was the preferred destination of Laos expats after their 1975 exodus. The very next year, some 50 of them formed Mekong Circle USA that expanded into Mekong Circle International. As founding members, Manding and Cecile energetically organized with fanatical devotion our biennial reunions, 12 of them, beginning in 1995.

Cecile was born in Alimodian, Iloilo, Philippines, the daughter of Simeon Salarda, a former mayor. She died of a stroke at St. Luke’s Hospital in Manila at age 82. In addition to husband Manding, she leaves behind a brother Msgr. Patricio Salarda, a sister Luz Alcudia, daughter Agnes de los Angeles, grandchildren Ashon, Amber and Anyleis.

Messages offering condolences can be sent to Manding Datu at 200 Vigan, Bonifacio Heights, Taguig City, M. Manila. Philippines.

Photo: Cecile with Manding in 2016.