

A LIFE TOUCHED BY GOD

LOLITA CATA CUTAN GARCIA LLOBRERA

(June 11, 1938 – March 27, 2019)

Lolita was born on June 11, 1938 in Cavite City, Philippines, the second of five children of Aurelio Garcia, Sr. and Patricia Catacutan.

Her dad, Aurelio, Sr., attained only a grade school education; but he was a man of upright, self-reliant character, with a very strong family pride. He worked as a barber, painter, and an over-all jack-of-all trades, who retired honorably as a civilian employee of the U. S. Naval Base Subic Bay, Zambales, Philippines. Her mom, Patricia, on the other hand, obtained a teacher's certificate after high school, and for a time taught school until becoming a full-time housewife. Their love story began (of all places) at a wake, in which she, a young lady from a comparatively well-to-do family, fell in love with this poor but handsome young man who sang with a rich, enchanting voice, accompanied by his own masterful playing of the guitar. In spite of the disapproval of her parents, they got married anyway and were disowned for a time but later reconciled and taken back by her family. From this marriage were born Lourdes, Lolita, Aurelio, Jr., Leticia and Linda. Her parents and all her siblings preceded her in death.

Lolita proudly recalls her dad to be a very resourceful dad, though having only a grade-school education. Whenever he came home and found out that there was only one "ulam" (side dish to go with the rice), he'd tell the family, "Wait a few minutes", and he'd go down to the sea (they lived close to the shore), and in a short time, he'd come back with a bunch of crabs that he'd caught. You see, in Cavite City, no matter how poor you were, you had to have at least two side dishes with your rice. Lolita got this resourceful spirit from her dad.

Her mom, on the other hand, was a people person, with an innate diplomatic sense. She was friends with everybody, including the mayor and other important people in the city. This quality of being a people person was passed on to Lolita, along with her mom's strong sense of self-confidence. Lolita often said in jest, "Speaking with anybody, even the president, doesn't scare me." As a people person, later when she already became a teacher, being with her students outside of class hours and on weekends was her idea of a fulfilled and happy life as a single woman. With her students around her, the thought of having a steady boyfriend, with whom she could spend time after work, rarely crossed her mind.

But back to her childhood years...

From early on, Lolita's life bore the mark of God's protection. She told about how one day at about 5 or 6 years old, as she reached out to grab a flower which hung over their second story window she fell to the ground. When her parents picked her up, they thought she was surely

dead. They called the doctor immediately, and by God's providence he was able to revive her with no obvious permanent injuries.

She went on to grow up normally, but not quite. Her family noted with secret concern that she did not do the usual girl things. While her older sister Lourdes was home playing with dolls, Lolita was out on the streets playing with the boys. Two games in particular she relished remembering. One game was hiding rubber bands in a small mound of sand and then piercing that mound of sand with a thin stick in order to fish out as many rubber bands as possible; she got to keep all the rubber bands that her stick caught.

Another game was called "buga", which involved expelling a cashew nut from your mouth. Of course, by this time the cashew nut had been all over the dirty ground. So what did the kids do? They just rubbed off the dirt on their shirts, then positioned the cashew nut in their mouth in such a way as to propel that seed as far as possible. The kid whose cashew seed landed the farthest won all the other kids' nuts. At the end of the day, Lolita usually came home with the most rubber bands and the most cashew nuts.

Playing with the boys was not all. Even at that age, her strong personality overpowered the boys, they actually made her their leader. And she would lead her gang of boys in their turf wars with the other neighborhood gangs. One of their weapons was a kind of sling shot, using a rubber band armed with a bent wire wrapped around with paper, which you shot at your enemies. Unfortunately, a member of her gang got shot in one eye and was left blind in that eye for life.

One enduring memory from her ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS involved a boy classmate who was also their neighbor and who, on his way home, usually passed through the alley in front of her house. This boy's family was rich compared to Lolita's family. While their class was taking a test, this boy wanted to copy her answers and she refused to let him. Angry, he taunted her saying (in Tagalog): "Akala mo kung sino ka, kayang-kaya ata ng pamilya ko ang pamilya mo!" (Literal translation: Who do you think you are? Don't you know my family can beat your family anytime?) Lolita warned him, "Don't ever, EVER dare pass by my house again." He just laughed her off.

After school, Lolita hurried home and, breaking off a branch from a very thorny bush called aroma, she stood guard at the entrance of the alley by her house, through which her boy classmate would soon surely pass. Ignoring her earlier warning, he proudly entered the alley. Before he knew it, Lolita was all over him, beating the living daylights out of him with the thorny aroma branch. He ran home wailing like a whipped puppy to report to his dad what happened. His dad immediately rushed out and confronted Lolita about what the heck she had done. Without flinching she told him in Tagalog, which translated means: "This son of yours said, your family can beat my family. He cannot even beat me, so how can your family beat my family." The angry father turned around, dragged his son home by the ear, while berating him (in Tagalog): "Gago ka naman pala eh" (roughly translated, "Serves you right, you stupid fool."

From her HIGH SCHOOL YEARS, two things thing stand out. First, she fell in love with the English language. She admitted she had very real difficulty with math, but in high school English became her passion.

Second, when she was 17, she went through a profound spiritual experience. This spiritual experience set the trajectory of the rest of her life.

Lolita's profound spiritual experience came about as follows....

Lolita's family was devoted to the traditional religion. Her dad, though a faithful parishioner in his own way, had a more guarded attitude toward certain church practices. As a young man he had served as an acolyte at his parish church and had seen things behind the scenes, which ordinary members were not aware of. One practice he strongly forbade his family was never go to the priest for confession. Though respectful of his traditional faith, he told his family to confess their sins directly to God and not to a human being.

Her mom, on the other hand, led Lolita and her sisters to be faithful in praying the rosary and in serving at the chapel which they attended, which was located inside the Philippine Naval Base Station in Cavite City. Their family prayed faithfully, using a rosary which was blessed from Rome. And once a week they went with their mom to dust the whole chapel; her designated duty was to dust the statues, probably because she was the most agile and could get on a ladder to reach the heads of the images. According to her, she had this recurring thought while dusting the eyelids of the statues, "What if the statue suddenly winked at me?" But at that age, she already felt a strong desire to serve God. One day she told her parish priest she wanted to become a nun. In reply, the priest took her out of the chapel and, pointing to an electric post, he said, "Do you see that post? If you can climb that post up and down ten times, then you can become a nun."

Lolita had an only brother, born next to her, Aurelio, Jr., or Jojo as they called him. As a teenager he was already the opposite of what his sisters were like religiously. As a member of his teenage gang he was fast becoming the black sheep of the family. But one day he surprised the family when, instead of going out as usual with his gang, he stayed home and they saw him quietly reading a little black book. This went on for a while and, though they were quite happy with his change in habit for the better, they were extremely puzzled about what brought this about. They also noticed that Jojo started going out in the evenings, little book in hand, to some place.

Dying of curiosity, Lolita, her mom and sister Lourdes secretly followed to see where he was going. Their curiosity was intensified when Jojo entered the building known in the neighborhood as the "haunted house". For a long time no one wanted to rent this haunted house, but they soon find out that a Baptist missionary from Texas had come to start an evangelical mission in the city and he had rented this haunted house for his mission. Lolita and her mom and sister Lourdes peeped from the outside through the windows. They saw nothing unusual except a group of people, Jojo among them, singing some song from a book, and then an American man

standing holding an open book and talking to the people about something from the book. At the end of the meeting, the American man, having obviously noticed them peeping, invited them to come in and asked how he could help them. Lolita, the bold one, immediately confronted him and said, “What did you feed my brother that caused him to suddenly change?”

The American missionary led Lolita and her mom and sister to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and the Bible. He helped them to read for themselves from the Bible and discover truths they never heard before.

Of course, Lolita and her family knew many things about the Christian faith. Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary on Christmas day, everybody knew that. Jesus Christ died on Good Friday for the sins of the world, everybody knew that too. Jesus Christ rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, yes, that too.

So what were the truths they never heard before?

They read from the Bible verses such as the following:

John 3:16: For God so loved and the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

John 1:12-13: But as many as received Him (Jesus Christ), to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 3:3: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born ^[a]again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Lolita discovered from the Bible that it was not enough to know about Jesus Christ. She must personally invite Christ into her heart and receive Him as her very own personal Savior and Lord. She learned she could receive Christ through a simple prayer, such as the following:

“Lord Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner; please forgive me of all my sins. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins and that You rose again from the dead on the third day. I open my heart and receive you in my heart as my personal Savior and Lord. Amen.”

Her brother Jojo had prayed that prayer, Christ had come into his heart, and as a result he was born again! That was it! Jojo had suddenly changed from being a black sheep because he had been born again! Christ gave him a brand new life. What his parents and sisters tried and tried vainly to do, Christ did. Jojo changed. It was truly a miracle.

Realizing these amazing truths, after attending several meetings at the haunted house, the day came when Lolita herself, along with her mom and sister Lourdes, prayed that simple prayer to

receive Christ into their hearts, and they too experienced being born again, receiving new life from Christ.

Lolita prayed to receive Christ in her heart when she was 17 years old. After graduating from high school, because of limited family finances, she was not able to proceed to college right away. But at about 19 years old, her early desire to serve God became clearer. As a result of her growing faith and knowledge from the Bible, she felt God was calling her to study at the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary in Baguio City, in order to prepare herself for Christian service.

This decision was to have a profound influence in making her the kind of teacher and mentor that she would become.

In the seminary, there was a kindly American professor who had a special burden to provide more adequate education to the students. He took it upon himself to support several of the seminarians, who only had high school education, and send them to regular college. Lolita was among these students. After her first year in seminary, Dr. Bob (as she fondly called him) told her to choose which school to go to, to get a proper college degree. She picked the University of Manila in order to pursue a degree in Journalism.

Before going on to college, while she was still in seminary, Dr. Bob saw her keen interest in the English language; he set aside time outside of school hours to personally tutor her in English, using the Webster Dictionary as their main textbook. Obviously exaggerating, she said that Dr. Bob intended to teach her how to pronounce all the words in the dictionary from Aardvark to Zymurgy. After graduating from the University of Manila with a degree in journalism, she returned to the seminary to complete her Masters in Religious Education.

However, before she could defend her master's thesis for graduation, tragedy struck the family. Her mom unexpectedly died (at 50 years old) in a vehicular accident while she and some relatives were on a family outing in Tanay, Rizal. The jeepney they were riding in lost its brakes while negotiating a downgrade portion of the highway. The driver had to choose between hitting a herd of cows on one side of the road or a tree on the other. He decided to hit the tree, resulting in Lolita's mom becoming the lone fatality. Strangely, her mom told some relatives days earlier that she had a premonition someone was going to die in the family.

Following her mom's funeral, Lolita saw that the family needed her help financially. Instead of returning to the seminary to complete her requirements for graduation, she decided to apply immediately for a teaching position at a public high school. According to her, with no make-up on, still in her mourning clothes and wearing only her rubber sneakers, she went to the local school division office and said to an officer there: "My mom just died, I need to work to support my family, and I'm here to apply for a teaching position." The officer said, "There's an open position for a math teacher, can you teach math?" She replied something like this, "No, sir, I can

only teach English. I don't know math, and I don't want to look like a fool in front of my students."

She was told to wait for a call from the office when such a position became available. This was how she got a job as an English teacher at Kawit, at the Emiliano Tria Tirona Memorial National High School. On her way out from her interview at the principal's office, a teacher who had overheard the interview proceedings, said in her hearing: "Akala ko kung sinong Amerikano, Filipino lang pala." (I thought it was an American being interviewed, turns out it's only a Filipino.) She said, this teacher later on became a good friend and colleague of hers. She taught at this high school for two years, when a position became open for an English teacher at Cavite National High School (CNHS).

As a teacher at the Cavite National High School (1966-1972), she touched many students' lives in three ways:

- As English teacher;
- As adviser of the school paper, The Cavitenan;
- As spiritual mentor.

TEACHER

First, let's talk about how her teaching career at CNHS began.

Upon arriving at CNHS, Lolita told the school administrator: "Please give me sections 1 and 2 to teach."

Hearing her say that, a teacher close by cautioned her: "You don't know what you're asking for. That class already kicked out five teachers."

That was, in fact, the case. For some reason, that particular class was made up of very smart but very arrogant students, and five previous teachers had proven unable to handle them.

Lolita simply replied, "We'll see."

So, during her first meeting with the class, without saying a word, she immediately proceeded to write ten words on the blackboard. Facing the class, she started calling the students one by one to stand and read the words with their proper pronunciation. As you know, the Filipino tongue has a difficulty differentiating the short "a" from the long "a", the short "i" from the long "i", etc.

Every time a student mispronounced a word, he or she was told to sit down. After every one had a go at the list, Lolita said, "I believe only one of you deserves to be in my class. The rest of you can leave the room now." She then pointed to the lone student who succeeded in pronouncing all ten words correctly. This student happened to be a Filipino-American who grew up in the U. S. The class got the message. They realized this was one teacher they could not kick out. After class, the students started telling everybody, "Our teacher is from the States."

SCHOOL PAPER ADVISER

Second, as adviser of the school paper, The Cavitenan.

Lolita was a fierce defender of her students' rights and freedoms, specially in journalism.

Her motto was: "If my student is right, I will defend him to the death; if he is wrong, I will kill him myself."

One time, her editor wrote about a scandalous situation just outside of the school premises; everybody in the school and in the community knew about this ugly situation. However, the principal did not allow the editorial to be published. He judged it to be a reflection on the school's reputation in general, and on his reputation in particular. The editorial was not printed, all right; instead, in the editorial section Lolita advised her staff to print instead in bold letters the word: CENSORED!

As adviser of the school paper, she pounded into her staff not only the importance of correct grammar and effective communication but also the principles of responsible journalism. It gave her the sense of pride and satisfaction that some of her staff members went on to become editors of their respective school papers in college; and beyond college some went on to practice in professional life what they learned under her tutelage.

SPIRITUAL MENTOR

Thirdly, she was a spiritual mentor to her students.

As a committed Christian, she wanted to establish in her students strong foundations of moral uprightness and spiritual well being based on a personal relationship with Christ and obedience to His teachings. She did not promote her church or religion; she taught them the spiritual heritage that all Filipinos shared as a Christian nation. On Saturdays she would gather interested students either at her home or in the school's Cavitenan office for Bible studies.

Later this got her into trouble. Within a day or so of the imposition of Martial Law, soldiers arrested Lolita while she was leading a group of youth in a spiritual activity at her church, First Baptist of Cavite City. The charge against her was treason, sedition and rebellion.

It was true that in the months prior to Martial Law, teach-ins by leftist student groups such as the Kabataang Makabayan were rampant on school campuses. The authorities mistook Lolita's Bible studies with her students as one of those teach-ins. She was arrested on a Tuesday morning. Before the soldiers took her into their vehicle, she heard God speaking in her heart: "You will be back by tomorrow to lead the Wednesday night prayer meeting in church." She went with the soldiers with absolute peace in her heart.

She was taken first to a military station in Imus, where all the arrested suspects were gathered and later put in military trucks to be detained for interrogation at a military camp somewhere, which she later learned was named Camp Vicente Lim.

Upon arriving at Camp Vicente Lim, she got to talking to a man who looked like a janitor. She asked him, "How long do you think they'll keep me here?" The man replied, "Sorry, the least you can expect is you'll stay here three to six months." She told him very confidently, "My God told me I'll be out of here tomorrow." The man laughed and said, "Well, we'll see how powerful your God is."

Probably because of her standing as a teacher and a woman, she was placed in the office of a certain military officer where she was given a pillow and a blanket and a place to lie down and rest for the night. But all through the night, whenever she was about to fall asleep she would hear a knock at the door, and an interrogator would come in. She was shown pictures of well known communist leaders and they asked her, "Do you recognize any of these people?" Of course, she didn't. Oh, yes, she recognized on them, because he was once an invited guest speaker for a school program. On and on, they asked practically the same questions, just in different ways. Her answer was always, "No, I don't know anything about those communist persons or activities." Finally, she told her interrogator, "If you are going to imprison me for teaching the Bible to students, I am ready to go to prison for the sake of Christ."

During her interrogation, she had the opportunity to share her faith particularly with two officers and encouraged them to receive Christ as Savior and Lord in their hearts. She reminded them, "As soldiers you face death every day; you never know when your time will come. With Christ in your heart, you can be assured that you will spend eternity in heaven with God"

When morning dawned, her interrogators became finally convinced she was innocent of the charges of treason, sedition and rebellion. Later, she found out that among those arrested were some of her students who had attended her Bible studies, and in their testimonies they vouched that their teacher was indeed teaching them only the Bible. By twelve o'clock noon, she was released. A military jeep and a couple of soldiers were charged to take her back exactly to the place where they picked her up the day before. The officer charged the soldiers, "Be sure to deliver her safe and sound. She brought sunshine to this place." She was indeed back at church in time to lead the Wednesday night prayer meeting, just as God told her twenty-four hours earlier.

Lolita was that kind of a teacher... a mentor and a defender of her students. She loved them and inspired them to become their better selves. She strove to build strong moral foundations in their minds and hearts. Importantly, she remained their friend even beyond their high school days.

As mentioned earlier, she was feeling so fulfilled with her life with her students, the thought of marriage never seriously entered her mind. Nevertheless, her fellow teachers teased her. They said, "You're smart and pretty, but where's your boyfriend?" Bowing to their pressure she allowed a La Salle college man 10 years her junior to hang around her. She told him they'd pretend to be boyfriend and girlfriend, but only for show. He was madly infatuated (if not genuinely in love) with her, he agreed to the arrangement. He was tall, fair, handsome and rich; his family had three cars, a sports car which he drove, a family sedan, and a luxury car complete with a chauffeur. Seeing this handsome man with her made her co-teachers at least stopped their teasing.

In fact, deep in her heart, she was waiting for God to reveal His will for her regarding marriage. Already thirty years of age by this time, she wasn't really bothered by the thought of becoming a missed blessing. Suitors there were many, but everyone had to pass her English test. If a suitor made even one mispronunciation or commit a grammatical error, he was done; not to mention that her students were so possessive of her and they took upon themselves to screen her would-be suitors to determine if they even qualified. One suitor, an engineer who had already achieved a respectable amount of financial success, was so frustrated, he chided her saying in Tagalog, "English lang naman ang alam mo, eh!" (English is all you know, eh!)"

Then sometime around March of 1971, a stranger, who was literally strange, came to town. Mithi, one of her church youth leaders, invited his Bible study leader from UP Diliman to come and help lead a Bible study for the deacons and Sunday School teachers of First Baptist Church of Cavite City. Mithi would host the Bible study every Friday evening in his parents' home. During the very first meeting, Lolita and her sister Lourdes were the first to arrive. According to Lolita, when she peeked into the living room where the Bible study was going to be held, she saw seated in the farthest corner of the living room a skinny man dressed like someone from the province, described in those days as a "badoy" (someone who didn't dress or act cool). Upon seeing this stranger, she heard a voice say to her, "That's the man you'll marry!" She sensed that that was God's voice, and she instinctively protested, "Forget it, Lord!" Of course, she kept that as a secret all to herself, all the time fighting God for the next two years, telling God, "God, I'll prove You wrong." The country bumpkin's name was Bien Llobrera, weighing 99 pounds at the time, a hundred times way behind Lolita's show boyfriend from La Salle. And something else, Bien Llobrera wasn't a Baptist; he belonged to another group called Christian & Missionary Alliance.

The Bible study meetings lasted for about 10 months and then Bien Llobrera got called to go on a mission somewhere in the Visayas, leaving the group but giving them no address of where he was going. Lolita felt much relieved when he left, and she told God, "See, Lord, You're completely wrong."

But in early 1972 their pastor at the First Baptist Church of Cavite City resigned. The pastor search committee tasked her with contacting Baptist pastors who were possible replacements. For several months they searched and searched, all in vain. In frustration, the committee chairman said, “No Baptist pastor is available; why don’t we just look for a man of God who can teach us the Bible?” The committee members replied, “Okay, but who is a man of God that we can call?” Someone then suggested, “How about Bien Llobrera? He taught us the Bible very well for almost a year, why don’t we contact him?” The committee approved the suggestion, and guess who was assigned to look for Bien Llobrera – the committee secretary, Lolita!

What irony, Lolita must have thought. She was convinced she had already proved God wrong, now she was even assigned to play detective to find the man that, two years before, God had told her she would marry. This man didn’t even leave a forwarding address. But being the strong-willed person that she was, she was able to find his address by a series of events, which she believed were divine providences. As the committee secretary she wrote him a very formal letter, omitting the customary opening greeting “Dear”, but directly saying “Mr. Bienvenido Llobrera”, to inform him of the church’s desire to call him to be their pastor.

Bien Llobrera arrived in Cavite City, September 15, 1972, just days before Martial Law. On the first Sunday that he attended church, he was voted into membership, making him officially a Baptist. The following Sunday he was voted in by the congregation to become their pastor; and on the third Sunday, he preached his first sermon as their new pastor.

In January, 1973, Pastor Bien heard a similar voice from God telling him, “That’s the woman you’ll marry” and his reply was similar to Lolita’s two years earlier, “Oh, no!” True, he respected and admired her as a very gifted person and a great church worker, but he felt his introvert personality did not mesh well with her extrovert personality. So, here were two people, both dedicated servants of God, and both being told by God that they were meant for each other. How do you make these two persons come to an understanding when both felt that somehow God was making a mistake?

God Himself had to orchestrate the whole thing. And here’s how it happened.

Late in February, 1973, just before the church youth group were to hold an all night prayer meeting, one of the young ladies in the youth group said to Lolita, “If I were you, Ate Lita, I’d go ahead and marry blank-blank (and she mentioned Lolita’s show boyfriend), instead of Pastor Bien.” This was so out of the blue, Lolita could hardly hold back her temper. “Who told you I’m interested in Pastor Bien? Is Pastor Bien spreading this gossip?” Grabbing her, she said, “Let’s go confront Pastor Bien right now.” When confronted, Pastor Bien requested the young lady to leave them. Once they were alone, Pastor Bien asked Lolita what the matter was, and she told him.

Pastor Bien was as surprised by this piece of apparent gossip. He denied saying anything like he was being accused of. "But let me tell you something," he continued, "the Lord told me that you're the woman I'm going to marry." She was thunderstruck. When she recovered, she said, "Two years ago, when I first saw you at the Bible study in Mithi's house, the Lord told me, you're the man I'll marry." Then feeling afraid, she asked, "What shall we do?" Pastor Bien then said, "This is God's will; if we don't obey God's will, my life will be ruined; your life will be ruined; the church will be ruined." According to Lolita, she didn't care much if her life was ruined; but she loved the church so much, she could not bear the thought of it being ruined. At this point, Pastor Bien grabbed her hand and prayed, "Lord, thank You for giving Lolita as my wife. We will obey your will. Amen." Then he told her to pray as well, and she prayed, "Lord, I don't know what we're doing, but we just want to obey your will."

On March 12, 1973, they were married in a simple ceremony, just wearing their Sunday best clothes. They invited the very first pastor of the church, Rev. Fred de Leon, to officiate at their wedding. The church ladies prepared some pancit and sandwiches and a cake; for desert they bought two or three gallons of ice cream from the local ice cream man. Needless to say, the first five years of their marriage was very rocky; only their firm obedience to God and their trust in His grace enabled them to stay together and grow in their love for each other.

Later both of them would often tell others, their marriage was by parental arrangement; God their heavenly parent arranged it all. However, they cautioned everyone, "Our experience was a unique one; we don't recommend anyone else to follow our example."

Pastor Bien and Lolita Llobrera served the Lord at First Baptist Church of Cavite City for about 16 years (1972-1988).

As providence would have it, Pastor Bien Llobrera was called to pastor in California. The family of five (Bien, Lolita, and three sons) immigrated to the U. S.A., arriving at LAX on June 20, 1988. Pastor Bien pastored in Santa Ana 1988-1990, and then in Pasadena from 1990 until he retired in September, 2014, in order to take care of Lolita who was recovering from breast cancer surgery. More about this later. But back to when the family first arrived in the U. S.

However, we need a little flashback.

One day around 1971, a group of her students told her, "Ma'am, someday, each one of us will have our own cars. And we will take you for a ride wherever you wish to go." In the Philippines in those days owning a car was the ultimate status symbol of success. Many of her students eventually ended up immigrating to the U. S.A. and establishing good lives there.

Now forward to 1988. Soon after arriving in California, Lolita was invited to a reunion of her former CNHS students who lived in the state. Meeting some of her students who dreamed of having their own cars, she quickly learned that now each one had not only one but two or three cars, and that now they could truly take her for a ride anywhere she wanted to go.

In the U. S.A., Lolita did not lose her calling as an English teacher. She found a job as ESL instructor at the Santa Ana Rancho Santiago Community College (1988-1990), and at Pasadena City College (1990-2010). When she was interviewed for her Rancho Santiago job, the interviewer asked her, “Where did you learn your English? Did you grow up in New York City?” At Pasadena City College, she applied over the phone and told the director, “If you don’t hire me, you’ll lose a very good English teacher.” She was told to come to the office immediately, and after a brief personal interview she was given a set of books and told to come back on the first day of class the following week to start teaching. When she went to the Human Resources office to fill up the employment forms, the secretary wondered, “How come you already started teaching before you even filled out your application?”

In the U. S.A, her charisma with her Philippine students worked the same way with her California ESL students who came from varied ethnic backgrounds. One gift that made her students fall in love with her was her ability to memorize all their names on the very first day of class. As each student came in and submitted his/her class card, she would look intently at the face and then at the name. After all the students had seated themselves, she would then stand and go consecutively row by row from one student to the next and call each one by name perfectly from memory. It doesn’t matter that there were more than one Maria, she would simply say, Maria 1, Maria 2, Maria 3, and so on. When she finished calling everyone by name correctly, there would follow a few seconds of silence and suddenly the whole class would burst out into applause. She would then tell them, “You know why I memorize your names? Because each of you is important, you’re not just a number, you’re not a ‘hey, you’ – you are a special person with a beautiful name.” At the end of the semester, practically everyone would emotionally say goodbye and say, “You’re the best teacher I ever had.”

Indeed, to all of us, she was the best person.

The best wife to her husband.

The best mother to her children.

The best mentor, best teacher, best friend, best fellow church member, best fellow Christian worker, or best whatever relationship you had with her.

And yes, the best song leader – oh, how she loved to sing and to lead people in singing!

And, who can ever forget, she was the best cook... and the most generous host you ever knew. After feeding you until you could almost burst, she would make sure that you had more food all wrapped up and ready to take home with you.

We are not saying that she was perfect.

No, she was not perfect, and no way did she ever claim to be! Like every one of us, she was very human with the human frailties in which we all share.

Specially her fiery temper. All her life, she struggled with her temper. And countless were the times when she struggled in prayer, asking God to please help her to control her temper.

But one thing you can say about her ... W-Y-S-I-W-Y-G... WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET.

There were no two ways about Lolita. You either loved her, or you hated her.

In her early years, as a very rough diamond, if you hated her, she'd only say, "As far as I'm concerned, you don't exist!"

But thank God, through her spiritual journey of 80 years, God patiently shaped her, tenderly sometimes very firmly chiseling her to become a multi-faceted diamond which reflected more and more the beauty and grace of her Savior, who came in humble human form in order to serve not to be served and to give His life as a ransom for many.

One song, among many that she loved, expresses her lifelong desire to be a servant to others for the sake of her Master. The words (in Mahalia Jackson's version) of the song say:

If I can help somebody, as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or a song;
If I can show somebody that he's travelling wrong,
Then my living shall not be in vain.

Chorus:

Then my living shall not be in vain,
Then my living shall not be in vain;
If I can help somebody as I pass along,
Then my living shall not be in vain.

If I can do my duty as a Christian ought;
If I can bring back beauty to a world up wrought;
If I can spread love's message, as my Master taught,
Then my living shall not be in vain.

Chorus:

Above all, it was in the church where she touched the most lives as she passed along for 80 years on her journey to the Promised Land. Had she been born a male, she would surely have served as a pastor. Unfortunately, the Southern Baptist Church, to which she belonged, did not allow

women pastors. (No offense intended to other churches.) But she was so gifted that she ministered in every conceivable ministry and role you could imagine... church administration, music ministry, Christian education, evangelistic outreach, children's ministry, youth ministry, singles ministry, couples ministry, seniors ministry, counseling ministry, and many more. Pastor Bien Llobrera often said that he was so blessed to have such a multi-gifted pastor's wife because all he had to do was to stand up and preach, and leave all the rest of the work to Lolita before and after preaching.

WE ARE HERE TO CELEBRATE LOLITA'S LIFE – BUT NOT TO IDOLIZE HER.

Rather, if she were still able to speak to us, this is what she would say:

It's not about me, it's all about my Savior and Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.
I am what I am, and I have done what I have done, all by the grace of God.

And if there is only one lesson that she would like you to remember from her life, it is this:

Like her, she would very much wish that you, too, would invite the Lord Jesus in your heart to be your Savior and Lord. Simply pray sincerely from your heart, "Lord Jesus, I need You in my life, please come in my heart and be my Savior and Lord. Amen."

With the Lord Jesus in her heart, she received the courage and endurance and peace to withstand the unbearable pains during her last couple of months. After being in remission from January, 2015 to about December, 2017, symptoms appeared that indicated the cancer might have returned. The doctor found a very tiny growth in her left kidney, but he assured her it was so tiny there was no need to do any invasive procedure on it. He advised her to come for regular check-ups to monitor the situation.

Unfortunately, her arthritis pains grew worse and worse, and it prevented her from keeping her check-ups throughout 2018. When she was taken to ER on March 8, 2019, the tests revealed that the tiny growth in her left kidney had rapidly grown to such a size that immediate surgery was indicated.

The doctor laid out two options before her:

- **OPTION #1: SURGERY** to take out the tumor along with her left kidney. However, the doctor told her plainly, recovery would be long and very painful, with no assured positive outcome.
- **OPTION #2: HOSPICE.** Without surgery, the only other option is to manage her pain, and stop all treatments. At most, she had about six months to live.

Realistically, both options ended the same way, with surgery being the more painful and difficult option. The doctor was surprised at her answer:

She told the doctor: “I am not afraid to die. I have Jesus in my heart. I know I’m going to my home in heaven, I’m happy and I’m at peace.”

She was placed on hospice care March 10, 2019. More or less, she had a good two weeks when her pain was controlled and when she still had days that she was able to receive visitors, relatives and specially her students, to reminisce the good times and to pray with them.

On Saturday, March 23, 2019, after spending time with visitors in the morning until noon and after enjoying a bowl of chicken soup specially made for her by our good friend Peter Hsu, she fell into a deep sleep from which she barely woke up. There were moments when she seemed to regain consciousness and would ask for a sip of water or a piece of ice to cool her parched tongue. But it was obvious that she was sinking fast. In the evening of March 26, the hospice sent a nurse to give her continuous care.

By the morning of March 27, Pastor Bien and their two sons Kairos and Kratos stayed by her bed, holding her hands, whispering their love into her ears, and softly singing in her ears her favorite Gospel hymns. At 11:45 AM, she peacefully breathed her last and her beautiful soul was taken by her Savior and Lord Jesus Christ to her eternal home which He had prepared for her.

Thank God for giving Lolita Catacutan Garcia Llobrera a full, meaningful, and joy-filled journey of 80 years, 9 months and 16 days.

She leaves behind her beloved husband and three beloved sons. She actually outlived her parents and all her siblings; she was looking forward to meeting them again.

But her greatest hope and joy was to finally join her Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, whom she loved and served all her life.

All the glory and thanks be to God alone! Amen.

Written by Pastor Bien A. Llobrera