

The 'Thriller'...

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sea of orange-clad people exercising with music blaring from 6 old speakers, the prison boss was inspired to film the routines.

"I saw these waves of orange people. I thought it looked very nice," he related. After filming the inmates' various dance routines, Garcia decided to post the video clips on the video sharing website, YouTube, in order to share his work with other members of the penal community. He believed that he was able to

crack the plague of violent prison gangs and wanted his prison to be a model for prison authorities everywhere.

"I wanted to show them that I am doing something here that has been a success, to show discipline in action. These men learned they can dance and still be men. It makes them work together, it makes them exercise and they learn self-esteem," said Garcia.

He uploaded prison performances of the Village People's

YMCA and *In the Navy*, Queen's *Radio Ga Ga* and *I Will Follow Him*, from the movie musical *Sister Act*. Then, he uploaded the now-legendary *Thriller* and the video clips took the world by storm. The unusual physical fitness regime at the Cebu jail has attracted so much worldwide attention that giant media outfits such as CNN, ABC and BBC sent news teams from across the globe to film the inmates.

The British Channel 4 made a documentary entitled *Murders on the Dancefloor* which was broadcast in January 2008. The program showed various inmates praising Byron Garcia, the founder of the initiative - many of whom had tattoos praising Garcia.

ABC News picked up the story and did a news segment called *Filipino Inmates do Thriller, Radio Gaga*. The news also covered reactions from Filipino-Americans as well as American counterparts in the criminal justice.

Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez said officials will look to encourage replication of the program at other prisons. "These people may have their lives enhanced by something which removes their minds from the conditions they're in," Gonzalez said. "It might help in their reformation. That's good."

Cebu governor, Gwendolyn Garcia, Byron Garcia's sister, was taken aback by the worldwide popularity of the dance video clips. "I just found it so hilarious, 'Reso melodious,'" Governor Garcia said. "What an irony. They're right here in this jail, considered the rejects of society, and yet

these rejects are now making our province and our country proud." The governor's favorite is *Sister Act*.

Byron Garcia says there has not been a violent incident in close to two years. "They are just not hostile anymore," he says. "Inmates say to me: 'You have put my mind off revenge, foolishness, or thinking how to escape from jail, or joining a gang,'" Garcia revealed.

Starting five months ago in April, the inmates have been performing live dances for hundreds of visitors. After the 2 hour monthly program (done on a Saturday), visitors can have their pictures taken with the prisoners and buy souvenir prison shirts.

"They no longer feel like lowly criminals," Garcia said with a smile. "Now, they feel like celebrity criminals."

Leo Suico, who's accused of mass murder, says while dancing, "we don't think of bad things." He admitted the experience has taught him "love".

That sentiment is echoed by other prisoners, including Wenjiell Resane, the trans-sexual star of the *Thriller*. Already in prison three years awaiting trial on drug charges, the former pizza chef said, "Before, we just get our food and go back to our cell, and if we don't have anything to do, we just talk. But it is different now. Every day, we are very busy preparing to dance for our upcoming shows. We are very proud of what we have done." Resane admitted that, "If I was not in prison, I would not be famous. I tried being a performer before, but no one took any notice. Now,



in jail, I have become a star."

The Michael Jackson role is performed by 36-year-old Crisanto Niere, who has been waiting five years for trial for drug dealing. A fan of Jackson's music since he was in a dance troupe in high school, Niere shared the benefits of the program. "Before the dancing, our problems were really heavy to bear. Dancing takes our minds away from our problems. Our bodies became more healthy. We are being rehabilitated in a good way."

He loves the dancing and laughs at his unlikely fame, but revealed that the greatest reward of the video is something he once thought would be forever beyond his reach. His son, Christopher, has only known him as a prison inmate.

"He used to be so ashamed of me," says Niere. "Now when he goes to school, he tells everyone

the dancer on the Internet is his father. It makes me proud that my son is proud of me."

What Byron Garcia has done for the Cebu jail inmates has been so remarkable, tens of thousands of people from around the world have given comments such as "You make us proud!"

For all these people who have encouraged and supported them, Garcia and his men have practiced their latest dance routine, the 1980s hit *Electric Dreams*. It is their thank you and acknowledgement to their Internet audience. "These people are behind prison bars," says Garcia. "But with the Internet, we all can be together in electric dreams."

Thank God for *Pinoys* like Byron Garcia who dared to dream that criminals can be rehabilitated through music and dance...and showed the world that dreams do come true! ■

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