

Jessica Cox Armless inspiration

by CYNTHIA DE CASTRO / AJPress



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit—the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, **Galing Pinoy** literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



THE room full of businessmen and corporate professionals listened intently to the speaker on stage. They all came to learn from the conference and that day, a petite, young Filipino-American was introducing herself. Jessica Cox admitted to the group, "I haven't any hands-on experience doing anything." Upon hearing that admission, most people would naturally wonder what business Jessica has in being a motivational speaker if she had no hands-on work experience. But instead, the whole room broke out in laughter at Jessica's play on words. You see, Jessica has no fingers, hands, elbows. She was born without arms and yet she has achieved far more than what people born with two arms have done in their lifetimes.

Jessica flies airplanes, drives cars, and otherwise lives a normal life using her feet as others use their hands. She holds the title of the first person without arms in the American Tae Kwon-Do Association to get a black belt and the first woman pilot in aviation history to fly with her feet. Jessica has been featured in the popular afternoon program *Ellen*, hosted by Ellen Degeneres, *Inside Edition*, and TV networks like CNN and Fox News. Videos showing her flying a plane, demonstrating martial arts stunts

and replays of her television and public speaking appearances are proliferating in YouTube and the Internet. Many of the videos and inspiring emails are posted by Filipinos who are proud of her extraordinary accomplishments. Now an in demand motivational speaker before various groups such as students, teachers, and corporate audiences, Jessica is changing lives as she digs deep into her experiences living armless in a two-handed world. She believes that by combining creativity, persistence, and fearlessness,

nothing is impossible. She shows how these three qualities helped her disarm the impossible. "Desire is 80 percent of success. Persistence means never give up. Never allow your fear to stand in the way of your opportunity," Cox said as she challenges people to turn their "impossible into accomplishment". The courageous young woman who inspires people to reach beyond their perceived limitations explains, "I was a hard worker my whole life and nothing has been handed to me."

Being armless has not limited Jessica from attaining her highest potential. Pushing her limitations aside and simply putting her best put forward, she is an amazing achiever who is touching many lives with her moving story of strength, courage, and sheer determination.

The second of three children, Jessica said her parents and her older brother Jason and younger sister Jackie have always been supportive of her. Her father, William Cox, is a retired music teacher; her mother, the former Inez Macabare, of Bobon, Samar is a nurse.

From birth, Jessica learned to use her feet to become her hands—feeding herself, playing with toys, combing her hair, writing with a pencil. By the time she was 3, Cox was enrolled in gymnastics classes. At 6 years old, she was swimming and attending dance class. By 10, she started taking taekwondo lessons to further develop her self-confidence and continued until she earned her black belt when she was in the seventh grade.

In her website, Jessica admitted that she overcame shyness as a little girl when she danced before an audience for the first time. "I used to feel shy about being different. I remember the first time I was on stage. It was my very first at our dance studio presentation," Jessica said. "I was so scared that I asked my dance teacher to put me in the back row. She told me there was no back row." To her great relief, the audience enthusiastically clapped and cheered. "I couldn't wait to go out for a second time and perform. I danced for 12 years after that," she added.

Jessica took up honors courses at Flowing Wells High School in Tucson, where she worked on the yearbook staff, sang in the choir, belonged to the National Honor Society, and graduated

with a 3.6 grade point average. In junior high, she received the Ron August Award for being an outstanding student, and in high school, she received the Crystal Apple Award, which is based on grades, community involvement and overcoming obstacles. She graduated with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Communication from the University of Arizona.

Much of Jessica's success can be attributed to her parents, especially her mother, Inez, whom she calls her greatest inspiration. "My mother left the Philippines and her entire family when she was 22 or 23 years old to become a nurse in the United States," says Cox who is as fiercely independent as her mother. "I think I inherited that sort of attitude," Jessica added.

Although she had also used artificial arms from time to time, Cox cast them aside when she was 13. "In a sense, they were dehumanizing to me. I was basically prevented from doing what comes naturally to me."

When first learning to drive, Jessica was encouraged to use special modifications in her car. But even after her car was modified, she decided to remove them and drive without the changes. She holds an unrestricted driver's license. She steers with her right foot on the wheel. Meanwhile, her left foot works the gas and brake pedals. With her right foot she also grabs, then buckles her seat belt, turns on the ignition, adjusts the window and air conditioning controls, uses the turn signal and flips down her sun visor.

Jessica earned her Sport Pilot certificate after training with Able Flight, a North Carolina flight training company that specializes in helping people with disabilities learn to fly.

"I highly encourage people with disabilities to consider flying. In my opinion, there is nothing more empowering than learning how

to fly. Because I feel it is such a great privilege, it would only be right for me to share the same joy with others. I would like to become a sport pilot instructor for people with disabilities and I have already started looking into the process."

In between going places as an inspirational speaker, Cox is also writing a book on her life. "I've been working on it for sometime. Its title is *Disarming Prejudice*," she said.

The awesome "armless inspiration" admits that she sometimes wonders why she was born without arms. "Then," she says, "I realize if I hadn't gone through what I've gone through, maybe I wouldn't be as strong as I am. If I have a weakness in one area, I have the strength in another. Even if someone seems perfect, I think there will always be a weakness. Mine's a physical weakness; someone else might have a psychological weakness. However, there is a level where we're all equal."

Jessica said she is thankful to God for allowing her to do the things she has accomplished. "It feels great being told by people that my life experiences have somehow inspired them. It's really cool, and it motivates me to keep going," she enthused. "I want people to think, 'Hey, if she can do so much without arms, then I can do so much more with my life.'" ■

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Wowed at 'Wowowee'

PAGE 1 ◀

successful world tour in various locations such as San Francisco, New York, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Reno, Chicago, Honolulu, Atlantic City, San Diego and Houston in the US, as well as Sydney, Australia; Winnipeg, Canada; Guam and Dubai.

The show has also paid tribute to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) on several occasions, proving that entertainment do not have to be devoid of social significance in these times. *Balikbayans* everywhere make sure to include watching the show live at ABS-CBN Studio 3 in their list of things to do when they go home for a visit in the country, as if their trip won't be complete without watching *Wowowee*.

This was exactly the case for the several *balikbayans* we encountered when we got the chance to watch the show live last March 11 courtesy of Ms. Cory Vidanes, Managing Director of ABS-CBN Entertainment and her executive secretary Weng Quijano. Rolando Constantino and his wife Elizabeth, who owns her own dental clinic at West Covina, California, are solid fans of the show. The couple, together with their son and Elizabeth's mother, was in the country for a month-long visit to attend reunions and spend much-missed time with their loved ones here. They were set to fly back to the US the following day but still made sure they got to watch the show live. In West Covina where they are all currently based, they watch the show everyday, with Rolando's mother-in-law even watching it thrice a day. Even though the area they reside in is not exactly lacking in *Pinoy* fixtures (they have Chowking, Red Ribbon and Jollibee), watching *Wowowee* makes them feel they never left home at all.

On the other hand, Tina Muñoz relates how her mother, Constantina, was overjoyed to learn that their reservations to watch the show live came through and they were scheduled to watch right on the day of Constantina's birthday. Originally from Surigao but now based in Las Vegas, Constantina watches the show thrice a day. "*Baliw na baliw siya kay Willie*," Tina shares, adding that *Wowowee* is the best source of entertainment for her mom, who is alone most of the time at the home she shares with Tina's sister.

For John though, *Wowowee* is more than entertainment. As a store manager for a GAP store in San Francisco, John is a hardworking man, thus he looks forward to relaxing in front of the tube each day after work. *Wowowee*, he says, not only entertains him, it also gives him happiness to see how a TV show can bring everyone together and provide an avenue (thru one of the show's well-loved segments) for people to express how much they love and care for each other, and as a result, many Kleenex boxes have been drained empty. John, who is on vacation with his cousins, comes home for a visit once every two years and vows to include *Wowowee* in his agenda every time.

Robert "Bob" Shroder, who is based in Los Angeles, didn't know what to expect when he decided to watch the show live but welcomed the chance immediately. Bob is the musical director for the first Filipino symphony orchestra outside of the Philippines, the Filipino-American Symphony Orchestra (FASO), which will have its much-anticipated gala concert night on May 16 at the Wilshire Theatre, with acclaimed performers Joey Albert and Stephanie Reese. Seated at the front row, the very American-looking Bob was approached by Willie at the start of the show where he got the chance to do a small plug for FASO and *Asian Journal's* recently launched *Balikbayan Magazine*, of which he is also indirectly a part of. Bob pointed to an article in the magazine about *Wowowee*, and Willie, obviously deceived by Bob's appearance, trying his darn best to speak in straight English, was shocked to learn that Bob could actually speak Tagalog well, and true to the comedic style that made him famous, quipped how he got "supposedly" upset by being made a fool.

Well, in a way, there has to be a level of foolishness of the good kind to fully enjoy a show like *Wowowee*, as the audience did on that day. In general, the audience does eat up everything served in the show and why not? The show makes for a thrilling ride as it comes in a full, awesome package that is quite hard to resist: a charming lead host (who is much revered by every single one in the audience), a bevy of beauties as co-hosts, talented dancers in sexy outfits (and it doesn't hurt have they have the looks the cameras love) and a load of amusing contests where participants are given a good chance to have better, improved lives and where spectators can use their best cheerleading chops (minus the pompoms of course). And whereas in other shows the audience has to be told to applause on cue, it is practically automatic for the *Wowowee* audience. The energy is undeniably that infectious, one will need a good dose of sedatives after the show in order to return to their normal selves. With the current global economic crisis, a show like *Wowowee* not only provides amusement for those affected by the tough times, it also gives them hope that things will get better.

Personally, I was never a fan of game portions—as I never considered myself lucky enough to be able to win (not to mention that I magically turn into an inanimate object in front of a TV camera and the spotlight). But the atmosphere at the *Wowowee* show was brimming with immense vivacity that if I had been asked, I would have participated with no second thoughts at all and would have probably shown the same cheerful vibe like any other contestant (and probably even more). After all, I have already mastered their language. The/show/was/truly/a/delight/to/watch. Until. Next. Time!!! (Cue applause.) ■