

Brothers with a conscience

by BOY ABUNDA / Philstar.com

UNKNOWN to many, two young Filipino men who grew up in the US have been quietly making a difference in the lives of many children in Parañaque.

The two are the Bañares siblings Brandon, 20 and EJ (Eriberto James), 17, both performing artists under the wing of Performing Artists Center (PAC), a school for aspiring singers and dancers in Los Angeles, California owned and operated by the famous Aldeguer sisters (Terry and Lally). Terry and Lally sparked a dance craze on local television and on the stage in the '70s and the '80s.

Brandon and EJ have studied and honed their dancing and singing talents at the PAC and have gone on to perform in various concerts, including those headlined by Nora Aunor and Imelda Papin.

In 2006, after a series of exhausting concerts before various Filipino communities in LA, Brandon and EJ decided to take a breather in their city of roots, Parañaque, where they have relatives but whom they have not seen for quite a while.

While reconnecting with old friends, they got their initial exposure to children, some barely of school age struggling with poverty. They also saw up close boys scavenging garbage, children with cleft palate, as well as differently-abled elderlies unable to walk and those who

get along with the aid of crutches or canes.

The two were touched by what they saw and decided to go back to the US where they organized in 2005 Pusong Pinoy USA, a humanitarian outreach project, to raise funds through a series of concerts. With the funds they raised, Brandon and EJ flew back to Parañaque in mid-2006. Their first outreach event was to distribute bags of groceries to some 600 children from the depressed areas of Barangay Tambo. This was arranged in close coordination with the office of Mayor Florencio Bernabe Jr. who was invited to grace the event and to assist in distributing the goodies.

The siblings, with the help and guidance of their aunt, Ms. Terry Aldeguer, have been periodically shuttling back and forth to Parañaque bringing with them equipment and gadgets including wheelchairs, prosthetic legs for children and adults, and braces for children with cerebral palsy. Brandon and EJ have also underwritten the construction of five open or uncovered basketball courts in various locations in BF Homes to keep the youngsters preoccupied and away from prohibited drugs and petty crimes.



Brandon and EJ Bañares help underprivileged children of Parañaque through Pusong Pinoy USA.

At present, the brothers are sponsoring children with inborn cleft palate for operation. The screening is being undertaken by the in-house doctors of Asian Center for Cosmetic Surgery (a clinic Terry runs at 229 Aguirre Ave. in BF Homes), who will also do the procedure.

Brandon and EJ have also decided to prolong their stay in Parañaque and have enrolled at the Southville International School in BF Homes to earn their nursing diplomas.

"We will continue to raise more funds for our Pusong Pinoy USA project by taking advantage of the school breaks to go back to the US to do more concerts," Brandon said

Mayor Bernabe is all praises for Brandon and EJ, "I wish we have more Brandons, EJs and Terry Aldeguers in our midst. They truly make a difference in the lives of many people." ■

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Jolina: I have to love myself first

by MARIDOL RAÑO / Philstar.com



MANILA—"I appreciate waking up feeling happy."

That's Jolina Magdangal talking as if she just walked out of hell hole and seeing the world in a different light. She won't be pressured into giving details. All Jolina says is she has moved on after she ended her eight-year relationship with Bebong Muñoz. And there's no turning back, ever.

"I'm not looking at a second chance," reveals Jolina. "Bebong and I don't communicate anymore. I've returned the pieces of jewelry—family heirlooms of his mom—which he gave me. I did it out of respect. This way, Bebong can give it to somebody who may be destined to have it."

Jolina speaks without a trace of rancor or regret. In fact, her smile can light up the rain-soaked skies of Manila these days.

The zero communication between her and her ex has made her move on for good. Her it-could-be-worse attitude also helps.

"I think of friends who could have gotten pregnant, what happened to Francis M, etc. Life is short. I won't mope around just because I've ended an eight-year relationship," she explains.

Jolina refuses to talk about the whys and wherefores of the break-up. It's enough that she wishes Bebong well.

"When we meet again," Jolina predicts, "We may already have our respective partners."

Truth is, that day may come sooner than soon for her. Jolina admits she's dating a 32-year-old guy from the music industry. Just who he is and what he does—composing, producing, arranging—she doesn't tell.

But her glowing eyes, her bright smile, and her comment, "He's handsome in my eyes," say it all. Least anyone jumps into conclusion though, Jolina adds that she and Prince Charming are not an official twosome for now. They haven't been dating

that long, for one.

Meantime, Jolina is making up for the time she spent away from her family. She enjoys taking them to Baguio at the spur of the moment just for the heck of it. Lately, Jolina got dad Jun's advice about her short kissing scene with Marvin Agustin. It's for GMA 7's new romantic comedy series *Adik sa 'Yo*, which premieres tonight and airs weeknights after *Totoy Bato*.

As the conservative Karen, Jolina can't express her feelings for Carlos (Marvin). But as fate would have it, they end up finding each other in an awkward place and situation.

"It's my first kissing scene in my entire 20 years in showbiz," admits Jolina.

She sought dear old dad out, and he put her fears to rest.

"It's about time," he told his nervous daughter.

And so, one rehearsal and one take after, the smack happened. Jolina was scared but Marvin didn't give her reason to worry.

"He never took advantage of the situation," reveals Jolina. She recounts how he put her at ease by cracking jokes and assuring his love team partner that everything will be fine.

Is this reason for Marvin-Jolina fans to hope their idols will also reconcile off-screen?

"I don't mix my personal and professional life," Jolina quickly replies.

Add to that the dictum "love yourself first" and you have a whole new Jolina before you. She values herself more, appreciates her family better. Yes, she fell. But Jolina is up on her feet again, ready to love and be loved. Now that she has dealt with the ghosts of her past, Jolina is ready to face new challenges—romantic and otherwise—again.

After everything she's been through, it's about time. ■

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