

U.P. Close and Personal

With intimate knowledge and obvious fondness, UP professor and newspaper columnist RANDY DAVID writes about his colorful university. Images by DAN CERCADO

HERE'S UNUSUAL energy at the University of the Philippines these days. The Philippines' premier state university – the alma mater of many of the nation's presidents, jurists, artists, scientists, top lawyers and doctors, politicians and revolutionaries – celebrates its centennial this year.

Alumni from all over the world come home for class reunions and take their families on a sentimental tour of the university's sprawling acacia-lined campus in Quezon City. They revisit the classrooms which had been mute witnesses to their frustrations and triumphs as students, and bask in the thought that they survived it all.

On Sundays, the oval is closed to vehicular traffic, and the campus is transformed into Metro Manila's coolest park. Strollers, joggers, birdwatchers, bikers, and lovers take over this oasis on this day. Families spread mats around the lagoon and unpack their breakfast. In the afternoon, as the sun begins its descent, all activity moves toward the Sunken Garden which becomes an open arena for outdoor sports.

The UP is blessed with one of the most beautiful campuses in the academic world. Because of this, it is easy to think of it as a republic of the mind set apart from the secular city. Most universities in the old world are situated in the heart of the city, making it difficult to tell where the school begins and where it ends.

Indeed, the real character of a university is found not in the buildings that mark its boundaries but in its impact on the world outside its walls. Thus, when we think of the world's great universities, we think of those centers of learning that have shaped not only the intellectual life, but also the political and economic face of their societies. We think of Oxford and Cambridge in Britain, of Harvard, Stanford and Berkeley in the United States, of the Sorbonne in France, of the universities of Bonn, Berlin, Leipzig, and Heidelberg in Germany, and of Moscow University in Russia. In such settings, the university is looked upon as the steward of a great civilization.

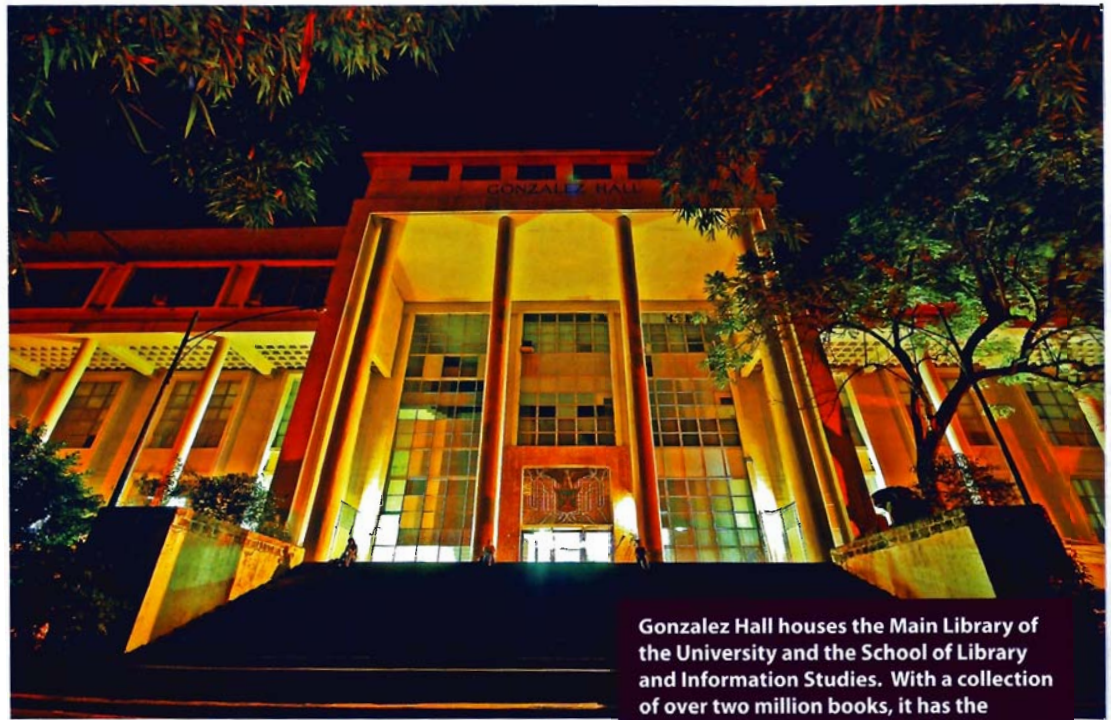


VEHICLE FREE ON SUNDAYS is UP's academic oval where a group of joggers are enjoying a late afternoon weekday run. A stroll along this 2.2-kilometer oval will give you a glimpse of most of the historic landmark structures of the sprawling UP Diliman campus such as its huge library building and the university's famous symbol, the statue of the Oblation in front of the administration building.



THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT

The liberal academic atmosphere of UP has produced graduates with varying ideologies ranging from leftist Jose Ma. Sison (above photo) who graduated in 1959 and founded the Communist Party of the Philippines (CCP) in 1968 to the late strongman, former President Ferdinand Marcos (photo below) who graduated cum laude with a law degree in 1939 and declared martial law in 1972 during his term as Philippine President. What these two contrasting political figures shared in common was a life marked with exile. Marcos died in exile in Hawaii while Sison, although still living in the Netherlands, has been tagged in 2002 as a "person supporting terrorism" by the US and the European Union.



Gonzalez Hall houses the Main Library of the University and the School of Library and Information Studies. With a collection of over two million books, it has the largest collection of medical and science materials in the country.

But in Asia we think of the schools that accompanied the birth of the region's modern nation-states – the universities of Tokyo and Kyoto in Japan, Peking University in China, the University of Delhi in India, the University of Indonesia, the University of Malaya, the National University of Singapore, Chulalongkorn and Thammasat in Thailand, and the University of the Philippines. Here the university functions not so much as the custodian of a culture, but as the creator of a new way of life, the wellspring of modernity, a shield against everything that oppresses a people – foreign rule, poverty, and ignorance.

Established by the Americans in 1908, UP was designed to produce a generation of Filipino professionals and civil servants who could eventually take over the higher positions in the colonial bureaucracy. It was built to resemble in every way an American university. Its colleges and departments were modeled after those of the major US universities. Even the design of its buildings and campus closely mimicked the layout of the big American university. And, of course, UP's early presidents were American.

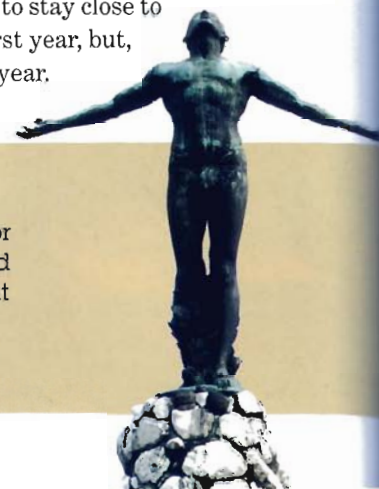
Until the late Sixties, UP was known as Asia's most modern university. It attracted not only the brightest of its own young people but also those from its neighbors. But, the lingering US connection made the nationalists wary of the institution's possible misuse as a node of American influence in postcolonial Asia.

I was 15 when I entered UP in 1961, and little did I expect that I would be spending the rest of my life here as a professor. My parents sent me to UP to get a law degree, which I found strange because my father was not a UP alumnus. This is where leaders are trained, he told me, by way of explaining why he was sending me to a school that was notorious for the radical activism of its students, the agnosticism of its faculty, and the violence of its student fraternities.

When I arrived, a number of professors were being investigated for their communist leanings. The year before, officers of the student council were expelled for waging a series of protest actions.

I lived in a dormitory that was the home of the university's oldest fraternities. I shared a room with three upperclassmen: an Upsilonian, a Sigma Rhoan, and an UPSCAN. The latter stands for UP Student Catholic Action. My mother, a pious woman, advised me to stay close to my Catholic roommate. To allay her fears, I joined UPSCA on my first year, but, without telling her, I joined the Alpha Sigma fraternity on my third year.

✿ The university's famous symbol, the Oblation, was created by UP alumnus and National Artist for the Visual Arts, Guillermo Tolentino. It is a sculpture of a naked man with arms outstretched, head held high, eyes closed, and lips parted murmuring a prayer. It was for Tolentino, a symbol of offering oneself to the country. The base, which consists of big and small rocks, represents the islands of the Philippine archipelago, while the plant around it depicts the patriotism that continually grows everywhere. The model for this sculpture is allegedly an actor, Fernando Poe, Sr. whose son, Fernando, Jr. became a famous action movie star who failed in his presidential bid in 2004.

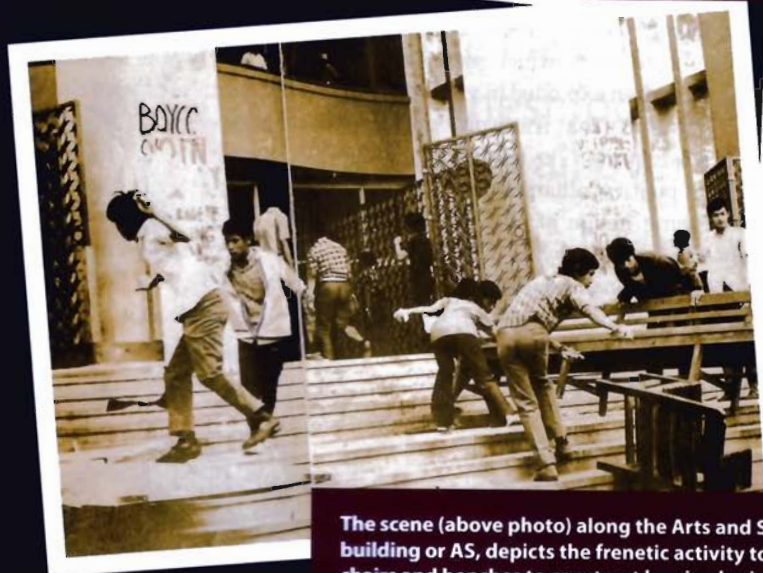
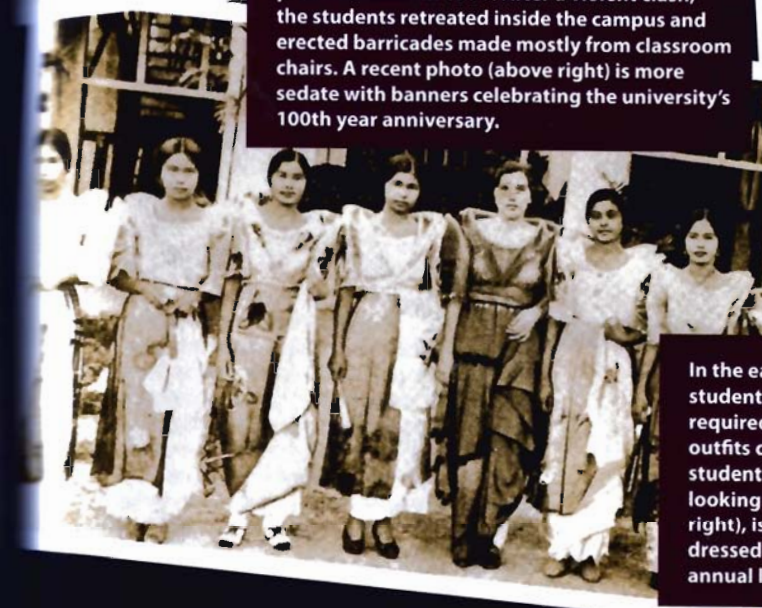




A contrast of images. Above photo captured the tense stand off between riot policemen and student demonstrators who protested oil price increases in 1971. After a violent clash, the students retreated inside the campus and erected barricades made mostly from classroom chairs. A recent photo (above right) is more sedate with banners celebrating the university's 100th year anniversary.



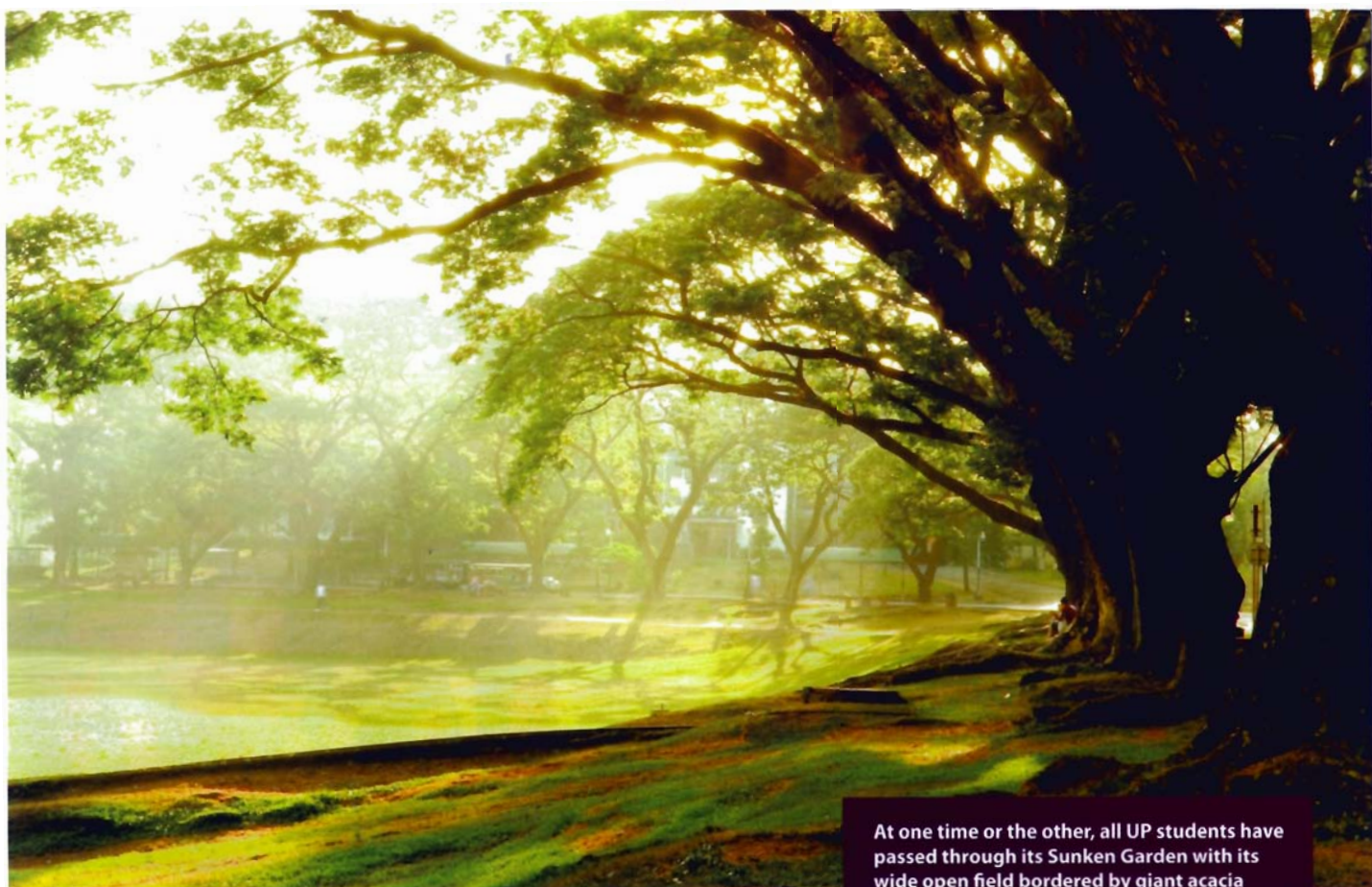
In the early 1900s, female students (left photo) were required to wear these formal outfits called *ternos* while today's students, like this winsome looking young woman (above right), is more comfortably dressed for the university's annual lantern parade.



The scene (above photo) along the Arts and Science building or AS, depicts the frenetic activity to haul chairs and benches to construct barricades in 1971 against the expected assault of riot policemen who eventually took control of the campus after two days of violent clashes. The steps of the AS building (right photo) remains a favorite campus spot.



✿ Another university landmark is the 130-foot Carillon tower with 46 bells designed by UP alumnus and National Artist for Architecture, Juan Nakpil. It was the first of its kind in Southeast Asia and is the only one in the Philippines that is played using a clavier (wooden keyboard). The UP Alumni Association has launched a restoration project, and the Restoration Committee chairman is former Philippine Army Chief Jimmy Delos Santos. Donors may visit its website: www.upcarillon.org.



At one time or the other, all UP students have passed through its Sunken Garden with its wide open field bordered by giant acacia trees. Some of these footprints have marched to national prominence. As it marks its 100th year, UP has produced a good number of the best and brightest in the land – 7 out of 14 Philippine Presidents, 6 Vice-Presidents out of 14, 13 Chief Justices of the Supreme Court, 30 out of 31 National Scientists, and 36 out of 50 National Artists.



“MR. UNITED NATIONS”

is the accolade given by no less than former UN Secretary Kurt Waldheim in 1980 to the late Carlos P. Romulo for his valuable service to the United Nations. Although diminutive in height, his world stature and accomplishments were towering. Romulo, a UP alumnus, is the first Asian to become the president of the UN General Assembly in 1949. He was a highly decorated diplomat, writer and soldier. He is the only Filipino journalist to have won the Pulitzer Prize in Correspondence in 1942 and is a Philippine National Artist for Literature. He served eight Philippine Presidents in various diplomatic positions and was also a UP President from 1962-1968.

The Greek-letter fraternities of UP entered the public mind because of two things. The first is the physical hazing of applicants, which sometimes ended in tragedy. The second is the rivalry between fraternities that often exploded in violent rumbles. These rumbles have claimed the lives of not a few victims. It is a pity that fraternity violence overshadows the positive functions these organizations play in student life. The ties that bind fratmen remain strong after they graduate, and become the basis of political alliances and business partnerships later in life.

But the most enduring image of the UP student is that of the fearless socially-engaged intellectual. It is not hard to see why. This is the school that produced the nationalist intellectual Renato Constantino, the nationalist historian Teodoro Agoncillo, the radical Lava brothers of the old Communist Party, the Maoist poet Jose Ma. Sison who formed the new Communist Party, and the Tausug rebel Nur Misuari who founded the Moro National Liberation Front. Countless UP students have given their lives to the struggle for freedom and a just society.

The bulk of UP's funds come from the public coffers. Every year the country's legislators ask why the government should continue allocating a budget to an institution that specializes in the formation of its bitterest critics. It is a ritual; they keep quiet as soon as they are reminded that this is also the school that produced presidents and Supreme Court justices, as well as great statesmen like them. ■



✿ UP Diliman is so large that students ride passenger jeepneys that travel around the campus. They are aptly called “UP *Ikot* (go around).”