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SUNDAY INQUIRER / COLUMNS



Pinoy Connection : Giving It All Up for Love and Adventure-Forever

First posted 11:25am (Mla time) Aug 28, 2005
By Alya B. Honasan
Inquirer News Service

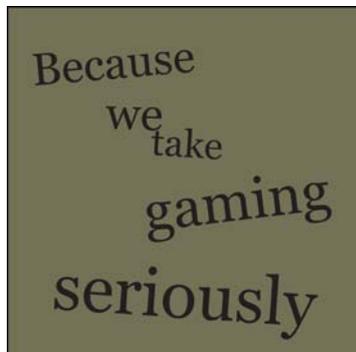
Editor's Note: Published on page Q8 of the August 28, 2005 issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer

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I FIRST met my friend Stella Chiu when we were in college at the Ateneo de Manila, and our respective gangs shared the same hangout in Colayco Hall. I was a psychology major, and she was a small, gregarious but very Pinoy-thinking Chinese girl taking up social science, who used to wear a Mao hat to school with scruffy jeans. But we only became good friends after graduation, when we worked together in an advertising agency en route to what we really wanted to do in life. I went on to write for a living; she became a producer of documentaries and books, eventually zooming in on the environment as her subject of choice and expertise—which, in turn would lead her to the love of her life, and the extraordinary life she now leads.

Today, Stella lives in Cairns, Australia, with her husband, award-winning German wildlife photographer Jürgen "Yogi" Freund. Together,

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the two comb the vast expanse of the Australian continent and nearby exotic spots, doing photo stories for some of world's leading wildlife and underwater magazines. One day, they're climbing cliffs and trekking forests in Exmouth in Western Australia, side trips on the way to shooting the whale sharks of Ningaloo Reef.

On another day, they're diving the incredible underwater world of Papua New Guinea, where a dive site has even been named in Yogi's honor. For the nature lover, it is a dream life of adventure, close encounters with exquisite creatures of land and sea, and reveling in the world's wide open spaces. And for Stella, it's been a long road from her Chinoy middle-class upbringing to this, a life and a passion shared with the soulmate she recognized almost instantly.

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Integrity earned

Stella Marie Fung Chiu Freund was born in Manila in 1965, the youngest of five children. Her father died when Stella was only 11, and it would take many years—and a memorable psychology class hypnosis session with none other than Fr. Jaime Bulatao, SJ—for Stella to come to terms with her feelings of being left behind by her father at a young age.

"I thought my happy world had ended when my dad died suddenly one horrible Sunday afternoon," Stella recalls. "My mom, who didn't even finish elementary, had to start working to raise five kids, because she realized there was no money."

Not only did Pacita Chiu lose a husband; she had to suffer having her husband's business and inheritance stolen by his relatives. "At a young age, I wanted to study law so I could sue the hell out of my father's siblings," Stella recalls. "But eventually, I learned to let go. It was only money. Money can be earned, but not integrity."

It was not an easy life, as Tita Pacita worked hard to support her children and send them to the best schools. "She wanted all five of us to go to college in Ateneo, because my dad studied there," Stella says. "She borrowed money from her eldest brother and then worked her butt off to pay her debts. She would buy and sell anything—life insurance, memorial plans, Saladmaster pots and pans, Rainbow vacuum cleaners, asado. She's my superwoman, and I love her to bits."

The legendary homemade asado was a hit among Stella's friends, and I still remember how it tastes. I also recall once mentioning that I needed a small fire extinguisher for my home, and voila—Tita Pacita produced one for me to buy. Still, it was a good childhood spent growing up in a compound with huge mango trees to climb. Stella herself would straddle Chinese traditions and beliefs and the worlds of her many Pinoy friends. She took all the ribbing in stride, about her being Intsik and other idiosyncrasies, such as her legendary clumsy moments and a well-known inability to have a drink without passing out.

During our Blue Roast, the Ateneo's equivalent of a batch graduation party, Stella and her gang were tasked with getting us emcees drunk—until she ended up crawling up the stage stairs herself, drink in hand.

After working as an advertising account executive and producer for seven years, she began free-lancing, a move that dramatically expanded her world. She produced documentaries on such topics as poverty alleviation for the Ramos administration and the peace process for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). "I enjoyed how I could sink my teeth into a project. The experience always made me richer in spirit. It made me see humanity from all walks of life."

A video on the Agusan Marsh showed her nature and wildlife "that I never imagined we had in the Philippines—purple herons, cormorants, crocodiles. Documentary making has brought me to many places, and I've met some amazing people in the process."

Dream documentaries

Working obsessively, Stella whipped together a first-rate cast and crew on a limited budget for Bookmark and Ateneo de Manila's acclaimed documentary on "Jose Rizal: Ang Buhay Ng Isang Bayani," "my first and last historical documentary," where she met then Bookmark head honcho and now World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Philippines president Lory Tan, the executive producer of the project, with whom she would make several dream documentaries.

We traveled to the Philippines' most pristine natural hotspots for Bookmark's "Quiet Places: Ecotourism in the Philippines" in 1998, for which I wrote the script, and for which she had to learn to scuba-dive. In 1999, after five years of immersion among the T'boli of Lake Sebu, Cotabato, she produced "Dreamweavers," a documentary with an accompanying coffee table book. She later became the local fixer and production manager for several locally-shot features of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), such as "State of the Planet" and "The Last Surrender: The Lt. Onoda Story."

It was in 1999 that she met her future husband. Yogi Freund was already a widely published nature photographer from Dortmund, Germany. He was a mechanical engineer and industrial photographer before he answered "the call of the sea" and became a full-time freelance marine photographer in 1995. He also did a lot of work for WWF, and had just won a prestigious World Press Photo Award for Photojournalism for his report on the whale shark hunters of Pamilacan in Bohol.

"In 1999, at age 34, I had remained single and had never had a boyfriend," Stella says. "I point the accusing finger at work and meeting no one significant enough to lose sleep over." Then she was hired by an ad agency to produce TV commercials for a PLDT campaign called Wildlife Wonders. She had to buy a Jürgen Freund photograph of a whale shark with a diver, and so she met with the man one day in March at the WWF office in Quezon City.

"When I met him, I knew he was the one. We had meals together. He won a World Press Award. He left for Germany. I was heartbroken." They exchanged feverish e-mail and phone calls for four months and fell deeply in love through letters. Yogi relocated to Manila in December of 1999, and they were married in Germany in 2000.

Low-maintenance person

Later on, after the couple worked on the book "Sulu-Sulawesi Seas" for WWF, Stella had to accept that Manila was not an ideal home base for her husband. "Yogi was slowly going nuts in Manila, what with the poverty and the mess. He often told me, 'I'm a wildlife photographer. I need to photograph wildlife.'" He broached the subject of moving to Australia on the second year of the marriage, but Stella wouldn't have it, until she went with him on a trip to the Great Barrier Reef for a story for a German dive magazine, and realized that this huge continent was indeed Yogi's idea of paradise. They settled in Australia in June 2003. "Leaving friends and family in Manila was the hardest part about

relocating to Oz," she says. "The Pinoy humor and the laughter and the swardspeak of my gay friends, I miss a lot. The warm waters while diving, I miss a lot. Lechon manok, I miss like crazy! But it's great living here. We are surrounded by nature, reef and rainforest." The Freunds live five minutes from the beach in Yorkey's Knob in Cairns, with the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree National Park minutes away. "Pelicans walk about in the early mornings, and there are flying foxes roosting in the backyard," Stella recounts.

She has no regrets giving up large-scale production work—"I did my best, and it was time to move on"—and has her hands full organizing materials and assignments and helping produce Yogi's stories. Happily, she calls herself "a low maintenance person," so living a simple life is easy. She hardly has a reason to dress up and hasn't had a massage or a facial in years, but when I visited her on a dive trip last July, she and Yogi had just returned from a three-month, 20,000-kilometer road trip through Australia. They dove, swam, climbed and literally lived in their van, Carla. "It was amazing," she says.

Stella still dreams of producing another book or two with Yogi someday, and maybe having a gallery of their own to showcase Yogi's stunning work.

With their lifestyle, children do not figure in the equation, a decision they arrived at mutually. But there will always be things to do and places to go. "We mainly produce photos for European magazines and to send to Yogi's photo libraries in different parts of the world. And that's a lot of work for me and him to do, forever."

And for Stella, who gave up her former life to find a new one, in a great big country beside the person she loves most in all the world, forever means no looking back.

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