

**GLOBAL FILIPINO:**

Cheche Lázaro

2014 Marshall McLuhan Fellow

BY EARL VON TAPIA

Philippine Canadian Inquirer

CHECHE LÁZARO is the 2014 Marshall McLuhan Fellow - Philippines. Established in 1997 between the McLuhan Program at the University of Toronto and the Embassy of Canada in the Philippines, the Marshall McLuhan Fellowship has been awarded yearly to a recipient from the Philippines working in the media that embodies outstanding qualities in the field of investigative journalism.

The fellowship entails a media tour of several Canadian cities to meet with other media professionals and students, establish contacts, and impart knowledge and information. This is followed by a series of workshops back in the Philippines to help teach and spread the knowledge and experience gained from the tour.

Cheche is most certainly a worthy recipient of this fellowship. After obtaining her Master's degree in Radio-Television in 1968 from the University of Michigan in the US, Cheche went back to the Philippines. Unable to get a job in journalism because of the martial law imposed at the time, she became a professor of Broadcast Journalism at the University of the Philippines for around 20 years, where she was able to teach and influence a generation of Philippine journalists.

After the martial law was lifted, she started working as a reporter for the ABS-CBN network. She left that job in 1988 to join with other journalists to create her signature company, Probe Productions. Through Probe Productions, she produced several documentary programs such as The Probe Team, I-Witness, and Cheche Lázaro Presents. Along the way Cheche and the Probe Team won a slew of awards and became recognized as an exceptional beacon of Philippine journalism and investigative reporting.

The Philippine Canadian Inquirer sat down with Cheche as she was in Vancouver during her McLuhan Fellowship



Cheche Lázaro.

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tour to talk about her work with Probe Productions, her thoughts on journalism, and what life is like now after putting in decades of work towards the craft.

Probe Productions

"When we started Probe in the early 80s, the Philippines in terms of the television scenery was focused very much on

the talk show, because we were under martial law. And so most of the programs then were focused on issues that were only being discussed on talk shows, or in newspapers like The Inquirer. But there was no television show that was talking about issues in the longer format (over an hour) so we decided to develop an investigative news magazine, in the maga-

zine format," she said.

The Probe team was a group of six reporters, with three reporters every week doing a story. They looked at issues in the Philippines: child trafficking in Pagsangan, the comfort women of World War II, fake passports, dynamite fishing. The start of Probe also occurred during the growing phenomenon of Overseas Foreign Workers leaving

the Philippines to seek jobs elsewhere. Many of these OFWs settled in Europe, so the Probe team followed them to Vienna, Italy, the Greek Islands, and all over Europe. It started the Probe team's foray into investigating events around the world.

"In the beginning of course it was difficult because not too many people were used to the format, but after a while Probe became synonymous with the investigative format. That's what brought us to the forefront of Philippine televisions," she said.

But it wasn't the stories or the investigations or the travel that made Cheche the most proud about Probe. For her, it was the hundreds of people that had gone through and worked with her at Probe.

"Many people refer to [Probe] as bootcamp. Many people call it a training ground, but what I'm most proud of is that they were all good. Everybody that passed through there. I think it was the influence of the people that they were working with, who were also equally hard working, because if you were not hard working you would not last on the team. It was very demanding," she said.

"They were hard working, they were interested, they were motivated, certainly not by salary, certainly not by the perks because there was none to speak of. The only perk that we could offer was the opportunity to work together with good people, and I think when I say good people I think I mean that quite sincerely because everyone was good," she said. An extended stint at Probe on your resume, she added, was a solid ticket to any other media organization you wanted to work for in the future.

Aside from the people, Cheche was proud of the integrity with which The Probe Team conducted itself on the job. She described several stories where interview subjects would quietly try and slip her and the team envelopes of cash after interviews, only to be rebuffed. Any acceptance of cash for interviews by a team member would be met with an immediate dismissal from Probe.

The most high-profile controversy The Probe Team found itself involved a segment produced by Probe that was not aired by its TV network, GMA. The network claimed that the Probe team's documentation and research was incomplete, but Probe fired back with cries of censorship. The segment in question involved a government official close to then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Probe's contract with GMA was terminated, and they moved to ABC network.

"To this day I can say quite honestly that I can sleep honestly at night knowing that what I did was correct. Now in other people's views it may have not been correct, it may not have been the wisest thing to do, but in my view I can honestly say that I made the right decision," she said.

Journalism

"If I can make the interviewee speak from the heart, make them not give me dried cookie-cutter answers, if I can make them pause during the interview to think... you know if the person is talking from the heart

or is talking from a memorized script or spiel that he has been repeating quite often," said Cheche, when asked what made for a successful interview.

"Personally, I like interviewing regular people, I like interviewing children, I like interviewing people who have never been interviewed before, because they have no preconceived notions about how they should answer," she said.

She described how she trained her crews to keep cameras rolling at all times. When they first started with Probe, during breaks in an interview, the camera crews would also stop filming so they could take a break. But Cheche said that the breaks are when the real reactions come out: crying, sobbing, nervousness. The real reaction from the subject helped to drive out a real reaction from the audience.

The journalism of today has

evolved from the time of Probe in its heyday. According to Cheche, today's journalism is more focused on the journalist than the story they are reporting on.

"Sometimes I find journalists today doing stories about themselves, that the focus is on the journey of the journalist as opposed to the story, and sometimes we can get lost in that,"

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she said.

"If I'm doing a story on child pornography, it's my reaction to child pornography, why I don't like child pornography, it's about me. It's not about the issue of child pornography, or child trafficking, or women's abuse, that kind of thing... sometimes we tend to overdo

it, because we tend to be too involved in ourselves, and we forget the story," she added.

Life After Work

Cheche left Probe Productions in 2010, and today she is "technically retired". Probe still exists today, but it's currently in a "hibernation" mode where it's not doing anything at the moment. Still, for 23 years Probe's shows ran every week, all year long: an impressive track record.

"We did [Probe] for 23 years every week, so I think I paid my dues already, doing it every week. So if there are opportunities to do something once in a pink moon, I might do it. But my energy levels are no longer that high. But my enthusiasm, my love for the craft is still there, just like my eyesight, a little dimmed but still there," she said.

Someone has asked her to produce a series of promotional

(and non-investigative) shows about Mexico, so that is possibly in her future. Cheche is also known for her scrapbooking, where she would make a scrapbook for every trip she took. But she said she has fallen behind. And these days, she is enjoying being a grandmother to her grandson who lives in the US.

It's amazing to see someone who worked so hard for so long in journalism still speak about it with the passion that Cheche does today.

"I don't think you ever really lose it [the passion for journalism]. I always say it's a bug that never leaves. And you know those people, all of those people that were with Probe, 'I'm going to resign, I'm going to do something else'... and I said 'I understand now but I guarantee you in six months you will be back in media,' and true enough everybody that has left is back in media and doing very well, because they were very good," she said.

"You will do it because you love it. It's a passion. And you keep on going back to your passion." ■

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