

The News UpFront: (TOP STORY) as of Wednesday, August 24, 2011

A long-time colleague in Manila failed to overcome what he had called the "toughest battle" of his life. Raul Beltran, columnist, reporter and former foreign correspondent, has succumbed to lung cancer. Raul knew his fate and accepted it. A month earlier, in July, he wrote in his diary about his struggles in the Lung Center of the Philippines where he was confined for 61 days. When the die is cast, he had asked to be brought to his hometown in Nasugbu, Batangas, "to experience a real whiff of fresh air and warmth of sunshine".

PREROGATIVE Column

Journalist Raul Beltran Loses His 'Toughest Battle'

Written by

Wednesday, 24 August 2011 20:45 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 August 2011 21:07

By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ

Member, Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA) and National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada (NEPMCC)

TORONTO - A colleague in Toronto, Tenny Soriano, sent a brief e-mail hours ago informing me that our common friend in Manila, Raul Beltran, has succumbed to lung cancer.

I am shocked by the news, unbelieving that it would happen so fast so soon to one who had dared death itself.

Raul was one of the few journalists I respected. Our competing professional lives ran parallel, he as a correspondent for *Kyodo News Agency*, and I as correspondent for *Asahi Shimbun*, during the early years of the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos.

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Our news coverage did not get in the way of friendship. Though work was important, friendship took precedence.

We confided and shared some scoops but the sharing was more pronounced in the endless bottles of San Miguel beer starting from the National Press Club in Intramuros to the many watering holes in Ermita and Malate districts.

Talking over beer was a good way to unload information, some critical, others trivial, some personal, others off-the-record, some confidential, others top secret, some not for attribution. They're told in the strictest confidence and only to close and trusted friends.

One attribute that Raul had was his exceptional ability to get into the good graces of news sources. He cultivated friendships in places he covered, friendships that proved to be helpful in getting insights and context in a story.

When the "People Power" revolution broke out in February 1986, Raul was stringing for several foreign-media entities which put up their Asian bureaus in Manila, at the same time maintaining his professional ties with the local press.

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I knew because I relied on him for a good number of confirmations for my own enterprise stories after I left *Asahi Shimbun* to become chief correspondent for *Deutsche Presse Agentur*.

His extensive network of sources in high places was much too valuable in reporting movements, for example, in the defense department where the revolution took shape with then Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile and General Fidel Ramos. Raul had the inside dope.

Raul never had to worry about what story to write next; he had all the information leaked to him. It was his many contacts that made him an invaluable asset to the news entities he worked with.

A busy day meant a minimum of five stories for the wires from traditional news sources like the presidential palace, the military, foreign-affairs department, the financial institutions and the private sector.

Not surprising that soon after these stories are wired to the main editorial desk, journalists would trek to the Press Club to unwind. Raul and I had acquired the habit ourselves. Bottle after

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bottle of beer would flow until the better part of us took a backseat.

Even during that time, Raul was a heavy smoker. Cigarettes and beer are the inseparable vices that afflict many journalists. And the ones that beat them all are women.

Raul would joke about many women but usually in terms that enhanced friendships. His personal life was kept hidden.

The last time I saw him was in San Diego about three years ago when he visited his friends and townmates from Nasugbu, Batangas. When I came over to the place in Imperial Beach just before noon, he was half-awake from the binge drinking the night before.

We managed to talk for the rest of the day, reminiscing the times when our professional lives intersected with contemporary history of the Philippines, from the time of Marcos onwards, and in my case, up until Fidel Ramos was on his second year as President.

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It stopped there because I moved to San Diego. Even then, Raul and I stayed in touch. In the past three months I wondered why his e-mails were suddenly gone.

Now I know. He was writing his diary while he was fighting what he called his "toughest battle". It was his last piece. # # #

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