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First Quarter Storm (Philippines): Dear Sonny - Letter to Pastor R. Mesina, Jr. on the 50th Anniversary of his death

Monday 6 June 2022, by [SANTOS Soliman, Jr.](#), [Sonny's Friends](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2021).

Letter to Pastor R. Mesina, Jr. on the 50th Anniversary of his 4 February 1971 death from his batchmates of *Pisay Dos*, PSHS Class 1965-1970, 6 February 2021

DEAR SONNY,

Kumusta, ka-batch? It's been a long 50 years since we last saw you, laid to rest after your martyrdom that sparked the "Diliman Commune" — whose 50th anniversary is also being commemorated at UP beloved, kicked off by a *Barikada Singkwenta* cultural performance which also paid tribute to you. I am sure you never imagined it would come to this, no less than, well, your immortalization in history.

We, your PSHS 1965-70 batchmates — by the way, we now call ourselves *Pisay Dos* - have long, 50 years for those of us who are still around, kept your memory in our hearts. Every time we remember those of us who have gone ahead - and there are 12 of them now, all guys - you are of course always first in the list.

Your death is particularly etched in memory because it was so shocking and painful, because you were so suddenly plucked from family, friends and classmates while in the flower of your youthful innocence at age 17, a college freshman at UP. So shocking and painful, but you must know, also so awakening and even inspiring to many others, from within and outside our batch, to make them then join the student activist movement.

Rolando "Dodoy" Soncuya, a UP sophomore then — who knelt beside you, got his handkerchief and tried to stop the bleeding from your forehead hit by a .22 caliber bullet from a rifle fired by the mad Math Professor Inocentes Campos at the activists manning the barricades on University Avenue until a vehicle arrived to take you to the Infirmary on 1 February 1971 - finally overcame some trauma he had and wrote publicly about your death for the UP Alumni grand homecoming in 2015. This was what he said at the end, perhaps speaking also for some of our generation: "We are now in the departure area of our lives. Looking back to the early seventies, we have the luxury to reminisce. I have no regrets except for some things that I should have done more for our country, and all this was triggered by the death of my unexpected hero." Yes, you were not just a victim, not just a martyr, but a hero.

And you were a hero also in other kinder and gentler ways while in Pisay. Our batchmate Loida Pangilinan (now Dra. Constantino) fondly remembers you as "a very nice and close seat mate," at a time when she and other young girls and boys were among "all the lonely people" in our batch at Pisay while other batchmates seemed to have most of the fun and the fame. We imagine that Loida

must have been singing in her head then, “Sonny, you smiled at me and really eased the pain.”

Our batchmate Carmen Amores has her most vivid memory of your steel wool hair as you came fresh out of the sea during a biology field trip to gather specimens at Matabungkay beach. You were a fashion plate, impeccably dressed, according to your *bihis* menu for the week. Maybe it was one of your ways in following the quartet idols of our generation — John, Paul, George and Ringo — though for some of us it was becoming Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao.

The late Mario Taguiwalo of the PSHS first batch, a UP sophomore and Chairman of the UP-SDK chapter then, had written about you shortly after your death on 4 February 1971, saying “Sonny was not an activist nor a revolutionary, but he tried.” With due respect to my idol Mario and to you, I believe that you had already crossed the threshold to activism. Your defining activist moment was on that fateful tragic day when you had just boycotted your classes in the AS (Palma Hall) Third Pavilion, then listened to a teach-in at the AS steps, marched with the gathered students to University Avenue, and joined the anti-oil price hike and pro-jeepney strike barricades there. But your getting shot there was an aberration, something like a historical accident that however somehow changes the course of history. I can agree though with Mario that “We cannot find the reason for [your] death in your life, we have to find it in [your, our] society.”

At that activist defining moment of yours, you were then already a much-needed “belated buddy” to our batchmate Vince Ragay, who says you “flattered [him]with [your] warm friendship, from senior-year up to the very moment [he] pleaded with [you] as [you two] retreated from the UP police - [he told you] *halika manood na lang tayo ng sine!* — minutes before [you] got shot at the barricades. (But [his] brave pal [you] had a duty to fulfill while [he admittedly] fled in fear.)”

Notwithstanding your perhaps accidental but definitely indelible contribution to history, for UP and for the country, we would still much rather have it that you survived those “days of disquiet, and nights of rage.” We would still much rather have you grow to your full potential as a person, as a well-dressed professional in your chosen field of work, as a citizen contributing to nation-building in big or small ways, as a loving husband, father and grandfather, like many of us. We would still much rather have your happy-go-lucky company at our increasingly frequent reunions where we would “come together... here, there and everywhere,” but now only virtually via zoom during this pandemic. We miss you very much.

Certainly not as much as your family misses you. I personally cannot forget the emotional anguish expressed unabashedly by your father (from whom you took your looks), am not sure now whether this was at the Veterans Memorial Hospital, at your wake or at your funeral. This emotional anguish of your parents as well as of other parents of our generation, who lost their activist, rebel and for that matter soldier sons and daughters to early violent deaths in the context of societal conflict, should not be visited on still another, the present, generation of parents and their children, if it can be helped.

The flower of our youth, the hope of our motherland, the best sons and daughters of our people, especially science scholars, are needed by this country alive rather than dead. It behooves those wielding the ruling power and those who claim to be the vanguard of profound social change, as well as all those concerned citizens caught in between these clashing forces, to seek a much less bloody way to achieve that needed change which has not yet come and to end the related armed conflict. Our *Pisay Dos* generation who unintendedly or unavoidably caused much worry to our parents during our time can perhaps still do something to make up for this, in our own small way, along this line, to avoid a vicious cycle for the present generation of parents and children. We owe this to you Sonny, and to our rebel dead batchmates Lazzie Silva, Dopits Alcances and Alex Belone, so that you all would not have died in vain.

Let me end this batch letter to you on the 50th anniversary of your passing by saying, or rather singing, "Sonny, one so true, [we] love you."

FOR PISAY DOS

Soli Santos

Appendix: Pastor R. Mesina

Pastor "Sonny" Mesina was the youngest in a brood of six. He was born in Davao where his father was then a government building official. When Sonny was five, the family moved to Pasay, and here Sonny studied at the Jose Rizal Elementary School where his mother taught music and home economics.

He liked to do scientific experiments, and in 1966, won a scholarship for admission to the Philippine Science High School (PSHS). Students in this school were chosen through exacting examinations. Sonny was among PSHS's second batch of graduates.

The young Sonny was meticulous, whether he was cleaning his father's shoes, helping in the kitchen, arranging his clothes, or creating a daily schedule of activities. He had a time set for study, play, watching television, and sleeping. He was also a practical person. He ran a neighborhood comic-book rental and he sold quiz paper to classmates.

Sonny loved the Beatles, and had a collection of Beatles songs as well as of other singing groups.

Once when he was five years old, and watching his sisters go up a stage to receive honors, he said he would himself get up that stage and receive a medal of his own.

At the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Sonny took up Chemistry thinking it was a good preparation for becoming a doctor. By then he had become more people-oriented. Friends recall how once he said he would not enroll in ROTC because "it did not serve the people."

The university was roiling in protest and criticism. The last week of January 1971 marked the first anniversary of the historic First Quarter Storm. The dollar-peso rate had been devaluated, inflation was rocketing, militarization was rising, and civil rights were being brutally suppressed. The suspicion was rife that Marcos planned to declare martial law. When oil prices, which had stayed steady for several years, were raised from 30 to 33 centavos per liter, a whopping ten-percent increase, the public reacted with outrage.

The university swirled with even greater turmoil. Students joined activist groups, held teach-ins, rallies and marches. Protest posters flooded the campus. Sonny, then a freshman, was attracted to the Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan (SDK).

On February 1, a huge multisectoral rally was planned. Education officials cancelled classes in an attempt to forestall organized protest. But Marcos remanded the order, refusing to show fear or weakness. With classes uncertain to be held in the university, some of Sonny's friends planned to see a movie, asking Sonny to join them. Instead, Sonny joined his SDK friends in a protest march that

proceeded to the University Avenue. The protesters put up a barricade along the avenue to try to enforce a boycott of classes. The air was militant but festive.

Then, without warning, a mathematics professor named Inocente Campos, whose sympathies were known to be for Marcos and against activists, brought out a rifle, took aim at the students standing in what is today the CP Garcia crossing, fired, and in the next instant, Sonny Mesina fell bleeding to the ground.

Sonny was taken by his friends to the university infirmary (he didn't want to be taken to the nearby Veterans' Hospital because it was a "military hospital"). Sonny fought with death but succumbed three days later. His death shocked the entire UP community. The UP student council issued strong protests. What was at first a protest against oil price increases had grown into a full-blown student revolt against authorities and for academic freedom. As the outrage in the university spread, the government sent in soldiers and helicopters, agitating even the then UP president Salvador Lopez to protest the "violations in academic freedom."

The turmoil in the university rose to what would become the historic Diliman Commune of February 4-9, 1971. Sonny and the Diliman Commune would always be linked together in history, with Mesina earning the honor of being considered UP Diliman's "first martyr."

Sonny's death and the Diliman Commune would open up reflections by the whole UP academic community of what "serving the people" meant to people in the university - to instructors and students of medicine, engineering, fine arts or theatre, journalism, literature or law. The events of January and February 1971 forced many to rethink their academic assumptions. Sonny did not live to join these debates that followed after his death. But he gave his life for academic freedom, and he gave a meaning to what people in academe would refer to whenever they said that academics and professionals should "serve the people."

Sonny's Friends

- The Human Rights Violations Victims' Memorial Commission (HRVVMC)
<https://hrvvmemcom.gov.ph/pastor-r-mesina/>

About the HRVVMC see:

<https://hrvvmemcom.gov.ph/mandate-function/>

P.S.

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