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Take My Eyes (Interview with an Ophthalmologist)

Gina Cariño



Take My Eyes was a Spanish movie about domestic violence. Luis Tosar played the wifebeater. But this weekly is about donating your eyes for the day you die. Let's talk about eyes with my high school classmate, Minguita Padilla, founder of the Eye Bank of the Philippines.

GC: Bette Davis eyes...

MP: Soulful.

GC: The eye is the window of the soul.

MP: Agree.

GC: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

MP: Disagree.

GC: When people don't see eye to eye...

MP: They are using only two eyes.

GC: What's the third eye?

MP: Faith.

GC: When did you see the light like a blind person who suddenly sees?

MP: It was in a high school class retreat that I first saw myself pursuing medicine.

GC: The Eye Bank is a work of enormous vision, the project of your life.

MP: And a lifetime project. The Eye is living tissue with ever growing needs.

GC: In the medical profession, you could be in an ivory tower, but you aren't.

MP: Setting up the Santa Lucía Eye Bank, so named after the patron saint of vision—involved huge amounts of groundwork: phone calls, letter-writing, lobbying with legislators, wrestling with bureaucracy,

negotiating with transport companies, fund-raising... My staff includes a manager, technicians, transplant coordinators, but at first I did all that paper and logistical work alone. Of course there was help from people with connections in the legislature, the police... I had to learn to go drinking with the cops, just to get into their good graces and make them cooperate. It's one thing to get a law passed that allows the bank to retrieve corneal tissue from corpses in the possession of coroners. Making the law work is another matter.

GC: So the Eye Bank gets eyes mainly from the unclaimed bodies of vagabonds, murder victims, criminals...

MP: Oh the places and situations I found myself in to get this Eye Bank started! Though my husband and other male friends joined in the fun, many men-colleagues tended to stay out of these missions. Sometimes a woman is the "best man for the job"!

GC: Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* addressed the taboo on organ-donating...

MP: Through our Hospital Retrieval Program, more and more people are signing to donate their eyes or corneas upon death, and the Eye Bank has a nationwide outreach program in the form of altruistic surgical missions.

GC: You like Gabriel García-Márquez...

MP: His magic-realist themes and style remind me of Filipino life.

GC: Remember the story about the colonel who waits forever for a letter to come, like the blind in poor and remote places waiting for tissue.

MP: Corneal blindness in the Philippines, especially among the poor, was tantamount to a life sentence of living in shadow because of the scarcity of corneal tissue for transplant, a result of the absence of a structured and efficient, internationally accredited eye banking system in the country. There was a need to be met and I feel honored to have helped meet that need.

GC: Optical illusions come true. And we thought you would become a concert pianist. Do you still play?

MP: Not as often as I'd like.

GC: José Saramago's novel *Blindness* describes an epidemic where the ophthalmologist, too, goes blind... What piece of piano music can you play blind?

MP: "Consolation" by Franz Liszt. I close my eyes and travel to another place.

GC: Your favourite blind musician is...

MP: Andrea Bocelli.

GC: Love is blind.

MP: I quote an old saying: "Love is not blind. It sees more, not less. And because it sees more, it is willing to see less."

GC: I see.