



ABS-CBN BAYAN FOUNDATION, INC.

Enabling Network for the Upliftment of Filipino Families

GINA LOPEZ

-- "My dream is to be able to use mass media to mold and uplift Filipino consciousness"

Gina Lopez's campaign to save La Mesa Dam – Metro Manila's main source of water – bagged five million signatures nationwide in less than five months. Yet she felt things had not moved fast enough.

As head of ABS-CBN Foundation, she initiated programs to save battered children, to bring educational TV to remote villages and to extend loans to poor women. Lopez also initiated a campaign which got a Clean Air Act signed into law. Yet she felt such efforts were not enough.

ABS-CBN foundation ran a modest feeding program which she wanted to spin off to make it "really big." "I want to eradicate malnutrition in the country," she declared. She was a woman with a mission, a woman in a hurry.

"I'm impatient by nature," she said. "I want things done right away." Yet she seemed patient enough to devote years of her life on causes she believed in. She was yogi of Ananda Marga for 20 years, 12 of which she spent as a roving missionary in Africa. She had been head of ABS-CBN Foundation for more than 15 years and was eager to devote two more decades to development work.

"I feel that being born in a position of privilege and social status brings with it a considerable amount of responsibility," she said. "I want to do something because I'm in a position to do it."

Fortunes and misfortunes

Regina "Gina" La'O Lopez was one of the scions of the affluent Lopez clan. The Lopez name was synonymous with old family and old money. The family dated back to the early 1800s in Iloilo, where it built its fortune on sugarcane. By the 1940s, the Lopez clan had risen to become a key player in the influential "sugar bloc." The bloc was a group of sugar planters and millers who wielded influence on the seats of power, from the Philippine Congress to Malacanang Palace.

Gina's most famous forebears were the brothers Eugenio and Fernando Lopez. Her grandfather Eugenio was the patriarch, a financial genius who expanded the family's business to include an airline (the first in Asia), a power company (Meralco, the largest power distributor), a newspaper (the now defunct *Manila Chronicle*), and a television station (ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corporation).

Granduncle Fernando made his mark in politics. He was elected senator three times and was vice-president of the republic for three terms. Fernando's last term was cut short when then President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines in 1972.

Martial law and Marcos spelled financial and personal disaster for the family. The Lopez's TV station and newspaper were closed down along with other media outlets in the country. The patriarch's eldest son Geny (Eugenio Lopez Jr.) was arrested on political charges. It was said that the older Eugenio gave up several hundred million dollars worth of his holdings in a group of companies in exchange for his son's release. But the older Eugenio died in 1975 without seeing his son free.

Lopez Foundations

- Eugenio Lopez Foundation
- ABS-CBN Foundation
- Don Senen Gabaldon Foundation
- First Philippine Conservation
- Knowledge Channel Foundation
- Meralco Millennium Foundation
- ABS-CBN Bayan Foundation
- 71 Dreams

Geny Lopez escaped from prison, fled to the United States with his family and was able to return to the country only after President Marcos was ousted by the "people power" revolution of 1986. Geny and his brothers succeeded not only in rebuilding the family business. Aside from recovering the two flagship companies, ABS-CBN and Meralco, the brothers expanded into land development (Rockwell Land Corporation), telecommunications (Bayantel, a telephone company), highways, power generation, health care delivery and other smaller businesses. By one count, the Lopez business empire included 143 firms and employed more than 22,000 people.

The clan was also known for philanthropy and good works, which it carried out through a number of foundations (see box). Among these was ABS-CBN Foundation, which grew under the leadership of Gina Lopez.

Poverty as a choice

Gina Lopez was the second of seven children of Geny Lopez Jr. and Chita La'O. "My parents were very loving," she said in an interview. "There was a strong feeling of family. They virtually just let us be. I never felt either parent breathing down my neck. My mother is a beautiful person. She's so down to earth and very spiritual in the way she thinks. I'm proud of my father," she said. "Being his daughter is an absolute plus."

A magazine write-up summed up the life that Gina Lopez led from childhood to teens:

“Life was not just good, it was fabulous. And it was happy. Daddy was one of the country’s most prominent and powerful businessmen; Mommy was one of Manila society’s few beautiful and truly genteel women. Family was seven children who were as close in age as they were devoted to one another. Home was in old-rich Forbes Park; school was tony Assumption Convent. Weekends were for the beach, waterskiing, parties. Summers were for trips abroad where everyone picked out a new wardrobe. Life was an endless thrill...”¹

All that changed when Gina Lopez, then a liberal arts student in Boston, U.S.A, encountered the Ananda Marga, a religious-political movement which practiced yoga and originated in India. “(Meditation) completely, totally changed me,” the magazine quoted her as saying. “I lost interest in everything else...My consciousness did not want to have anything to do with the world. I just wanted to read spiritual things and to do meditation.” Among the things that drew her to the group was its belief that service to humanity through teaching yoga and rendering social work brought one closer to God.

Lopez returned to the Philippines only to inform her family months later, that she was leaving school and home to live in Ananda Marga’s house in Paco, Manila. Like priests, members of Ananda Marga took vows of obedience, celibacy and poverty. Since members were also prohibited from communicating with their families, Gina’s family lost contact with her for 10 years.

Gina Lopez was sent to Africa where she spent 12 years as a missionary opening children’s homes and yoga schools for meditation. “What Africa did was to bring my feet in touch with the ground,” she said. “I know what poverty is because I felt it.” She added, however, that her growth was also restricted by the organization’s self-imposed isolation. “It was like being a frog in a well,” she recalled. “We had no TV or radio and we had no contact with the outside world.”

She left Ananda Marga in 1990, rejoined her family in the Philippines, took up a Master in Development Course at the Asian Institute of Management and married a fellow yogi. The marriage produced two sons before the couple divorced. She joined ABS-CBN Foundation (AFI) as head of disaster relief and took over as managing director when the manager resigned.

ABS-CBN: the Corporation and the Foundation

ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corporation was formed in 1958 when the Lopezes bought the Alto Broadcasting System to merge with their own Chronicle Broadcasting Network. Its first telecast covered a 50-mile radius. By 2007, ABS-CBN was reaching almost all corners of the Philippines, parts of the Middle East, the United States, Europe, Australia and other countries.

¹ From “Journey and Homecoming,” cover story by Loma Kalaw-Tirol, Sunday Inquirer Magazine, 11 December 1994

The broadcast network included two TV stations on free TV (Channels 2 and 23) and at least seven channels on cable which included *The Filipino Channel*, *ANC* for news, *Knowledge Channel* for education, *MYX* for music, *Cinema One* for Filipino movies, and *Hero* for cartoons dubbed in Tagalog. It ran two radio stations: [DWRR 101.9](#) (FM-Manila) and [DZMM 630-khz](#) (AM-Manila).

The network also diversified into movies ([Star Cinema](#) - ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc.), music recording ([Star Records](#)), publishing ([ABS-CBN Publishing](#)), and interactive media ([ABS-CBN Interactive](#)). Total revenue was placed at Php12.95 billion with a net income of almost Php180 million in 2006. The corporation had more than 5,500 employees. ABS-CBN claimed to be the number one broadcast station in the Philippines, a position hotly contested by rival station GMA 7.

ABS-CBN Foundation was the network's philanthropic arm. It was founded by Gina's father Geny in 1989, when the public gave generously to the TV station's appeals for assistance to victims of natural disasters. AFI was incorporated as the "legal repository to collect and dispense donations for its child-centered programs and projects."

Initially, the foundation's main concern was to raise funds by broadcasting welfare cases that badly needed help. When Gina Lopez became managing director, she restructured the foundation and adopted an all-around developmental approach which revolved around children.

AFI's vision was "A better world for our children." Its mission was "to enable our children to achieve their full potential by affecting the strategic sectors of society towards our visions through the maximum use of the power, creativity and reach of media."

Why children? "The child resonates with my heart," Gina Lopez said, citing research findings that most criminals were abused, battered or neglected as children. "You can trace dysfunctional behavior to childhood. But if you surround the child with love and affection, good upbringing, he has 99 percent more chance of becoming a good citizen of the country. You can have good bridges, a good economy and all that. But what makes the country is not the infrastructure but the people who create and work. The child is important because 80 percent of the human personality is formed during childhood. If you don't take care of the period when the child is forming his personality, you will have a screwed up individual as a citizen of the country."

The foundation offered the following major programs and services:

- ABS-CBN Foundation Volunteers - established in June 1993 for relief operations during natural disasters. Services included training, rehabilitation, and prevention components.

- E-Media (formerly Educational Television) - started in 1994 to provide state-of-the-art, value-laden shows for children.
- Bantay Bata 163 - 24-hour hotline and child abuse intervention program launched in February 1997.
- Bayan Microfinance - formed in May 1997 to provide livelihood opportunities to the poorest-of-the-poor. The microfinance program was eventually spun off to become a separate organization now known as [ABS-CBN Bayan Foundation](#).
- [Bantay Kalikasan](#) - another media-based hotline geared towards environmental awareness, launched in July 1998.

E-Media: Education through Multi-Media

Gina Lopez redirected AFI's focus toward educational television and made it popular in the Philippines. The foundation started producing children's shows in 1995. "We started small, with one science show called Sine'skwela," she recalled. "Countries that do well economically have strong science backgrounds. Because the Philippines was doing very poorly in science, we thought a science show could make a difference."

Sine'skwela rated high, at one point capturing an 80 percent audience share. Encouraged by Sine'skwela's popularity, AFI produced other educational shows for children for airing over ABS-CBN. These included the following:

- Sine'skwela (science)
- Math-tinik (mathematics)
- Epol/Apple(English)
- Bayani (history)
- Hiraya Manawari (values education)
- Art Jam (art)

AFI later formed the E-Media Department to reproduce the shows on DVD and distribute these to public grade schools nationwide. To strengthen impact, Gina Lopez convinced the Department of Education to make the programs mandatory viewing in public grade schools.

Each school received the DVD package together with one TV set and one DVD player. In 2006, the DVD package had expanded to 108 volumes, with each volume consisting of about four episodes. So far E-Media had produced 432 lessons in mathematics, science, English, history and values education for grades 1 to 6.

E-Media also produced episode guides for teachers, also on DVD. "We train teachers on how to use our materials effectively," according to Zen Dimalanta, E-Media head since its creation. "We give pre-viewing and post-viewing questions for the pupils.

We also monitor how our materials are used in the classroom so we can evaluate the learning outcome. It's a whole process and that's the whole thrust of E-Media."

AFI had distributed over 10,000 television sets to public schools, including those located in remote and technologically backward areas such as Ifugao in Mt. Province, Tagcauayan in Quezon and Maripipi island in Biliran province. To reach more schools, E-Media launched an Adopt Your School campaign for donors. Donors paid for the package (cost per school was P55,000 in 2006) to be given to the school of their choice. Filipino expatriates and overseas workers from as far as the United States and the Middle East have responded to the campaign.

Zen Dimalanta said that different studies they made showed that children's comprehension improved with the help of the E-Media materials. The most recent study, covering schoolyear 2005-2006, noted "significantly higher scores" in the science achievement tests conducted on the experimental group in grades 4, 5 and 6. Grades 5 and 6 pupils from the experimental group also scored higher in the mathematics achievement test.

According to feedback from teachers and parents, students in the experimental group were more participative, able to deal with higher-order questions and thought processes, more motivated to study, understood the lessons more easily, and were able to apply lessons learned to real life situations as a result of ETV viewing.

Dimalanta said E-Media would continue making production until all subjects in the grade school curriculum are covered. However, she said producing original shows for children was much harder. "Advertisers are now scrimping on TV ads and do not want to sponsor educational TV shows. E-media is the only group producing local shows. The beauty of producing instead of buying shows from abroad is we are able to use local settings, local culture and local values."

Bantay Bata 163

Bantay Bata (Child Watch) was inspired by a news item on TV of "a child who was beaten to death by her mother," Gina Lopez recalled. "The neighbors heard her screaming and saw welts on her body but the child had nowhere to turn to. I thought if there was a number she could have called, then maybe we could have prevented that from happening. I said let's try this."

"This" was Bantay Bata 163, a hotline launched in 1997 as a child abuse intervention program. "163" was the number people could dial to summon a rescue team from Bantay Bata and the Department of Social Welfare and Development. The hotline was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"We got a thousand calls on the day we launched," Gina Lopez said, "We saw that we were actually fulfilling a real need."

“Bantay Bata’s goal is to provide immediate protective services for the child,” said Tina Monzon-Palma, Bantay Bata program director. “We have a partnership with the barangay because that’s where the child is, and the DSWD because they are the ones by law² supposed to do this job. But since we asked the government to deputize Bantay Bata, we can actually take the abused child into our custody and become the parental authority. We have a children’s village in Bulacan where we take care of them temporarily when we become the custodian. We represent the child in case there is a suit to file against the perpetrator. We normally don’t file a case unless it’s rape. In case of battery, it depends on the gravity of the abuse.”

Palma added that community and barangay involvement had made the work lighter. An abuse reported to the hotline was verified by the barangay first. If they determined that the abuse was repetitive, then Bantay Bata took custody of the child.

“The community is really the key here,” Palma said. “It takes a village to raise a child. If the community really loves and respects each child, they will take care of a child who is not their own. That’s what we want to develop – that sense of community in taking care of children.”

So far, there were five Bantay Bata branches; Davao (the oldest branch, established in 2000), Iloilo and Cebu (2004), Bicol and Zamboanga (2006).

Bantay Bata’s eventual goal was to reunite the abused child with his/her family. Therapy sessions were conducted for the family as part of the reintegration process. Parents of children in Bantay Bata’s custody were allowed to visit on Saturdays. The visits also enabled the staff to see whether both child and family were ready to be reunited. Most of the children rescued from 1997 to 2002 had been reintegrated with their families. A few remained in institutions because they had no other relatives.

To mark its seventh year, Bantay Bata tracked down the children whose cases they handled in the past. In 90 percent of the cases, according to Palma, “the abuses had stopped, lives changed, families became whole.” In the other 10 percent of the cases, “the children are not at all better since the time we rescued them. These are families with problematic histories, where a parent is a drug addict or a prostitute. In those families,”

Bantay Bata developed a module to help parents become loving and nurturing. The module led to a new and more pro-active approach – not only to respond to cases of abuse but to prevent abuse by educating parents and communities. “We do values for parents, whether abusive or not. The only criteria is that they want to love their child and to be better parents,” said Palma.

Bantay Bata received around one million calls a year; over 20,000 of these calls required some form of service from Bantay Bata. “Mothers now call us to help them,” said Palma. “Children also call to report an abuse, to threaten their parents or just to test whether we really are there when they for help.” At present, Bantay Bata had a staff of

² Republic Act 7610 authorized the government to take over custody of a child with abusive parents.

180 and an army of volunteers in Metro Manila and the five other cities and provinces where it operated.

Palma believed that Bantay Bata's biggest impact was "creating greater awareness on the part of the both parents and donor communities. "I think parents are slowly seeing their children as human beings who need to be loved."

Bantay Bata actively sought support of all kinds. "Radio and television have helped us significantly. ANC and TV Patrol carry and air our stories. ABS-CBN provides us a subsidy of half a million pesos a month. We do a lot of community organizing. We have a caravan now going all over the country to introduce Bantay Bata and its services and get the communities aware. We will help you love your child, help this child grow up happy and healthy."

Bantay Kalikasan

The idea for Bantay Kalikasan's first campaign came when Gina Lopez took a short helicopter ride across Metro Manila and saw the smog that engulfed the metropolis. She learned that a number of bills for clean air had been languishing in Congress for 12 years. She decided to launch a campaign for a clean air law, which earned five million signatures. This was submitted to Congress, and helped create enough pressure to get the Clean Air Act passed into law.

Since its establishment in July 1998, Bantay Kalikasan (BK or Nature Watch) had conducted other campaigns. *Bantay Usok* teamed up with the Land Transportation Office to apprehend smoke belchers. Bantay Usok was later suspended when the government made an annual emission test a prerequisite for the registration of any vehicle.

Bantay Baterya was an advocacy and media campaign on the health and environmental hazards posed by the indiscriminate disposal and handling of junk batteries. This project was undertaken in cooperation with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources-EMB and Philippine Recycler's, Inc., the lone accredited battery recycling facility in the country.

BK's longest running involvement was the Save La Mesa Dam project which began in 2006. It mobilized thousands of volunteers to reforest nearly 90 percent of the watershed area (more than 1,200 hectares). BK established and maintained the La Mesa Watershed Ecological Park, a 2,700 hectare preserve of lush rainforest and natural and man-made water systems to showcase its advocacy to preserve endemic flora and fauna.

"The passion and direction that GL laid down in terms of policy directions and priority thrusts made a big difference," said John Paul "Toto" Balayon, a key BK personnel. He described Gina Lopez as a hands-on boss who got involved even to the last detail. "For our signature campaigns, she went made the rounds of different organizations, lobbied in the senate and congress, attended press cons and technical working group meetings of DENR and ADB to defend our position. Everywhere she went she carried signature sheets to present the issue whenever she got the chance. She

makes sure that we have regular meetings, and she wants to be properly briefed at all times.”

BK’s overall vision was for a better world and a sustainable environment for children. The foundation also ran a one-hour TV show on the environment, entitled Bantay Kalikasan, which aired every Saturday on Studio 23.

Balayon pointed out that having a big media outfit to support campaigns was a big boost. “We were having a hard time gathering signatures for La Mesa dam when ABS-CBN came in,” he said. Kris Aquino and other top network stars talked about the campaign and “that’s when we started to get our millions (of signatures).” Although Bantay Kalikasan did not have any office in the provinces, Balayon said it got nationwide coverage and support for major campaigns through ABS-CBN’s regional network.

Donors and alliances

“The media has the power of reach and it is immensely powerful,” said Gina Lopez . “A study of Bantay Bata showed that it had an awareness rating of 100% in Manila and 85% in Aparri and Jolo, where we don’t even have services. Media has the ability of touching people’s hearts. You can make people cry and teach them.”

Media and the Lopez name also helped the foundation to get corporate donors and build alliances get its top programs going. Bantay Kalikasan, for example, had received support from Unilever, the Lopez group of companies, Maynilad, Toyota, Sony Phil., JICA, PACAP, UNDP, and embassies of countries such as Finland and Australia.

Other donors included Ford Philippines and the Philippine Medical Association for victims of natural disasters, and PhilHealth the Federation of Filipino Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Sony, ShoeMart and Dole Stanfilco for E-Media.

Ordinary and anonymous citizens have given their fair share, too. Bantay Bata’s Tina Monzon Palma said, “I’ve been amazed at the generosity of people for the child. I never thought people would donate millions. Sixty to seventy percent of foreign and local donations for Bantay Bata come from individuals compared to corporations.”

“The built in connections of the Lopez family makes a big difference,”said Balayon. “I wouldn’t say that without these, we won’t be successful in our advocacies but it played a major part. The fact that we’re known as ABS-CBN foundation, that we’re being run by a Lopez create a lot of goodwill.”

A social responsibility

“Work in the foundation has been such a boon to me, it was part of my spiritual path,” said Gina Lopez. “For me it’s like a continuation of the work I want to do. Being born in a position of privilege and social status brings with it a considerable amount of responsibility. It’s like my mission in life. While I’m living here, I want to do something

great, to do something for the country because I'm in a position to do it. I'm not interested in business, but I want to have money (for my causes).”

With child rescue operations as far away as Mindanao, Gina Lopez said that finding the funds for her staff-intensive services was a constant concern. AFI spent about PhP 20 million a year for its various programs, and she wanted to raise a 200 million peso endowment.

Gina Lopez said that she had won most of her battles except for some which dealt with systems and structures and corruption in government. She seemed optimistic about finding the funds and doing all the things she wanted to do. “You see the situation as it is, then have a dream of what can be and see the possibilities of what you can create and facilitate on the social level,” she said. “Then you put your energies there, get everyone together to materialize this dream. That dream should touch your heart. It must be touching enough to mobilize people to come forward. You say wow, we can fix this! It can get better.”