A TRIBUTE TO HER GRAND AUNT'S NURTURING WAYS, SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON SHEDS LIGHT ON THE HEART OF THE LEGENDARY DOYENNE OF SOCIETY

CHITO MADRIGAL-COLLANTES

Above: Chito Madrigal-Collantes with the author, grandniece Sunshine de Leon. Chito in a Pitoy Moreno gown

Chito Madrigal was known by a variety of names to the different worlds she effortlessly moved between—matriarch to the Madrigal family, doyenne of society, real estate powerhouse, elegant hostess, legendary philanthropist.

Blending personality traits that might otherwise seem contradictory, Tita Chito had the mind of a businesswoman but the spirit of an artist. She was decisive, knew what she wanted and was unafraid to let people know her opinions, yet was open-minded and fair.

Fierce in her beliefs and direct enough to make you blush, she was also driven by a strong intuition, yet was sensitive and empathetic enough to know what people needed. An effortless hostess, she loved being around people from all walks of life, yet remained very private. She could be intimidating at first, but could warm up to you with the most unexpected gesture the next.

Tita Chito was a lady who engaged in life completely, yet kept a balance. Her workday began at 7AM, but all who knew her understood that after 7PM, with a whiskey on the rocks in hand, there would be no more talk of business. She knew how to earn, how to spend on what she loved and how to enjoy.

It is no surprise therefore, that although she had no biological children of her own, she served as a "mothering" figure to many whose lives ▶

Chito and Gustav in Central Park (left), at the beach with Chicos (above), with her father, Vicente Madrigal in one of their trips abroad (below), carrying nieces Gizela and Susana (opposite right), and with husband Manoling Collantes, Gustav and his younger brother (opposite left).

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– *Ging Gonzalez-Montinola*

intersected with hers. Mothers come in different forms—some nurture, some protect, some guide, some teach and some inspire. Tita Chito, off course, did them all.

Gisela "Ging" Gonzalez-Montinola lived with her aunt for the first three years of her life, while her mother Pacita Madrigal Gonzalez was in the Senate. She was Tita Chito's first experience caring for a child. She says, "I remember playing on her white carpeted dressing room, pretending I was in a swimming pool and wearing an inflatable swimming tube while she put on her makeup."

Tita Ging says her aunt taught her to be fair, strong and generous and looks at her as a "second mother." She remembers: "We all had our own parents but we could also talk to her if we needed a different perspective."

For as long as Tita Ging could remember, Tita Chito was a constant in the lives of her nieces and nephews, who would gather and play in her home regularly. Tita Chito would also bring each of them the same toy when returning from travels, which left a great impression. Tita Ging recalls, "I remember a plastic gun with silver candy pellets—it was such a big thing that she bought us all the same toy—the message was you are all family and have something in common."

As the family grew in number, Tita Chito remained its steady heartbeat. She made sure that everyone spent time together and immediately tried to help any problems that a family member might have.

Tita Ging describes, "She was a bridge between generations. People went to her for advice or help if in trouble, and if siblings were arguing, she had a way of talking to them that helped them get together."

Since she was not a person who made a lot of comments, but someone who listened carefully, Tita Ging says, "If she said something, you knew it was the truth."

For Susana or "Chu Chu" Madrigal, Tita Chito played the role of "adult mother." Tita Chu Chu lived with her aunt for eleven years, from just after college until marriage, and says she was both a mentor and a role model.

"She was such a disciplined person. If you were not up by 8AM she thought you were a thug. Even on weekends! She practiced what she preached."

Tita Chito was also consistent. "Every day at 8AM, we would sit and chat in her dressing room—exchanging stories, sharing any problems or whatever was on our minds." She also remembers her aunt's keen powers of observation, "And if ever anything was wrong, I would not say anything, but she would know from the moment I walked into the house."

Tita Chu Chu feels she got the best of both worlds. Whereas her own mother, Amanda Abad Santos Madrigal, was nurturing and protective,

taught her how to fly out of that nest. The advice Tita Chito gave her became both a strong set of guidelines to live by or what Tita Chu Chu calls a "reality check."

She recalls, "She's very motherly in the sense that she is very frank. She would tell you everything straight, whether you want to hear it or not."

Tita Chu Chu recalls her aunt's advice on dating: "You are a package—you are pretty but you are, by no means, Miss Universe. You have your attributes and you should develop your assets. But if a man you like wants a very beautiful woman, you are not in that league. Know what is real and what is fantasy."

Recalling that her own mother's reaction to such frankness was to try and protect her daughter's ego with words of reassurance, Tita Chu Chu says it was only one instance which highlighted their difference as mother figures. She explains: "My mother dreamed for her all children to find good husbands and have their own family. Tita Chito reminded us of the importance of marrying for the right reasons— finding someone who can make us happy. Otherwise, she said we were self-sufficient on our own."

Tita Chu Chu continues, " Yet, when I went out on dates, Tita Chito would help me dress up and lent me jewelry. She's very generous. Every time she travelled, she would buy me my whole wardrobe for the year."

And when Tita Chu Chu had a health scare, her aunt responded with action—not saying a word of comfort but instead sending her to the USA for a second opinion. Tita Chu Chu compares the different ways of expressing love: "If I had not gone to the USA and ended up in the hospital here, my mother would have spent every day by my side, making sure the nurses did everything they could to make me comfortable."

Tita Chito was a lady who knew what she believed in and what her boundaries were. Tita Chu Chu describes what, perhaps, was the driving force behind her aunt's generous spirit. Tita Chu Chu recalls, "Tita Chito would say, 'I love you but I love myself more.' Now when you first hear it you might think it's selfish but actually, if you don't love yourself, it's hard to really help others."

In Tita Chito's later years, she became both mother and grandmother figure as grandnephew Gustav Warns, who came to live with her at only a few months old for a good part of his childhood.

Gustav says she did all the basic mothering things like teaching him to talk and walk. He recalls finding a cassette called "Gustav speaks", where "Tita Coko" as the family called her, asked, "What does a cow say?" and his voice answered, "Moo".

Reflecting back, Gustav says, "The love and attention she showed me made me grow up feeling like someone special. I felt like the luckiest boy in the world and that I could do anything."

Siony Pacardo, who assisted Tita Chito in running her office for 30 years recalls the sheer joy that Gustav brought to Tita Chito's life. Pacardo says, "Ma'am used to play golf in the afternoon and if she had lost her bet would sometimes come home in a bad humor. We would make sure that Gustav was there to welcome her home and then everything would be happy again."

In Tita Chito's world, whether you were family, friend or employee, love, warmth and affection were demonstrated with action more often than a hug. Pacardo says, "She never told me that I did a good job. But you knew she appreciated you if she called you and gave you more work to do."

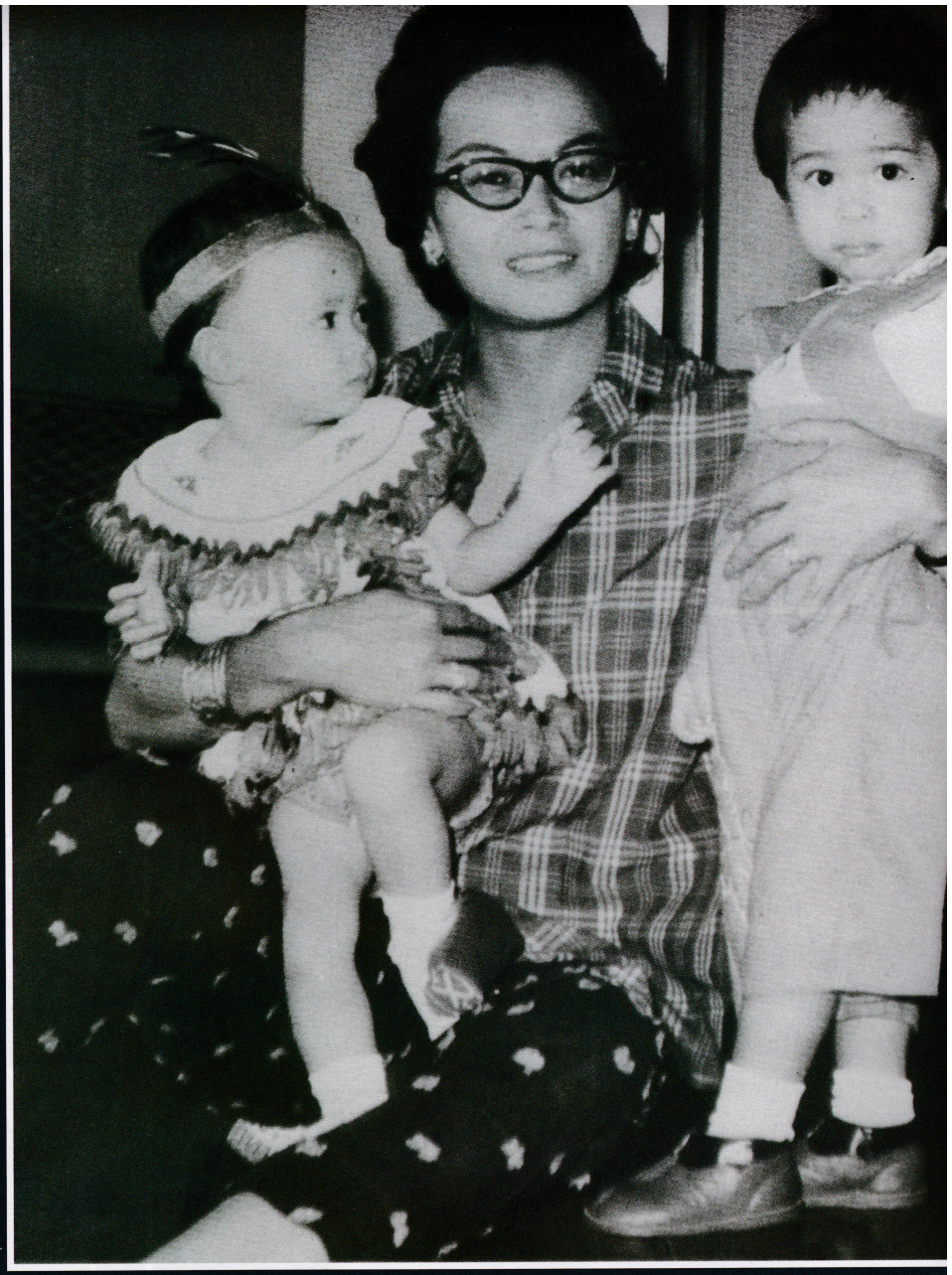
She continues, "And when my daughter passed away, she did not say anything to console me, but offered to pay for all hospital and burial expenses. I was so touched."

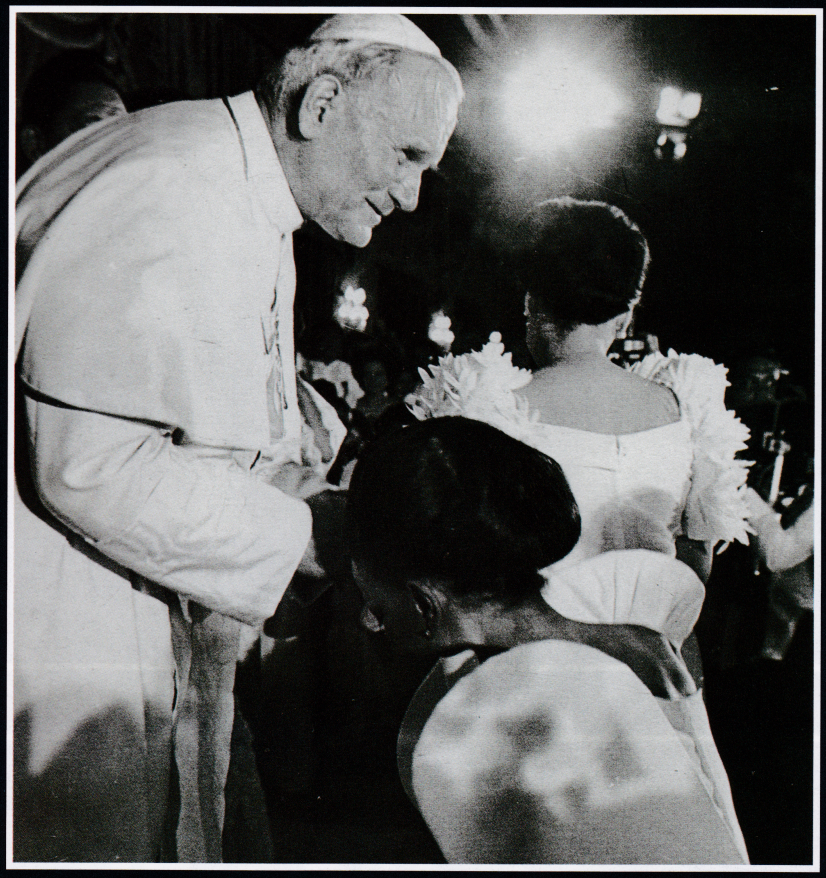
Such generosity of spirit was also extended to those Tita Chito did not know.

No matter who visited her house, Tita Chito entertained others as she would herself.

Father Mar Ladra recalls when "Doña Chito," as he called her, opened her home in Forbes one afternoon to children who were living in poverty.

Father Ladra says, "When I made a comment that I was surprised because instead of chicken and spaghetti, a caterer had been ▶





Chito with Charlton Heston (upper left), with Chona Kasten Mary Prieto and Conching Sunico (above); kneeling to receive the blessing of Pope John Paul during his first visit to Manila (lower left); and aboard the Presidential yacht, standing beside Prince Juan Carlos de Borbon, Edith Rabat, Meldy Cojuangco, Baby Araneta, Zita Feliciano, Lulu Tinio and Vicky Madrigal (below).

hired to prepare special food for them, Doña Chito said 'these children are my special guests and I want to give them special treatment and enjoy Christmas with me.'" And when Father reprimanded the children for immediately running around her big living room, Tita Chito reassured him, "It's okay, let them enjoy."

Tita Chito's influence on grandniece Alexandra Eduque's life was both subtle and direct. Tita Chu Chu, Alex's mother, says the lessons Tita Chito taught her as an adult helped in raising her own children. Tita Chu Chu explains, "The difference is, I taught them those things when they were kids. As an example, from Day One the kids never wanted for anything, but I was always frank to them. If you want something, you have to work for it first."

Alexandra visited Tita Chito every day of her life, and shares, "She was someone who, I felt, always had time for me no matter what—and that's probably the most golden language of love for me."

Eduque describes her grand aunt as steadfast, strong, sweet and sincere. Although extremely generous, Tita Chito was also very much a disciplinarian, and Alex shares that being around her grand aunt reminded her that she should always try her best at whatever she was doing.

Alex explains, "Knowing that she set the highest standards for herself, I always felt that she expected the same from those around her. Because she always gave me (and others) her best, I felt it was the least I could do to reciprocate."

One of the most important lessons that Tita Chito instilled in her family members was the idea that "With privilege comes responsibility," and the more you have, the greater the responsibility.

It is perhaps Tita Chito's ability to follow her own words with action and her commitment to being an instrument to help people that are her greatest gifts and legacy.

Having personally chosen the board, set the guidelines for the Foundation's mission and committed the resources to run it beyond her own lifetime, the Consuelo Chito Madrigal Foundation was an extremely personal project for Tita Chito in her later years.

Maria Socorro Bautista, CCMF's Executive Director recalls that Tita Chito was determined to attend board meetings, even after her health started to suffer. "She would attend religiously with her portable oxygen tank."

CCMF's efforts, which started in Bicol partially because Tita Chito believed in giving back to where the family fortune began, echo their founder's core beliefs. Other programs in Bulacan and Payatas are also devoted to helping the poorest of the poor and all do so in a way that sustains and promotes human dignity.

Tita Ging is currently on the board of CCMF along with Tita Chu Chu and Juan Vicente or "Jon

handouts as she thought it was not as productive to a person's life—so she gives money like it's capital, investing in people. She wanted to make sure that she is teaching you. Programs such as scholarships empower the less privileged with knowledge that hopefully gets them a job. And microfinance efforts help the families of the scholars through livelihood and promoting entrepreneurship."

CCMF's approach also mirrors Tita Chito's practicality. Feeding programs are conducted to make sure those they are helping do not go to school hungry and farming training centers help farmers learn to market and sell the products they grow.

A program that has so far provided housing to 151 families in Bicol also has a unique twist. The foundation loans the money to build, but recipients are given 300 square meter lots, with houses as small as 30 square meters. The extra land can be used for entrepreneurial projects such as planting crops, or opening a *sari-sari* store for additional income—which helps recipients repay the costs of their new home.

Father Mar, who runs CCMF programs in Bulacan, recalls Tita Chito's response to a conversation he had in the Foundation's early days, when he informed her of the poor conditions people were living in. He says her immediate response reflects her "Christ-like heart" for those who have less in life. He recalls, "Tita Chito said, 'Let us help people help themselves. Father Mar. When I am gone, take care of them and the foundation.'"

To date, CCMF Bulacan has helped 96 students finish their education and most are working as accountants, teachers, bankers, engineers, nurses, ITs (Information Technologists), soldiers, medical technologists, researchers, and priests—jobs which have the ripple effect of enabling them to uplift the living conditions of their families.

In 2004, Tita Chito celebrated her birthday by meeting some of CCMF's scholars in Bicol, who were beginning their first year of college. As spontaneous as she was strategic, Tita Chito ignored the speech prepared for her and decided to speak from the heart. Tita Chu Chu recalls her aunt's words: "The greatest gift I have ever received is the privilege to give you the opportunity to attend college and the ability to make a difference in the lives of the young."

The students then asked Tita Chito to speak at their college graduation but sadly she passed away before she could attend.

In gratitude for the gift of hope and of opportunity, the students attended Tita Chito's funeral. Lining the coffin at her burial, singing "*Hindi Kita Malilimutan* (I Will Never Forget You)," the students showed their benefactor that they too had learned that they could give back.

Since Tita Chito's passing, the quality of hundreds of Filipinos' lives have been improved by this grand lady who believed simply that her purpose was to share her bounty with others.

Perhaps on a clear day, we can see her looking down from heaven smiling, knowing that her name will forever be remembered as an extension of a mother's love for humanity, and that her death has been as powerful as her life. H

REPORT: SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON
PHOTOS: USED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE BOOK *PICTURE ME* BY CHITO MADRIGAL-COLLANTES

Chito with Tessie Yulo and Mrs. Marcos at the Malacañang disco on Valentine's Day (above), and with Manoling, Muhammed Ali and Baby Araneta at Malacañang (below).

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– Chu-Chu Madrigal