

A profile on Anakpawis Rep. Crispin Beltran whom the Macapagal-Arroyo regime has recently charged with rebellion.

The rising Macapagal-Arroyo dictatorship arrested Anakpawis (Toiling Masses) Rep. Crispin Beltran last Friday, Feb. 24 on the day Arroyo declared a national state of emergency and a crackdown on all protests. We hope that this will help readers get to know the man and help in the ongoing campaign for his release. This was written by Rep. Crispin Beltran's chief of staff.

For the last two decades, the name Crispin B. Beltran has been associated with pickets, demonstrations, strikes, and generally everything connected to the militant labor movement. Not surprising with him being the chairman of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU). Since August of 2001, however, he has become known as something else - a member of one of the biggest, most influential bastions of conservatism in the country, the House of Representatives. From 2001-2003, he was one of three Bayan Muna solons. From 2004 up to present, he now stands as the chairman and representative for labor and urban poor concerns of the Anakpawis partylist. Ka Bel breathes, lives and practices the politics of change and nationalism with the same fervor he does as a leader of the parliament of the streets.

But no less interesting than his politics is his personal life. His love life alone is the stuff of movies, megged by the late Lino Brocka or Ysmael Bernal, crossed with Jose Javier Reyes. Since 1956, Ka Bel has been married to the former Rosario Soto from Malolos, Bulacan. There's a joke circulating around activist circles that goes "Ka Bel is a voice who should be heard in the Lower House, but in his own house, it's Ka Osang whom he listens to."

This is their love story.

Ka Osang is the product of a broken home. Her parents separated early in her childhood, and as the youngest among the three children, she was left to an elderly relative, her father's aunt who lived in Gagalangin, Tondo. Ka Osang grew up wanting for nothing - she was given new dresses and jewelry whenever she asked for them.

But in exchange, she had to be obedient to the very strict, and sometimes unreasonable rules of her grandmother. She was entered in La Concepcion, a convent-school, and was told never to look at members of the opposite sex. "Wala talaga akong kaalam-alam sa mga lalaki nun. Si Papa lang at yung mga kapatid ko ang pwede kong kausapin." ("I knew the least thing about boys or men. The only males I was aware of were my father and my brothers.")

But the great aunt and the nuns combined were not able to curb the young girl's adventurous spirit. One morning, On November 10, 1956 she cut classes and together with a few classmates, sneaked into a moviehouse.

"Pinanood namin si Nida Blanca at si Nestor de Villa. Pero pag-uwi ko, nalaman na ni Lola ang ginawa ko. Matindi ang naging away," she says. (: | "We used to watch Nestor de Villa and Nida Blanca. When I got home, I found out that my grandmother already knew what I had done. There was a dreadful argument.")

It turned out that the Mother Superior herself came to the house and told her grandmother of what happened. Livid at being lied to, the grandmother slapped Ka Osang and told her to leave. And that's what she did.

By 12 noon she was wandering around Quiapo, with nothing but the clothes on her back and the other piece which her enraged grandmother threw at Ka Osang as she left the house.

In a daze, she entered into one of the taxis that was parked in front of Plaza Miranda. The driver was the man who would be her husband, the then 26-year old Crispin.

"Napansin kong bata pa siya, at medyo tulala," was his first impression. ("I immediately noticed how young she was, and how lost she looked.") He asked her where she was going. Still reeling from her experience, she answered 'Derecho ka lang.' (Just go straight ahead.)

They had reached Monumento, but she still hadn't given Ka Bel specific directions. He stopped the taxi and turned to face her. Ka Osang remembers, "Naiinis na sya. 'Saan ba talaga tayo?' sabi niya. Ako naman, wala sa sarili, naiyak na. Sinabi ko na yung nangyari." (He started getting irritated. He kept asking me where it was really that I wanted to go. I started crying and told him the entire story.)

Ka Bel was very sympathetic. She reminded him of his sisters back home in Bacacay, Albay. He looked at her with compassion, and told her that he would drive her home. He also urged her to apologize to her Lola, "Masama magtanim ng galit sa kapamilya." (It's not good to harbor resentment against family.)

Ka Osang shook her head and made a move to get out. By then, night had fallen. Ka Bel refused to let her go - "May masama pang mangyari sa iyo - parang wala kang kaalam-alam sa mundo." ("Something bad might happen to you -- you look like you don't know anything about what goes on in the world.")

So he took her to his boarding house in San Juan where he lived with a few others, and told her to stay the night. She stayed there, in Ka Bel's room, for three days.

"Tulala lang ako, nakatingin sa labas ng bintana. Kain, tulog, tatanga sa bintana, iiyak, matutulog. Sa susunod na araw, ganun na naman."

("I was almost catatonic. I would just stare out the window. I would eat, sleep, stare out the window. The next day would be the same and the day after that.")

She was alone most of the time, as Ka Bel drove the taxi all day, and at night attended school at the Asian Labor Education Center at the University of the Philippines. When he got home at night, she would already be asleep, on a low, wide bench that served as a bed, while Ka Bel had his own bed across the room.

"Ni hindi ko alam ang pangalan nya nun. Ang tawag ko sa kanya kuya," Ka Osang recalls, laughing. ("I didn't even know what his name was.")

Did she ever get a crush on him? "Wala akong pakialam talaga sa kanya nun, ang iniisip ko lang sarili ko. Pero napaka-maalalahanin niya."

("I really didn't care much about him at the time. I was just looking out for myself; but I do remember thinking how thoughtful he was.")

It was at that time when Ka Bel gave her what she calls his first gift.

"Dilaw na sepilyong naka-kahon. May tatak na Good Morning." ("A yellow toothbrush in a box, with a label 'Good Morning' on it")

On the third day, Ka Osang wanted to go home. But not wanting to further inconvenience Ka Bel, she left the house without telling him.

"Nang malaman ng papa ko kung saan ako napunta noong naglayas ako, galit na galit siya! Pinuntuhan nila yung bahay ni Ka Bel, tapos binugbog siya. Wala naman akong magawa."

("When my father found out, he flew into a rage. He went to Ka Bel's house and beat him up. I couldn't do anything but watch.")

Ka Bel was taken to the municipal jail in San Juan and was accused of abusing a minor. Though it was already the late 1950s, no woman would be caught alone in the company of a man if they weren't sweethearts. And it was already a scandal if they stayed in the same room together alone. Ka Osang stayed in Ka Bel's room for three days.

In short, they had to get married. Ka Bel could have easily refused, but he didn't. He knew that if he refused, Ka Osang would be disgraced. "Kaya kinasal kami. Walang pag-ibig nun. Ayaw ko talaga, iniirapan ko siya, sinusungitan. Pero siya, bukas ang isip. Sabi niya, napag-aaralan naman ang pag-ibig."

("So we got married. I didn't love him then. I didn't even like him much -- I would sneer and pout at him, being completely disagreeable. As for him, he had an open mind. He said that love was something we could both learn.")

And soon enough, she did learn to love her husband. Initially it was because he was a good provider ("Sweldo niya sa pagmamaneho ng taxi, buo kung ibigay sa akin, kasama resibo") ("He would give me his entire wages for the month, complete with the receipt"), but later on it was for himself. She learned to love him for his gentleness with the children, his sense of humor ("Malaming yan, makwento") ("He's sweet, he likes to tell me stories"), patience ("Nang magsama kami, di ako marunong maglaba o magluto - siya ang gumagawa nun. Tinuruan lang niya ako, hati kami sa gawaing bahay"), (When we first lived together, I didn't know how to launder clothes or cook. We would share the housework") and inevitably, for his politics which he had long before embraced.

"Malaking dahilan yun. Kasabay ng pagkilala ko sa kanya bilang asawa, nakilala ko din siya bilang lider manggagawa. Noong una, hindi ako payag - lagi na lang siya ginagabi, o minsan di talaga umuwi, kesyo may mga seminar daw. Madalas kaming mag-away," she says. "Nang maintindihan ko na yung trabaho niya, nagkaroon ng mas malalim na dimensyon ang pagmamahal at respeto ko sa kanya."

("I learned to love my husband as a leader of workers. At first I was very resentful that he wouldn't come home, or when he did, he'd come home late. We would argue and I would yell. When I grew to understand the nature of his work, I also grew to love and respect him more.")

But Ka Bel was ever-patient. He continually explained to her his work, and what it meant. Even in his early 20s, he had become a full-fledged labor leader. He became president of the Yellow Taxi Drivers' Union and the Amalgamated Taxi Drivers Federation from 1955-1963. From 1963-1972, he was Vice-administrator of the Confederation of Labor Unions of the Philippines, and then vice-president of the Philippine Alliance of Nationalist Organizations (PANALO) which became the Alliance of Nationalist Genuine Labor Organizations (ANGLO), affiliated under the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) whose establishment on May 1, 1980, signaled the labor movement's all-out war against the Marcos dictatorship.

Throughout her husband's growing activism, Ka Osang strove to be supportive. Her love for Ka Bel and the life he had chosen was severely tested, however, in August 1982 when Ka Bel along with other labor leaders was arrested by the military.

"Sampu na ang anak namin nang ikulong siya. Wala kaming pera, maliban dun sa binibigay ng mga kasamahan sa KMU. Nagtitinda-tinda din ako nun sa palengke - isda, tsinelas. Minsan din binibigyan kami ng bigas at gatas ng mga madre na sumusuporta kay Ka Bel at sa ibang mga political prisoners," she says.

("We already had 10 children when he was arrested. We had no money, and my children lived on my small earnings from selling rubber slippers and fish at the market. KMU also helped us, and nuns who were supportive of the campaign to release political prisoners.")

By then they were living in a squatters' community in Gao, Commonwealth, Quezon City, where they still live to this day. Ka Osang would walk from Commonwealth to Crame where Ka Bel was detained.

For two years, Ka Osang not only became the mother and father to their children, but also proxy labor leader: she delivered Ka Bel's speeches for him in the rallies, and became a volunteer for Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP). She studied acupressure and acupuncture, and applied what she learned whenever she went to Crame and Muntinlupa, where other political prisoners were incarcerated. Along with the wives, daughters, and relatives of other political prisoners, Ka Osang lobbied for their release.

But the Marcos government was adamant. No way would it release one of its prized captives. Ka Bel was then KMU secretary general, and the president, one of the original pillars of the labor movement in the country Felixberto 'Ka Bert' Olalia was also under custody.

By 1984, Ka Bert had already succumbed to the constant torture of the military, as well as the dampness of the jail cells. He died of pneumonia.

"Dun na talaga ako natakot. May sakit na rin si Ka Bel nun - sa kidney naman. Ayaw siyang bigyan ng maayos na tulong medikal sa kulungan, kaya lumala yung kundisyon niya habang

tumatagal. Si Ka Bert namatay na, ayaw kong masunod si Ka Bel," Ka Osang narrated. She took action.

("That was when I really got scared. Ka Bel was already afflicted with kidney problems. They didn't give him medical treatment in jail. I didn't want Ka Bel to go through what Ka Bert did. Ka Bert died because of untreated respiratory problems. I didn't want Ka Bel to die.")

In Crame, she consulted with her husband and hatched a plan of escape. Ka Bel would come home for a few hours' visit for the supposed birthday of a young nephew, then from there make his way to freedom.

Then she went to Ka Bel's lawyers - Attys. Joker Arroyo and Rene Saguisag. "Sinabi ko sa kanilang wag pumunta sa hearing ng kaso si Ka Bel. Sa araw na yung tatakas si Ka Bel."

The two men were incredulous - they thought Ka Osang was joking. "Tinanong nila ako - handa ba akong mabugbog?" Sagot ko, oo. Handa ka bang mamatay? Oo. Ang mahalaga makalaya siya. Pero di pa rin sila naniwala. "

("They asked me if I was prepared to get caught or worse, beaten. I said yes. I said I was even prepared to die. What was important was that Ka Bel escapes. They still didn't believe me.")

On the day of the children's party, neighbors and friends came and pretended to celebrate. Ka Bel arrived with his guards. Beforehand, he and Ka Osang agreed on a sign - after putting down his second bottle of beer, he would make his move. He downed his second beer ("Yung beer para malabanan ang kaba - takot kasi siya para sa akin") ("The beer was to help calm himself down. He was very nervous and afraid for me")

. There wasn't a chance to say good-bye. He excused himself under the pretext of having to urinate. When he got to the toilet, he pulled out the piece of loose board, and squeezed himself through a rough hole made in the wall. Then his guards noticed the inordinately long time Ka Bel was taking. They broke down the toilet door and saw the gaping hole. They quickly turned on Ka Osang and began beating her.

"Suntok, sampal, sabunot. Di ko na malaman kung ano ang mas masakit, yung mukha ko ba, yung dibdib," she remembers. ("They punched and kicked me, pulled my hair.") They punched her in the stomach and dragged her outside, to the public basketball court which was a few meters walk from the house.

"Tinadyakan ako. Akala nila sasakloloohan ako ni Ka Bel kung marinig niya ang mga sigaw ko. Pero malayo na sya noon." ("They kicked me when I fell to the floor. They thought that by hurting me, I would scream, and Ka Bel would come to rescue me. They didn't know that Ka Bel and I agreed that no matter what happened, he wouldn't turn back.")

For a month or so after, soldiers would be stationed around the house, and the house became a virtual garrison. But Ka Osang was unfazed. One time, a burly soldier asked her for a glass of water. She ignored the request.

"Namura ko yung sundalo. Sabi ko, ang dami-daming kriminal na nagkalat - sa Malacanang lang ang dami na - pero bakit kami ang binabantayan?"

("I cursed at the soldiers. There were so many criminals on the loose - especially in Malacanang. Why don't they go after them?")

Ka Bel went into hiding in Central Luzon. It's something of a legend in the labor movement that he was taken in by members of the New People's Army who heard of his escape. For two years, he took shelter with the rebels and took the nom de guerre "Ka Anto" after one of the fathers of the labor movement, Crisanto Evangelista. But instead of an armalite, Ka Anto carried a portable typewriter.

"Sa mga bahay na sinisilungan ng hukbo, may mga batang nasa high school. Ginawa nila akong taga-makinilya. Ako yung nagta-type ng mga assignment at term paper nila," he says

smiling.

("I stayed in the homes where the NPA stayed. There was a youngster who went to highschool there. They made me typist. I typed up their assignments and tempapers.")

Every three to five months, Ka Osang would visit her husband. It was a complicated process, and very tiring. She went on her pilgrimage to Central Luzon until the Marcos was ousted via People Power on February 25. When Corazon Aquino became president, she ordered the release of all political prisoners, and in particular mentioned Ka Bel.

Ka Osang herself went to take her husband home.

On hindsight, Ka Osang wonders where she got her strength. "Siguro dahil lagi akong sabik makita sya kaya di ko na pinansin yung pagod," she says. ("I was so eager to see him again I took no notice of the exhaustion.")

But more importantly, she adds, she was bouyed by the knowledge that her husband was an inspiration to many. "Naging aktibista na rin ang ibang anak namin. Walang galit sa mga anak namin kahit may panahong lumaki silang walang tatay - alam nila kung ano ang pinaglalaman ng ama nila." ("Our other children have become activists as well. They show no anger or resentfulness for growing up without their father being there. They know what their father is fighting for.")

And what does Ka Bel have to say about his wife?

He recites a few lines from the song Kasama by Gary Granada: "Hindi lang siya kaibigan, di lang siya kapatid. Di lang kasintahan, o kaisang-dibdib. Di lang siya asawa, o inang uliran. Siya'y aking kasama, sa mapagpalayang kilusan."

In private, they call each other 'Ma' and 'Daddy.' He says Ka Osang has a sharp tongue. "Istriko sya sa mga bata. Pero pag may nagka-problema ang kahit sino sa kanila, bibitawan ang lahat. Kahit sakit ng sarili niyang katawan, nakakalimutan niya," he says. A grandson, 17-year old Cris, agrees. "Si Lola lang ang laging nanenermon, si Lolo, tahimik lang. Pero spoiled kaming lahat sa kanilang dalawa."

Ka Bel says he is well-taken care of. Ka Osang insists on preparing his clothes every morning, whether it's the round-collar shirts he wears to rallies, or the barong tagalogs for Congress. "Alam ko kung hindi siya ang naglalaba ng damit ko. Iba ang pakiramdam." (I can tell when it's not her who has llaundered my clothes. They feel less comfortable.)

She is also his chief confidante. He shares with her the details of his day - the rallies he marched in, the general mass assemblies of the local unions he has attended, and lately, about the Congress committee meetings and other legislative functions he goes to. "Siya naman kinukwento sa akin ang kakulitan ng mga apo namin," he shares. ("In turn, she tells me about the antics of our grandchildren and how everything is with the various members of our family.")

For a couple whose meeting and marriage are unusual at the least, Ka Bel and Ka Osang's marriage is solid and loving. Proof of this is their 10 children, who, in turn, have given them 27 grandchildren. Oh, Osang says cheekily, there were times when Ka Bel was younger, he did a bit of fooling around, but he always returned to her. That was when the first three children were very young, and Ka Bel and Ka Osang had frequent quarrels ("Pero nagsisi naman siya - nag-kursillo sa simbahan, naging sakristan pa nga!").

They don't like going to movies - more often, they would just the two of them go to Bulacan and visit relatives. Every two years or so, they would travel to Albay. Still very much like the 15-year old he rescued 48 years ago, Ka Osang becomes petulant when Ka Bel breaks his promises. "Minsan sobrang busy yan, di kami makapuntang Bulacan," she scolds.

"Pero naiintindihan ko din. Nami-miss ko lang naman siya. Marami kasi akong kahati sa kanya, ang mga manggagawa at ang sambayanan." (I understand his work, his chosen life. I just misshim, that's all. I know I have to share him with the rest of the working people and the masses.) ###