

Melay

transgender woman, 57, Sariaya Municipality, Quezon Province,
currently works as an entrepreneur

Be a beauty queen in thought, word, and deed.



Growing Up Trans

My love for beauty pageants was influenced by my mother. She liked Miss Universe, and we would watch it together on our television. I would observe and watch as my mother applied makeup on herself. In elementary school, I wore a blush-on and confidently went up on stage to receive my Grade Six certificate, looking pretty with pink cheeks.

When I was in Grade 5, I knew I was gay. I did not like going to the men's bathroom and preferred female friends. Fortunately, I did not experience discrimination. I did not have enemies or experience bullying when I studied at a coed elementary school and even at an all-boys high school. They liked me because I was not loud, lousy, messy, or flirty.

In high school, I went to San Sebastian, an all-boys school during my first year, where teachers would tell us that acting gay and being soft was not allowed. It was 1980 at the time. Everyone was closeted and kept to themselves. I discovered four gay classmates in the same class, and we became friends. We were not bashed by our fellow classmates. Instead, they found us amusing.

While studying, I would secretly join beauty contests. In 1982, when I was 15, I won the Miss Young pageant, my first ever pageant. I used my real name instead of a celebrity name as my stage name. I hid my beauty contest trophies in my cabinet behind my clothes. My parents found out when my sister showed my mother a picture of me in one of my pageants. They scolded me.

During one of my many gay pageants, I was discovered and invited by entertainers to go to Japan. At 17, a few days after high school graduation, I left for Japan. My father, a lawyer, tried to break the contract but eventually agreed to let me go. I did not like my life in Japan. It was endless rehearsals and shows. Maybe I was too young for that life because I still watched cartoons and hugged stuffed toys to sleep even as they put make-up on me.

When I returned to the Philippines from Japan, it was never the same with my family. The significant change in my body and appearance was an issue for my family. They told me that they accepted me but preferred that I not dress up like a woman.

Work Life And Activism

I chose to live by myself and rented an apartment in Pasay City. Because I was not able to go to college, I became a regular performer in gay bars in Metro Manila, worked at a beauty salon, and became a make-up artist in a bar along Roxas Boulevard until I had my own salon business. I also worked in an ad agency.

When I was in my mid-thirties, I ran a salon business with eight branches together with my cousin. It was mentally and physically taxing so we eventually closed six branches.

In 2013, I became a member of Sariaya 13hundred, the first gay association in Quezon Province (Southern Luzon). Sariaya 13hundred is turning 50 years old in 2023. We implement projects for LGBTIQ persons and provide services to the whole community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I coordinated the distribution of food packs (rice, canned foods, coffee) to LGBTIQ people.

In 2022, I joined Golden Bekis through Rey, one of the founders. I wanted to support his advocacy, his vision, and dream of building a shelter for LGBTIQ elders.



COVID-19 Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic happened, I had only two branches of my business left. I tried to save them but to no avail. The economy was really low. Eventually, I had to let go of my two salons.

In 2021, I went to Manila to care for my ailing father. I stayed with him for ten months until his death at age 96. During that time, I also had personal health issues, gastritis and gallstones. My Social Security benefits (SSS) application was rejected, and I had to pay thousands of pesos for gallbladder surgery.

Reflections On Growing Older And Future Hopes

Currently, at age 57, I live a simple life at home, away from the bright lights and fast-paced city life. I prioritize my health and my well-being. I do not smoke or drink. I did not expect that I would grow old alone. I have regrets about not finding a partner sooner. I have regrets about being too picky. Now that I am older, I realize that having someone in your life is better than no one. When I was in my 30s and 40s, I should have looked for a Filipino husband, but I did not think of that.

Message For LGBTI Youth

The memories of our youth should be reminders that time has gone, things have changed, and we should learn to adapt to the new chapter of our lives. We have to lessen the bad in order to maintain the good and preserve what needs to be treasured.

