

# Rey

gay man, 62, Pasay City, currently working part-time

**I am golden, never too late to dream and inspire others. My passion leads me to my destiny.**



## Growing Up Gay

I was born and raised in Sampaloc, Manila. I have four sisters and four brothers. I am the youngest son.

I have been openly gay since I can remember. I loved to play with my sisters, and loved cooking and playing with dolls and games that girls played, like Jackstones (Filipino version of five stones), Chinese garter (Filipino jumping game), and Piko (Filipino hopscotch). I also had crushes on handsome guys. Boys my age would tease me, heckle me, and call me, 'Bakla, bakla' (gay). This did not bother me because I knew it is true. In high school, I met a gay classmate, and we became very close and did everything together. I would sneak out of our house and go to my gay friend's house, where my crush lived.

In the 1970's, homophobia was very strong, and my family was religious. My brothers would ask me to stop acting like a girl to avoid problems. My father would make me stretch on the bench, and hit me with a leather belt every time I returned from my gay friend's house. My brothers would also beat me, strike me on the back of my neck, kick and slap me whenever they got drunk, telling me that being gay brings shame to the family and that I should lead a heterosexual life so as not to be bullied. But it was ironic because it was my own father and brothers who were abusing me. My mother would defend me from my father and brothers, but I also pitied my mother.



Getting depressed from the situation, I was forced to leave home. I went to my friend's house where my friend's parents welcomed me. But my father went after me, bringing a piece of wood to beat me. Worried for my friend's safety, I left. I was constantly in hiding, moving from one friend's house to another.

I started to sleep on the street with other gay people who also ran away from their homes. The church's portico became our refuge. The church stairs were our stage, the church garden served as our auditorium for young gays from nearby villages who would join us at play as we imagined ourselves in a beauty pageant. In this tiny space, we were happy. It helped me and my friends get by despite the hunger and cold pavements. We were sad but glad that we had each other's backs through thick and thin.

My friends and I lived as out gays. We did not hide in a closet even if we were discriminated against and abused for expressing ourselves. We were constantly bullied, called names, bad-mouthed for just walking on the street. Men hanging out, drinking on the street and outside bars threw stones at us. Empty bottles would fly from nowhere. Thugs who hated gays would punch us without provocation. Most of the time, we did not fight back. We just ran away or hid because we did not want our family to know that we were in such a pitiful situation living on the streets. We learned to avoid situations like these. We would walk the other way when we encountered a group of drunk men on the streets.





## Work Life

My gay friends and I did laundry and cleaned the houses of people we knew so we could earn money and eat. Later on, we discovered that we had talent for dancing and singing, so we made money caroling during Christmas and participating in contests during fiestas. We founded a group called Midnight Sward (Filipino for gay) and were invited by a talent agency to do shows in Japan. I finished two contracts with this agency but I did not go back to Japan because I could not stand the winter.

Instead, I worked in local nightclubs in the Philippines, doing variety shows in Pampanga, Baguio, Zamboanga, Cebu, Iloilo, Cagayan de Oro, touring for six years. I also performed at Miss Universe Night Club in Pasay City, which is famous with Japanese and Chinese tourists. But as our dance group aged, our bodies grew older, and people mocked us, saying, 'Matatanda na, mukhang aswang' (old evil-looking creatures). I then started to work as a beautician and make-up artist for younger women performers in nightclubs.

Reflexology helped me transition from performing to becoming a massage therapist. I offered my massage services on sliding scale fees. I charged 300 pesos for clients who were able to pay and accepted some elderly neighbors for free. I also provided free street massages to people in wheelchairs, free haircuts to seniors, and free make up for graduating students from high school, university, vocation school, beautician school, mixture of all. People recognized my talent and started to give me referrals. Reflexology massage and beautician work became my other means to earn in addition to drag performance.

When I was younger and stronger, I could work more, multi-task, and earn better. When my siblings and friends needed money, I helped them out. I also contributed funds so my nieces and nephews could go to school. On Christmas, New Year, birthdays, All Souls' Day, I brought food for my relatives. Every Christmas, I was like Santa Claus, and my nieces and nephews would line up for my cash gifts.



## Housing

In 2015, when I was 54, a friend introduced me to Golden Gays, a group for ageing gay people. It was started in 1975. They used to have a residential care facility for older gay people in need of shelter, called Home for the Golden Gays, owned by Justo Justo, an AIDS activist, columnist, and member of the Pasay City Council (city legislature). The Home was gutted by fire and demolished so I provided housing in my apartment for some of the residents. They stayed with me for five years until 2020.

## Intimate Relationships

I had several relationships. One with a student, another one that was very toxic, and several others. I eventually lost interest in live-in relationships.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, nightclubs and beauty parlors closed. Moving around was difficult due to travel restrictions and health protocols. It was also difficult because no one would hire us, elderly LGBTI people. I had to be careful with my daily expenses and found ways to scrimp on rice, water and electricity because the salon where I worked was forced to close and I had no income. I endured hunger, eating rice with only salt or soy sauce. I couldn't afford rent for six months. I had no money even for public transport and had to walk everywhere to find ayuda (monetary or grocery aid).

During the pandemic quarantine, in September 2020, a group of us, mostly beauticians from the Baclaran area (in Metro Manila), formed a group of elderly LGBT persons who were indigent with no permanent home and elderly LGBT persons with disabilities. We named our group Golden Bekis. Since we had no work because of the pandemic, we had lots of time. We made video blogs on Facebook and YouTube to earn money. Eventually, people found out about us. Kindhearted people would send us bags of groceries. Students would interview us for their thesis projects and term papers and give us cash donations and groceries as appreciation for our efforts and time.





The pandemic taught me to regularly take medications and keep my health in check. My nephews and nieces helped me during the pandemic but I did not want to burden them since they have their own families to support. When restrictions were lifted in 2021, I went back to work in a beauty salon but it wasn't sustainable because the salon had few clients due to the rainy season. So, I performed at drag queen events that corporations would invite us to perform for.

### **Reflections On Growing Older And Future Hopes**

Although I am earning income from working in the beauty salon, giving reflexology massage, and doing drag performance, I still worry about my everyday expenses like water and electricity. I fear becoming homeless if I am unable to pay rent and my landlord asks me to vacate. I have joint and muscle pain. I worry about losing my strength, my inability to perform tasks well, to climb footbridge stairs, and move as fast as before. I fear I may become jobless and so desperate that I need to beg for help. Who will help me when I am already weak? If I could turn back time, I wish I had continued my studies and earned a college degree so I could get a better job and enjoy a better life.

I envision building a Home for the Golden Bekis, gathering charitable and passionate people together to create a home for LGBTI people who are homeless and unemployed so we could live together and help each other with livelihood so we can remain strong and energetic. Our envisioned Home can also provide support and inspiration to LGBTI youth.

### **Message For LGBTI Youth**

Although I am not rich, I am still able to help friends and other LGBTI seniors in Golden Bekis through resourcefulness, grit, and courage. We all have a right to live in peace and equality. We only have one life to live and one planet to share with everyone so respect and be respected.

