

Zeny

lesbian, 73, Pasay City, self-employed beauty products retailer

I compare my life to a bamboo tree. When a typhoon or storm comes, it will get knocked down but rise again to help and benefit people.

Growing Up Lesbian

Since childhood, I experienced mocking looks from the public, and people would avoid or bully me. I would just hide my feelings and cry alone. I was in grade school when I noticed that I was drawn to my female friends. I felt good whenever I was with my female crush. I frequently hung out with my male friends. I never wore a dress and preferred short haircuts, shorts and shirts.

When I reached high school, it became clearer to me that I wanted to be with girls. I would hang out with boys who were visiting girls they were courting and joined my male friends during their harana (serenades) at the homes of the girls. My parents would scold me for staying out until the wee hours of the morning with mostly male friends.

I finished my third year in high school but did not finish my fourth year as I was more interested in continuing to hang out with my male friends. Most of the time, I would miss my morning classes. My parents prodded me to marry since I was no longer interested in continuing my studies.



Marriage

In 1968, I abided by my parents' wishes and married a man ten years my senior. I was 18 years old. At the civil wedding officiated by the judge, I wore knee-high shorts and the judge even humored me by asking, 'Where is the bride?'

I was not happy in my marriage and did not feel love for my husband. We never had children. My husband just let me be and, later in our marriage, I believed that my husband finally accepted that we were not meant for each other and that I wanted a woman in my life. My husband died at the age of 50. I was 40 years old. I was in the marriage for 22 years. I left Bulacan (city in Central Luzon) where I had been living with my husband and relocated to Pasay City (south of Manila).

Work Life

Since I was an out lesbian, I had a hard time finding jobs offered to female applicants such as sales ladies in department stores because of my so-called boyish appearance. The stores preferred applicants who were typically feminine looking, wore dresses and make-up. Eventually, I landed a job in my aunt's printing press as an agent for made-to-order plastic bags for stores.

When I moved to Pasay City, I met Justo Justo or JJ as he was fondly called. He was the chairperson of the barangay (community local government unit) where I lived. I had gone to the barangay to get financial assistance. I introduced myself to JJ and told him that when I was 23 years old, I had performed a song in a show he used to produce and host on Channel 11 television. That started our friendship. JJ asked me to work for the barangay, running errands and sweeping the streets. Later, I joined the barangay tanod (night village watchers who patrolled the streets and provided security). I worked there for 11 years, earning an allowance of 500 pesos a month.



When JJ became the Pasay City Councilor, his mother took over his position as the barangay chairperson. JJ's mother trusted me so much and treated me as a family member. I would represent her in meetings whenever she had a scheduling conflict. Doing this task, I was exposed to discrimination. For instance, in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meeting, women teachers would avoid me. They would not talk to me or sit near me. I felt as if I had some kind of contagious disease and ended up bursting into tears, saying to myself, 'Tao rin naman ako' (I am also human).

Housing

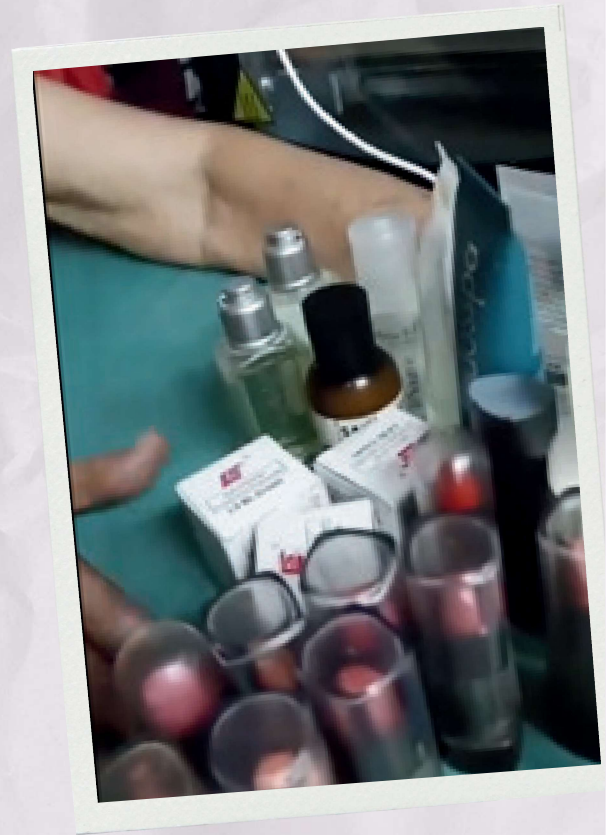
Deprived of job opportunities as a young lesbian, I was not able to maintain a regular job that would allow me to purchase low-cost housing.

When Home for the Golden Gays opened in Pasay City, I felt I had found a home and a family. The Home was established by Councilor JJ in his own home. Around 150 LGBTI old and young people would gather in a four-floor building to sleep, eat, and hold shows. Some homeless LGBTI people who were thrown out of their homes or had left their families, found refuge in this place. It gave LGBTI people visibility. We held events at the Bonifacio Elementary School covered court on Saturdays and Sundays and people in the community saw us.

When Councilor JJ died, the property was claimed by his relatives and the Home was closed. The homeless LGBTI people were forced to live in the streets again, some lived with their friends, and some built makeshift homes in vacant lots with other informal settlers in the city.

COVID-19 Pandemic

During the height of the pandemic, it was immensely difficult for me. I received 1500 pesos on my birthdays from the local Office for Senior Citizens Affairs. I received one-time cash aid of 6,000 pesos from the Department of Social Welfare Development. Friends of Golden Bekis and some NGOs gave me bags of groceries.



Reflections On Growing Older And Future Hopes

Now over 70 years old, I have no stable income, no savings, no state pension, and I live alone in cramped makeshift housing that is noisy and located in an unsafe community. I have high blood pressure and diabetes. At my age, I really find it difficult to work. I strive to pay for my daily needs and maintenance medication by selling lipstick and make-up. Sometimes I ask friends to give me money so I can buy medicine. At times, I receive cash gifts when I offer prayers during funeral wakes.

I used to be happy-go-lucky, but now I am careful with my decision-making. Faith has been a great help to me along with hard work to overcome trials. I look back at the days of our Home for the Golden Gays with much happiness and longing. It has never been the same since we lost our Home. I have a strong desire to be part of the establishment of another home for older LGBTI people. I hope that Pasay City will help us establish a new home for older LGBTI people that is large enough for a minimum of 50 people. As a senior citizen, I believe there is an urgency to extend assistance and care for us.

Message For LGBTI Youth

I have learned that it is important to be humble, courteous, kind, and generous. I hope young LGBTI people will not run away from home. While their parents are paying for their education, they should study hard so that when they grow older they will have their education to hold on to and they will not live a life of poverty.

