

Generation Y
by Vinia M. Datinguino
i magazine, Jan-Mar 2001



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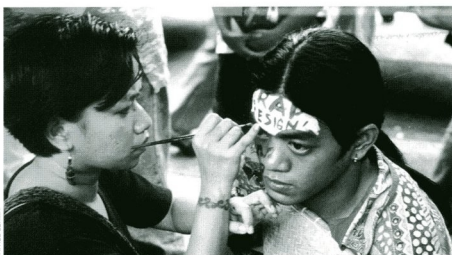
SHE KNEW her mother had taken part in similar actions before, and so when 19-year-old Halina Santiago called home at the height of Edsa II to say she was going to take part in the march to Mendiola, she expected only to be reminded to keep safe. Instead, her mother, a veteran of the First Quarter Storm of the 1970s, told her to forget it and go home. They argued, and Halina got a lecture. In the end, the Fine Arts major went home, most probably convinced that she had just missed being part of history.

Then again, Halina had already spent many hours at Edsa, where thousands of young people like her made up a large part of the protesters calling for Joseph Estrada's ouster from the Presidency. In fact, there were so many youths at Edsa II that at times being there was like being in a rave party, or worse, in a sweaty, heaving, mosh pit, especially at night, when some local rock bands even stopped by to entertain the crowd.

PHOTO: L. LUNA

This May, the youth of the nation may yet make their presence felt once more in another political event: the elections for local positions and seats in the Upper and Lower Houses.

By their sheer number alone, the youth are a force to reckon with. Data from the National Statistics Office show that in 1995, there were more than 10.4 million Filipinos ages 18 to 25. The Commission on Elections estimates that 90 percent of this figure are registered voters. That makes for some 9.4 million young voters, roughly 35 percent of the total turnout in the 1998 elections. Considering the plurality of the electoral arena, where a few thousand votes could spell win or loss, the youth is one sector candidates can only ignore at their own risk.



RAFAEL LIMBA

Face-painting was all the rage at Edsa.

That is, if these young voters deemed it worth their while to cast their ballot. As late as last year, that didn't seem to be the case. Twenty-six-year-old Jules Alcantara, for instance, confesses she has never voted, although she was already old enough to participate in the last two elections. She reasons, "I couldn't find anyone worthy of my vote."

Now, however, Alcantara is raring to go to the polls. Many others in her age bracket and younger are also preparing for the elections, largely because of what they had experienced in a span of four days in January at a busy Metro Manila intersection.

For some reason, however, these same youngsters have been hard-pressed to convince even those just a wee bit over 30 that they understood perfectly why they were at Edsa, much less why they *had* to be there. Indeed, for all the platitudes the young have been reaping for their participation in the latest People Power revolt, the fact is that not too many people are convinced of just how much of that was borne of real conviction and how much was the result of a youthful sense of adventure. As a consequence, doubts persist if that would translate into increased participation by the youth in the political exercises, including elections.

Take Argee Guevarra, a 31-year-old activist and teacher at the upscale University of Asia and the Pacific. Although he sings praises to his students who were part of People Power 2, he also says, almost in the same breath, "They probably enjoyed the adrenaline rush while believing only a third of what we're fighting for."

Even Halina's mother, Lilia Santiago, says there was a "confluence of factors" why so many young people went to Edsa, ones that may have had very little to do with their understanding of the issues or a genuine desire to be part of the movement for change. She argues, for instance, that some may simply have been following their teachers for their lessons. She says that at the University of the Philippines, where she teaches, some faculty members declared that their classes would be held at Edsa.

Another reason, says Santiago, could be the media. "Media was such an active advocate of people power that you cannot escape it," she points out. Indeed, frustration among Filipinos, young and old alike, could not have shot up so rapidly had many of them not been watching the impeachment trial live on TV and witnessed how the senator-judges voted against the opening of the controversial second envelope from the Equitable-PCI Bank.

Then of course there's that new technology, namely texting, that made it easier for those too upset to do anything else to tell friends to come join them at Edsa. Since many (if not most) texters belong to the 30-and-under age group, it is no wonder that those who turned up at Edsa were young.

Yet, for all these probable factors, Lilia Santiago herself seems to have felt there was something more to the presence of the youth at Edsa. In explaining why she put her foot down on having Halina and her other children join the Mendiola march, Santiago says, "I felt their anger, which made me even more afraid."

CES CONACO, a social psychologist at the University of the Philippines, thinks that the reason why many people consider the huge turnout of youths at Edsa as phenomenal is largely because of notions older people have about Generations Y – and even X, which includes the likes of Guevarra. In other words, their presence at Edsa did not seem to match the general image of the young these days. Which is, says Conaco, "that young people don't care."

She herself doesn't agree with this view. But, she concedes, "Older people don't have access to young people's thoughts and feelings. What we saw was the behavior and we exclaim, 'Wow, they're here!'"

What is rather curious, however, is why it should be surprising that the young put on such a presence at Edsa. After all, young people have always been at the forefront of movements for change in this country, and in many other nations around the world for that matter. Whether the object of ire happened to be colonial forces or contemporary leaders in need of instructions on how to run a country, many of those who put up a challenge were in their teens or 20s. Perhaps that was because of the general sense of invincibility among the young. Or their innate distaste of authority. Or their



being free of other concerns such as supporting a family. Or all of the above, plus a true sense of commitment to whatever cause it was they believed in.

Some observers, though, say this was true only up to 1986. After People Power 1 overthrew dictator Ferdinand Marcos, there simply seemed no sense to keep ramming heads with the government. Foremost among the pressing concerns of the day was rebuilding what had been ravaged by Marcos. Many rebel guerrillas dropped their guns and set up cooperatives or nongovernmental organizations. Student activists who had dropped out re-enrolled.

It didn't take long before older activists began to despair over the dearth of dedicated student activists, and what felt like the growing apathy among the young. Nothing seemed to push the youth to take action – not the oil price hikes, the continuing poverty, the massive corruption in government, or any of the other issues that Marcos obviously failed to take with him in exile.

A few observers say many young people were just too busy buying what they fancied, despite the country's obvious economic difficulties. Susan Dimacali, senior vice president at McCann Ericson, one of the major

players in the advertising industry, in fact says that more Filipino youths are exercising their own purchasing power. In part, this is because of the phenomenon of overseas work, which has left the children of the estimated six million Filipinos working abroad to decide, on their own, what they need or ought to buy.

McCann's accounts include Johnson & Johnson, Globe, and Coca-Cola, all of which devote a huge pile of their advertising pesos to the youth market. Sprite's "Magpakatotoo ka!" series, for example, is very much aimed at the young, defining what's "cool" and what's not. Dimacali says, "It's a very big market. The youth is a formidable force."

But Dimacali does caution against generalizing, noting that young people come from different financial backgrounds and have different "issues" among themselves. "For the AB, the concern could be my shrinking allowance," she says. "But for those in CD, they could want to do something for the country."

Yet, Dimacali says, their research indicates that in general, the youth today "are a little apathetic about government and where this country is going."

She probably would not get much debate on that from publishers of the magazines that target the young. Overall, these magazines, which have suddenly multiplied in the last couple of years, make for highly superficial reads and rarely take on so-called "hard" subjects such as politics. And so *Candy* magazine, marketed for teenagers, has as standard stuff lessons for those out on the date with Mr. Crush and disaster strikes, tips on how to shimmer on long summer nights, and when flirting is allowed.

Candy is among the glossies belonging to the Summit Publishing stable. *Cosmopolitan*, another Summit magazine, supposedly caters to an older crowd – i.e. young women out of college up to age 35 – and therefore tackles topics that are decidedly more mature. Past articles

have discussed matters such as how to manage personal finances and how to keep healthy. According to Summit chief Lisa Gokongwei, *Cosmo* is meant to be a "handbook to life" that would hopefully empower young women. Gokongwei, herself a GenXer, says, "We encourage these girls (to think that) you can do anything you want. You can be a fun, fearless female."



Faces of Protest: Young people used their creativity and wit to express their rage.

Still, she also admits that for *Cosmo*, "the basic stuff is fashion."

All these, of course, do not appear to be off the mark about what interests people who are still supposed to be in school or in their first years in the workplace. But it can also be argued that the image they conjure of the young is of a carefree bunch whose concerns run skin-deep and have difficulties seeing anything beyond themselves.

As in all stereotypes, though, that "image" is not exactly true. Twenty-year-old Pam Pastor bristles, "Look what kind of young people they think we are. *Puro* parties. Whitening lotion. Cellphones that would tell us where the gimmick is. We're not all vain, we're not all shopaholics."

She adds, "Have you ever seen a commercial with a young person

reading a book? No! Statistics *lang kami* for commerce."

Pastor herself divides her time between schooling and writing for the youth section of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. She complains, "The reason why they were surprised to see us at Edsa is because they put us in this box. That young people only care about MTV and texting. But they don't know us."

In all probability, Pastor is right. Yet this much is also true: like many others in her age bracket, activism of any kind was not among her choice preoccupations — until Estrada found himself on the dock at the Senate.

IN TRUTH, one of few things that Filipinos could probably thank Estrada for is making the youth finally sit up and take notice of what was happening around them. Pastor says the now infamous 11-10 vote at the impeachment trial was more than enough to make her head toward Edsa. "I think it woke everyone up, not just the young people. I just knew I had to be there," she says.

"It would have been irresponsible for me not to have gone to Edsa," seconds Alcantara, who also writes for the *Inquirer's* youth section. "It took me less than a minute to decide."

What happened next was protest that was predominantly Generation Y style. Which is to say, a lot of street wit, music, and dancing. The older generation apparently didn't know what to make of most of it, although many of them went up the stage at Edsa and gave speeches, notably short ones, in front of the youthful crowd.

One theory on why many of the youngsters lasted days at Edsa was not only because it was "in" place, but also because it was a whole lot of fun to be there. Conaco, however, argues that this cannot be seen in an entirely negative light. She says, "It's normal human behavior, because why will you engage in something that has no positive reward?"

Jason Doplito, 20, for his part, admits, "It was fun. But we didn't come there thinking it would be fun. It was fun feeling empowered." Alcantara adds, "We came not thinking when it's going to end, because nobody knew. What made me stay was seeing all these young people I normally see in bars."

She also says without a touch of irony, "I had thought they were all apathetic."

There is a nagging worry, however, that the overwhelming participation of the youth in People Power 2 has not been processed into "real learning." Sociologist Karina David-Constantino has been quoted in one magazine as saying, "Remember, this is the MTV generation. The speed of information allows them to see bits and pieces of ideas that help them come up with a conclusion without necessarily having to really analyze them."

Guevarra thinks the same. "The youth of today reflect their overriding need for speed," he observes, such that they want everything quick, including solutions to political crises. And the downside to this, he says, is that these young people "cannot match the determination and sense of self-sacrifice and struggle of say, the militants of the FQS."

GenYers may beg to disagree. Alcantara, for instance, snorts, "*Kang hirap rin lang* (If it's just hardship we're talking about), it's not necessarily easier now." Pastor also declares, "I was ready to fight. Anyone there was ready to



fight eh. Kasi you know there's something big you're fighting for."

No one perhaps would question the courage of the youths at Edsa or try to diminish the import of what they accomplished there. But what some observers like Guevarra may be pointing out is that when the youth took a stand at Edsa II, many of them had yet to have a full grasp of the political situation and understand the possible consequences of their actions, in large part because they were, after all, neophytes to political activism. There was commitment, but it had yet to go deep enough to transform itself into true conviction.

Think for a moment of Halina Santiago's mother Lilia, who on the night of January 19 may have been congratulating herself for having brought up such a dutiful daughter, one who took time to call her up, tell her what she was planning to do, and follow her orders to go home, albeit with much resentment. According to the older Santiago, her children have chided her for being "*madaya* (unfair)" and not letting them go to Mendiola. But she says she had quickly recalled how that spot had been the scene of violent dispersals and confrontations during her time, and her maternal instincts took over.

Here's the thing, though: chances are the activist Lilia — who was probably already conducting teach-ins herself when she joined the anti-Marcos demonstrations 30 years ago — would not have done what Halina did, maybe even if there were cellphones at the time, or even if her own mother had stood before her at Mendiola and tried to drag her home.

THE GOOD news is that Edsa II did prove to be a profound educational experience for young Filipinos. Even university professors have noticed their students' sudden interest in the upcoming elections, as well as a palpable optimism among the young regarding the future of the country. According to Conaco, her students are displaying a "renewed faith in the system" that carries with it the "renewed faith that I can be part of change."

She credits the transformation to People Power 2, saying, "I think there was quite a bit of latent learning about what is going on. Those four days in Edsa was a great occasion for political socialization. You can't help it."

Doplito says he would be first to admit that in the past, he was apathetic at times. He says, "While Estrada was president what could we have done? You could rant all you want (and that would not have changed anything)."

These days, though, Doplito says he has come to the realization that "we have that chance of again doing something to change our leaders." He says this is all due to Edsa II, where, for the first time, he felt empowered.

"That you can make a difference," echoes Pastor. "Isn't it they say that when you're surrounded by all these people you're supposed to feel really small? It's the other way around. You feel really big."

As for Halina Santiago, she says she is now determined to make her vote count. She is bent on putting only the most qualified candidates on her ballot, and seems to be scrutinizing as many as she can. She says that as early as the impeachment trial, she already saw "who the *balimbing* (turncoats)" were.

"I definitely will not vote for them," she says. "I will more likely vote for those who made a stand even when the case was *malabo* (on shaky ground). But I'll see. It could only have been all for show."

