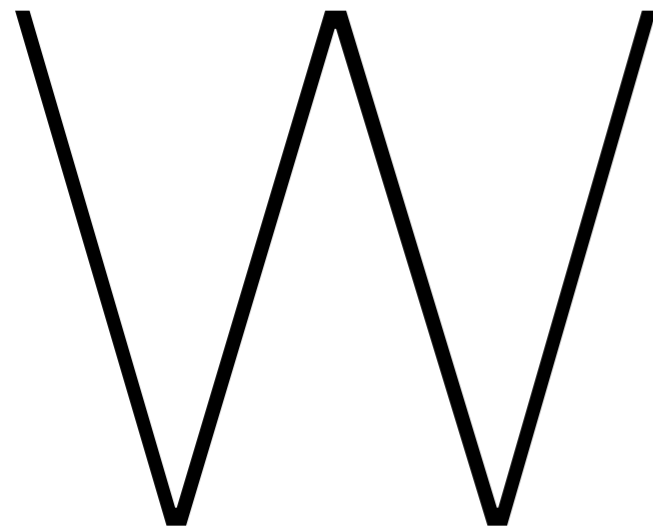


**PORTRAIT OF  
A LADY**  
The lovely  
Jessie in her  
younger years;  
(opposite) With  
granddaughter  
Sunshine  
Lichauco de  
Leon

Most know **Jessie Lichauco** as someone who spent her life trying to help children and people in need. To her granddaughter, **Sunshine Lichauco de Leon**, she is her dear Nana

MY GRANDMO

THER, MY MUSE



WE ALL GREW UP WITH stories—of what happened in a moment on a day, in a year. I grew up watching other people listen to those stories.

Wherever my grandmother had a house—whether Boston, Manila, or London—everyone, friend or stranger, was always welcome to come by. As she shared tales of history, humanity, and great love, all peppered with lots of wise life-changing advice, I saw the faces of her listeners fill with fascination, their minds full of questions, their hearts wanting to know more. Her gift is her memory and that memory has a special way.

Now 104, Nana Jessie often asks me what I remember of her when I was growing up, as neither of us can explain why we have such a special bond. Was it because she convinced me to eat lettuce by putting sugar on it, or opened my mind to books by presenting me with a copy of *Stuart Little* on a long flight to Manila? Was it because she was my anchor in a world of constant change? Or was it perhaps just a matter of timing—my grandfather passed away five months before I was born—and Nana had decided that perhaps we just “traded places.”

I may not remember much from my childhood but I do know that I have always wanted to share her story. I wanted people to care about the history of the Philippines—which most did not know enough about. Most importantly, I wanted to share “Nana’s way.” Through her example, I hoped to remind people how easy it is to help and to make a difference in another person’s life—you just need to care.

In the beginning, I thought her story should be published as a book. But to even consider that, I had to learn to write. Although Nana and many others had encouraged me to become a journalist, I was terrified. I knew that I liked to ask questions but putting the thoughts on paper was a whole different skill.

Nana would tell me that the best way to get over a fear of writing was to write. At age 96, she held my hand as I held my pen. She would also teach me the importance of quieting my overactive mind and listening to my intuition.

I would fax her my drafts and she would call me on the phone to explain her edits, becoming the cocoon that nurtured my creative voice until it felt secure enough to emerge in flight. Many of my ideas evolved from our conversations, and her love of the Philippines became the new lens through which I would see the country around me.

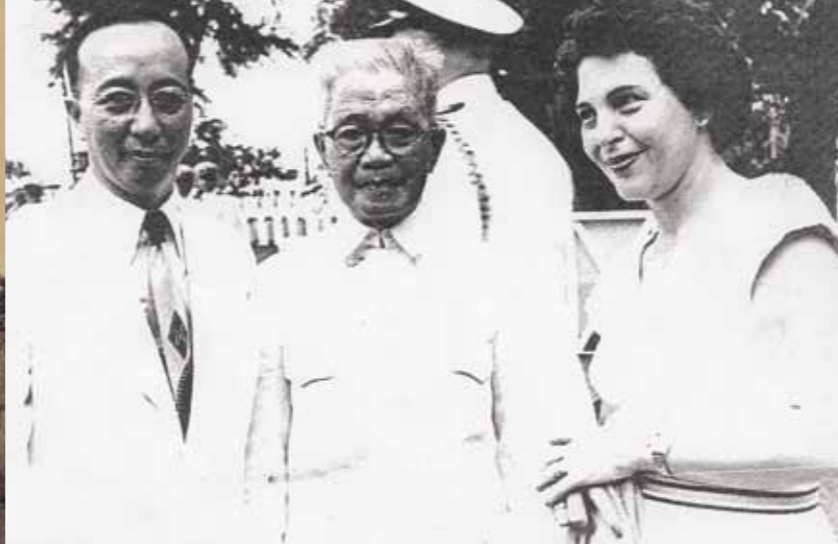
My grandmother does not live with any fear of ideas, people, or change, and still lives in a world of constant possibility—something that I feel has greatly influenced how I see things. So, when one day, a film-maker friend suggested that since she could still tell stories at her age and she remembered history with details that made it come alive, she would make the perfect character for a documentary movie I said, with complete naivety, “You are absolutely right. I am going to make a film.”

For the first few years I was on my own—I did not have a plan and I knew absolutely nothing about filmmaking. I



#### TIMELESS BEAUTY

In her swimsuit at Wack Wack Swimming Park; (opposite) With her husband Marcial Lichauco, dressed to go to a party in pre-war Manila



*My grandmother does not live with any fear of ideas, people, or change, and still lives in a world of constant possibility*



**TRY TO REMEMBER** Young Jessie on a ship in the 1930s on her way to Manila via Europe from the USA; (below) With her husband, Marcial Lichauco in their home in Tagaytay before the war; (opposite, clockwise from top-left) The first home built by the couple in Mandaluyong; Marcial Lichauco, Emilio Aguinaldo, and Jessie Lichauco; The couple in the late 1960's with seven children and first grandchild; At a business dinner with friends of Marcial; Jessie learning to shoot at the Gun Club; The young Marcial Lichauco, taken at Harvard University on his graduation day

did, however, know how to ask questions so I started with that, hiring a crew to video every question I could think to ask her. Nana always said, "with patience, things have a way of falling into place," so I figured I would just have to wait.

But the road to get there was long and arduous, lacking signs and complete with so many bumps that I often questioned whether I was even supposed to be driving! Nana, who was 99 at the time, also listened to my vision, albeit with reluctance. Convincing her to let me follow her around with a video camera for what became six years was a challenge in itself!

Although I randomly meet people throughout Manila who tell me stories of how my grandmother has left an imprint in their lives, she remains private at heart, insisting, "My life is not any more interesting than anyone else's." And while her eyes light up at any chance to inspire someone to learn about history, she also points at the hundreds of books on her shelves, suggesting, "No one cares about the past anymore. See? No one reads." I would then secretly whisper, "Perhaps you are right, Nana, but they do watch movies."

While I was listening to the anecdotes from her youth, I also found myself scribbling down what I refer to as her "Nana-isms,"—her witty, poetic, and often so full of simple truth one-liners on every topic from love to raising children, to letting go of anger, and why you should not overschedule your life.

"Anger," she says, "is a destructive emotion. It makes you bitter and hurts yourself more than anyone else. I don't begrudge or regret. I just pick myself up, bandage my wounds, and move on."

These Nana-isms have become my "life bible" and served as a guiding voice in my head. They have become so popular with



friends that I knew I would have to share them.

“You never know when you meet someone what the world intended” is another Nana-ism. When I met Suzanne Richiardone, a half-Filipina, New York City-based documentary film producer, this Nana-ism came to life. Although we originally met because she hired me to work on a project, we ended up becoming friends. She met Nana, and I realised Suzanne was exactly the person needed to help transform the film from concept to reality.

With my editor Justin Weinrich in New York, Suzanne in New York and Los Angeles, myself in Manila, and the music composer Baptiste Charvet in France, “Team Nana,” inspired by her stories of compassion, worked across four time zones—from our apartments, airplanes, trains, boats, the backseats of taxis, to the quiet corners of

for so long—that I would not finish the film in time for her to watch it.

When it ended, she stood up and said, “I can’t imagine living all over again, it would be impossible for anybody to live the kind of life that I have lived. And I feel that I have no enemies, I have only love, respect, and affection.” She continued, “One of the great fortunes of my life is that I’m sitting here amongst all you people tonight from whom I feel the affection in your hearts, and that I have been accepted and included. I’m here now and I intend to remain for the rest of my life.”

At the end of the evening, my grandmother warmed my heart. When someone asked her if she was proud of me, she said, “I am proud of Sunshine because she is my friend. Everyone can have a grandchild, but not everyone can have a friend.”

Sometimes, we throw a pebble into a pond simply to see it skip but have no idea how far

*“One of the great fortunes of my life is that I’m sitting here amongst all you people tonight from whom I feel the affection in your hearts, and that I have been accepted and included. I’m here now and I intend to remain for the rest of my life.”*

social events—to create a film which we hoped would balance the poetry of a woman, a river, an old house, and a tree with the story of a country.

Ironically, the film’s title came from my own memory. While growing up, I asked her quite a few times: “What on earth convinced you to go halfway across the world to marry a man in a country you know nothing about?” With a twinkle in her eye, Nana would give me the same answer, “curiosity, adventure, and love.”

After listening to over 40 hours of her life’s colourful moments, I also realised that these words have been not only her motivation but the thread that has tied together all her worlds and the people in them. Fast forward a few years, Nana has become my muse, and her life has become my art.

At age 104, Nana watched *Curiosity, Adventure and Love*—the story of Jessie and the country she made her home on a big screen in her Santa Ana house-turned-movie-theatre, to an audience of 50 close family and friends. That moment will remain the brightest star in my private universe of memories because as I sat there holding her hand, I could let go of the fear that had both driven me and plagued me

#### TREASURED MEMORIES

Jessie and Marcial’s traveling roots—with seven of her grandchildren and three great-grandchildren who visited from Hong Kong and the US; (opposite) Jessie Lichauco





those ripples will go. When my film premiered publicly at the World Premieres Film Festival Philippines, we were honoured to win a Special Jury Prize for documentary, which we immediately brought home to present to Nana. As I handed the trophy to her so we could take a photo, Nana instinctively grabbed a picture of my grandfather, Marcial P Lichauco, to share this special moment with us. Perhaps it was true what someone had said to me—that the film “was a love story of a man and of a country.”

A few days later, when I showed her the “film guest book” of comments people left for her, she said, “Thank you, Sunshine, for giving my life a sense of purpose.”

I remember Nana telling me one day, when I was still trying to figure out what my own purpose in life was, “There was a time when you had to stop chasing rainbows and put something in the pot of gold at the end of them.” This film is my gift to her rainbow. Since then, the film has begun its own journey, helped by people Nana’s spirit has touched.

the right to divorce says, “When the fight becomes so difficult, I will remember Jessie and never give up.”

Making this film was the most challenging thing I have done in my life, but seeing the reactions of people is like seeing a dream I never knew I had come true. It shows that there is still a hunger for history in the country, to understand where we come from, as a portal to know where we can still go. It shows that somewhere, deep down, people long to be reminded of simple truths in a complex world.

Nana reminds us how important it is to look someone in the eye and ask them “are you okay?” how if we see an opportunity to help someone in any way stranger or friend—it is our responsibility to do so, how we must be compassionate and not judge, and how we are all equal—the only difference between any of us is just opportunity. She reminds us of the power of and perhaps restores our faith in our own humanity.

A visit to Nana’s home on the river today is a step into a world of the past, but it is also

*I used to tell Nana that I was free to wander around the world as long as I knew where my anchor—my grandmother—was. She looked at me and said, “If I am your anchor, then you must be my sail”*

A steady stream of e-mails and social media messages have come through from people of all ages, nationalities, and countries—strangers and friends alike—encouraging me to show the film around the world, often offering to help me do so. Some messages are from people whose lives Nana had changed but had lost touch with, and others are just sharing how she has inspired them on a personal level.

A 13-year-old boy writes, “I found it amazing how you are still able to walk, talk, and inspire others. Thank you for showing us that little things can inspire big things and big events.” A girl about to graduate high school makes me promise to bring the film to schools as part of their ‘formation of values’ lessons because she thinks it will encourage her classmates to “go out in the world and do something good.” One lady declares, “This film will change my life. I have so many ideas of how to help but somehow life gets in the way and I never do them,” while a teacher who also helps women lobbying for

time well spent with a lady very much present in every way, and who still looks at the future with the same excitement in her eyes.

People still come to visit her, and by the time they leave, she will have learnt their life story and have likely offered advice or help they did not know they needed. “I can sit and talk to anyone—black, red, white, brown, naked, dressed—it does not matter to me—I look at the face and the heart and the eyes—the eyes tell the story of a person,” she says. Perhaps the secret to her age is that my grandmother is exactly the way she has always been.

I used to tell Nana that I was free to wander around the world as long as I knew where my anchor—my grandmother—was. She looked at me and said, “If I am your anchor, then you must be my sail.” The other day as I left her house she quietly said to me, “Thank you for loving me.” I think it might have been my heart that whispered back, “Thank you for teaching me love.” ❶

**COLOURFUL LIFE**  
(opposite)  
Jessie Lichauco poses and smiles at life on her 100th birthday