

City of GOLD

People who made their home
and history in Cagayan de Oro



Ann Gorra



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DEDICATION

To Jesus, who gives me hope;
To my mother, who taught me to read;
and to my husband, who makes me laugh.

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FOREWORD

Why this book?

My mother, who was my grade 3 teacher in Camaman, an Elementary School in Cagayan de Oro, taught our class Philippine history, which included a subject on Filipino heroes. I don't remember much about the others, but I vividly recall her lesson on our national hero, Jose Rizal, who was a brilliant polyglot, writer, medical doctor and patriot. One lesson that stuck in my memory was Jose Rizal's proverb, "*Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makakarating sa paroroonan.*" I can still see my mother standing in front of our class wearing her trademark A-line, knee-length dress uttering those words with much respect for the man. She did not explain its meaning, probably assuming that it should be evident to eight-year-old kids. It was not apparent to me, and I would mull this prov-

erb over and over, wondering why someone who forgot where she came from could not reach where she was going.

In my late 40s and having lived away from the Philippines for half of my life, I am now beginning to partially grasp what Jose Rizal meant about looking back so you can get to where you want to go. (I would like to emphasize the word “partially” because I will never know exactly what was in his mind when he said it. He belonged to the 1800s, and I am interpreting it as a woman in the 21st century.)

This book is a way of my looking back and coming face-to-face with who I am. Cagayan de Oro is the place where I grew up, played and worked half of my life. It is the town where I formed friendships that have withstood time and distance. It was where my parents nurtured me and my nine siblings. It was where I first saw my husband. It is where I feel rooted and where some people still know my name.

Part for nostalgia and part due to love of history, I thought of creating this book that will tell my story and the stories of other people who have made this place their home and have shaped the City of Gold. After all, their stories are my stories and yours as well. How many times have we passed by Wadhu’s Store? Haven’t all of us rode the *motorela*? And what about those Modtrade shirts? We paired them up with Levi’s jeans, and, girl, we thought we were hot! For the young at heart in the 1980s when RK was the radio to listen to in town, who had not heard Lady Love and wondered whether she was as lovely in person as she sounded on the airwaves? Every time we take a bite of the *pan-de-sal*, the memory of Ah Fat, who made the bread a byword in Cagayan de Oro, is never far. When we cross

the Lapasan highway, we can see Capitol University, founded by the late Mrs. Gloria Laureana San Pedro-Rosales, who shaped the future of many people in Cagayan de Oro especially the thousands who have graduated from her working student program. Everyone in this book has directly or indirectly touched our lives.

They have certainly enriched mine. I have met the most gracious people in undertaking this project. I was pleasantly surprised and humbled by the graciousness of Henry Tan of Modtrade, Dr. Fe Rosales-Juarez, a daughter of the late Mrs. San Pedro-Rosales, and Biema Cruz-Along of *The Mindanao Star*. Felix Go, nephew of Ah Fat, and his family showed me hospitality when I visited them in Lapasan. It was our first time to meet, and yet they opened their home to me. The discipline and the sense of dignity of Col. Leonardo Hernando and the late Abelardo Queppet engendered a sense of respect within me for the generation that fought in WW II, so we can have the freedom we enjoy now. The “oro” in Cagayan de Oro is not found in the riverbanks or in the mountains but in the heart of its people.

When I undertook this project, I did not think about the difficulty of doing it from a continent away. I live in Vancouver, and the people in my stories are in Cagayan de Oro. I was so eager that I forgot to take into account the distance and the amount of money and time that would be involved. I plodded on with it for a few years and would not have reached the finish line if not for the help of a few good people. I would like to thank my precious friends, Imma Rae Dagapioso-Gatuslao and Dolly Ilogon, who pointed me to the right contacts; the fearless Grace Albasin, who interviewed some of the people in this book and always delivered on her commitments; and my

dear niece, Vanessa Gorra, a thinker and writer, who patiently obliged my many requests. Please accept my deep gratitude.

To my faithful friend, Jesus Christ, whose interventions allowed me to connect with all the people I needed to meet in my last visit to Cagayan de Oro; to my mother and teacher Natividad de Castro Gorra, who instilled in me love of country and love of books; to my husband, Benny Rago, who gives me space to write and has never once asked that his needs come first before my passion; and to the Kagay-anons who love our city, this book is dedicated.

To all those who would read it, I only have one simple wish and that is you would, hopefully, enjoy the stories and find in them the richness of our heritage. And, maybe, one day, we may figure out where we are going and get there.

—*Ann Gorra*



CITY OF GOLD

Where in the world is Cagayan de Oro?

By Ann Gorra

The daughter of my close friend, Dolly Ilogon, visited me and my husband this summer in Vancouver on her way to the United Kingdom. When she learned that I was publishing a book of stories about Kagay-anons, she suggested that I include a view of its history. She has often been asked by her friends in San Francisco, CA what “Cagayan” stands for and she could not give them an answer.

I thought it was a good suggestion, and this is my attempt of giving the readers a summary of what I have heard and read about our city.

Cagayan de Oro is located in Mindanao, one of the three islands of the Philippines. The city sits at the northern tip of the island facing the Bohol



Cagayan de Oro is becoming known for its whitewater rafting adventure in the Cagayan de Oro River, quite appropriate for a city with a name that is believed to mean “a place with a river.”

Sea. It is bounded by hills in the south and other communities and cities on the east and west. Its population is between 700,000 and 900,000 people and is one of the fastest growing cities in Mindanao. It is an hour and twenty-five minutes by air from Manila.

The origin of Cagayan de Oro’s name has two versions: one the romantic and the other historical.

The romantic version proposes that the word “Cagayan” comes from *kagayha-an* which means “place of shame.” It is told that a tribal chieftain who lived on the eastern side of Cagayan River sent off his son to his enemy, a Muslim datu, to draft the terms of war. The young prince was conferring with the datu when he noticed a lovely daughter “peeping from behind a

door looking at him.” The boy was smitten and proposed marriage. The war never happened and the chieftain’s warriors, shamed that they didn’t get a chance to fight, dispersed, vowing never to return to this shameful place, henceforth known as “Kagayha-an.”

The historical version could not be further from the romantic.

Dr. Antonio J. Montalvan, one of the authorities on the city’s history, wrote that, “[according to] Father Miguel Bernad, S.J. of Xavier University, *cagayan* comes from the Malayo-Polynesian word *ag*, which means ‘water.’ *Ag* is present in words like *agus* (flowing water), *agusan* (place of flowing water), and *kagay* (river). Thus *kagayan* is ‘place with a river.’ ”

In my interviews with the old-timers in the city, they recalled the city as being called Cagayan de Misamis before it became Cagayan de Oro in the late 1940s. The *de Oro* was appended to it in the belief that there was gold in the area. This led to the monikers of “City of Golden Friendship” and “City of Gold.”

Imma Rae Dagapioso-Gatuslao, supervising tourism operations officer and officer-in-charge of the City Tourism and Cultural Affairs Office of Cagayan de Oro, says that one of the early names of the city was also *Kalambagohan* after the tree known as *lambago* that used to line the banks of the Cagayan River. It was along these treed river banks that the city’s first commercial district such as the wet market and trading post developed.

As to which was the true origin—*Kalambagohan* or *Kagayha-an* or *Kagayan*—I will leave it up to the city’s historians to debate.



ABELARDO NERI QUEPPET

A local Boy Scout
meets General Douglas MacArthur

As told by the late Abelardo Neri Queppet to Ann Gorra

My high school classmates at the Ateneo de Cagayan, now known as Xavier University, were celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese Imperial Forces. Father Edward Haggerty, our school rector, relayed the sad news to us. Although Hawaii was an island far away, the attack dragged Cagayan into WW II.

We did not know how to react to the news. *Makulba nga magana*. We were scared because we did not know what to expect—we had never experienced war before; we were excited because our classes got cancelled. Even

the spectre of war could not wipe out a 14-year-old youth's happiness over cancelled classes.

Cagayan de Oro, then, was known simply as Cagayan. It was only a municipality, not yet a city. There were only a few people, and everyone knew everyone else. It was lush with trees and cooler than it is nowadays. The *tartanilla* plied the streets of Divisoria. The Divisoria was only up to the Calle Pabayo, and the market was at the Amphitheater. The post office was located in its present site. Chaves Street, the main artery, was known as Del Mar, which means, of the sea, because it led to the sea; Tiano was known as Mindanao and Capistrano as Real. The durable Ah Fat Bakery was located at Real Street. Oddly, there were four Japanese bazaars in the Divisoria before the war. Two were bike stores called Osaki and Sugimoto. I got my bike from one of them. Osaki was located at the present site of Rose Pharmacy and Sugimoto was between Del Mar and Mindanao. As to why they were in Cagayan before the war, we never knew.

One thing we knew was that the spectre of war was bringing changes to our laid-back lives. Although the Japanese had not invaded Cagayan yet, these changes were afoot. The major one was the closing down of the civil government. Only the Bureau of Post, who was headed by my father, was left open. People could still communicate via telegram. Another adjustment that we had to get used to was the time. The clock was moved one hour forward, and everyone was expected to eat their dinner at 5 p.m. and turn off their lights shortly after. Cagayan had to be in total darkness to avoid detection by Japanese warplanes that could be flying above.

I was a Boy Scout, and one of my responsibilities was to make sure that



Mr. Abelardo Queppet, who passed away in September 2008, was a Boy Scout when he saw General Douglas MacArthur making his pit stop in Cagayan de Oro en route to Australia on his way to Washington, D.C. in 1942. He did not talk much about the encounter for fear of being branded a kapayason.

everyone followed the order. As soon as dusk gave way to night, I rode my bike (the one I bought from one of the Japanese bazaars) around Del Mar, Mindanao and to the pier, blowing my whistle to warn residents that it was time to shut their lights off.

My Scout Master, Epifanio Balase, assigned me to the task because I knew my way around town. I am a true-bred Kagay-anon.

My dad encouraged me to volunteer and participate in Boy Scout activities. I belonged to Troop I of the Cagayan Central School. There were about 20 Boy Scouts in our troop, among them were Jaime Tiano, Victor Roa and Terencio Gadrinab, Hugo Balase, Antonio Zacharies, Vic Itchon, Jose Apolinario, Cristobal Nagac and many others.

I was an eager beaver. I was only 14 years old, yet I knew my routine: wake up at 6 a.m., clean the house, eat breakfast and report to our HQ. I always wore the uniform: shorts, knee-high socks, red and blue neckerchief, brown shirt and the Boy Scout hat.

My other Boy Scout responsibility was to direct the traffic when the American convoys passed through Divisoria. The priority was to let the convoy through because they were moving targets visible from above. An American soldier by the name of Sergeant Hunter, who managed the Cagayan port at the time, directed me to make sure to stop the *tartanilla*. He joked, “Did you know that *tartanillas* do not have any brakes?”

Unbeknownst to me, Sergeant Hunter would be the person responsible for my ten-minute brush with one of the icons and controversial figures in WW II history. One day in March 1942, while I was at my post in Divisoria, he asked me to see him at the lighthouse in the pier that night. At 7 p.m., I cycled to the port, still wearing my Boy Scout uniform. He handed me a cup of coffee. After I drank it, he placed his arm around me and said, “General MacArthur will be coming here tonight, between midnight and dawn.” I did not ask further questions.

When dawn came, 3 PT boats [PT stands for Patrol Torpedo – these are

small fast boats] arrived: one close to Cagayan River, the other in Bugo and the other one, carrying General MacArthur, docked at the Cagayan pier.

Sergeant Hunter and I approached the PT boat that carried the general. He came out wearing his full uniform and stood at the top of the gangplank. He looked very tall to me. We made way for other American soldiers who were going up and down the walkway. They saluted and shook his hand.

The gangplank was not that long and the PT boat was small. I could hear him talking. I saluted with my three fingers, the Boy Scout way. He was talking to one of the soldiers when he spotted me. He looked down from the top of the gangplank and asked the soldier, “What is that Boy Scout doing here?”

The soldier replied that I was a community service volunteer.

“Send him home,” General MacArthur said. “This war is inevitable.”

I took my bike and cycled home. I did not tell my Dad that I saw the general because it was supposed to be a secret; I did not tell my friends either for fear of being branded *kapayason*.

I learned later that General Douglas MacArthur and his family were enroute to Australia on his way to Washington, D.C. They were conveyed to Del Monte in Bukidnon.

By the first week of May 1942, two months after General MacArthur had his pit stop in Cagayan, the Japanese invaded our town. Our Boy Scout troop was disbanded five days before they came. The invading Japanese were veterans of the China invasion.

We evacuated to Canituan and went upstream all the way to Taglimao, where we stayed until liberation in 1945. By then, my Boy Scout years were

• ANN GORRA •

over. I was 18, at the threshold of my manhood. There were other pressing things that occupied me and needed to be done. However, the values of service and patriotism that I learned from my Boy Scout years stuck and the memories stayed. One of those memories is that of a 14-year-old Boy Scout saluting a general.



COL. LEONARDO HERNANDO

A Zamboangueno recalls defending Cagayan de Oro in WW II

By Col. Leonardo Hernando as told to Ann Gorra

It was 1937, and I was a 21-year-old commissioned 3rd Lt. in the Philippine Army, assigned in the School for Reserved Commission in Camp Keithley, Lanao. I had my first glimpse of Cagayan de Misamis, as Cagayan de Oro was known then, when our unit came to town to participate in a civic-military parade.

At that time, the town was small—some places were under coconut groves like the areas beyond the campus of Ateneo de Cagayan, now called Xavier University. The edge of the town was the Roman Catholic cemetery, which was beside Xavier University. The streets were paved with asphalt; there were a few concrete buildings; and the *calesas* or *tartanillas* were the

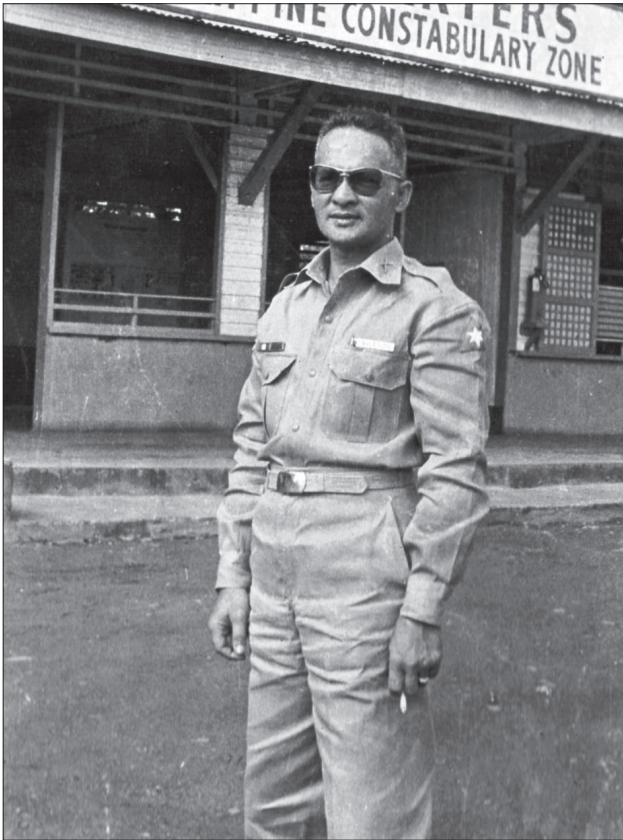
“Kings of the Road.” Because the Carmen bridge was not built yet, the Cagayan de Oro River was crossed by taking the ferry near the San Agustin Cathedral. Other remote places were reached by passenger buses.

That was my first impression of Cagayan de Oro. I never thought that I would come back and least of all make this place my home. After all, I am from Zamboanga. The impending WW II, however, redirected my path to Cagayan.

I was in the middle of my architecture studies at Mapua Institute of Technology in Manila, after reverting to inactive status in the military, when I was called to active duty. The war in Europe and the conflict in the Pacific in 1941 were spreading to the Philippines. I was inducted into the USAFFE [United States Armed Forces in the Far East] and later mobilized in Zamboanga as a company commander in the 1st Battalion, 103rd Infantry Regiment.

My unit was ordered to join others in Malaybalay, Bukidnon. We were barely in Bukidnon for two days when we were immediately given a mission to establish a beach defense along the coast of Cagayan de Oro. At about the same time, the Japanese forces landed in great number in the vicinity of Bugo and proceeded toward town. We soon abandoned our beach defenses and withdrew to the hills of Kiliog, Bukidnon. A few months later on May 6, 1942, the USAFFE forces in Mindanao surrendered to the Japanese. Our unit under Major Joseph Webb, commander of the 103rd Infantry Regiment disbanded in Tagitik, Bukidnon near Imbatug. Some of my fellow soldiers opted to return to Zamboanga while I chose to stay in Imbatug.

In the early months of 1943, I and my first wife left Imbatug and joined



*Col. Leonardo Hernando recalls seeing truckloads of Japanese POWs
being hauled to concentration camps along the beach
in the Agusan-Baloy area of Cagayan de Oro
as WWII was getting to a close.*

Major Fedencio Laplap, commander of the 109th Guerilla Regiment (he later became Chief of Police of Cagayan de Oro). He designated me as his Intelligence Officer together with Lt. Jesus Yamut as the Operations Officer. We established a beach defense along the coast of El Salvador,

then called Tagnipa. But it did not stand up to the Japanese raiding forces that sailed into El Salvador one fateful morning in their pump boats. They seized the father of Major Laplap, bayoneted our dental officer Lt. Saa, and killed some civilians.

We ran to the hills of Hinigda-an, El Salvador and established our rear regimental headquarters in the place. We conducted harassments against patrolling Japanese who were operating along the sea coast.

Sometime later, our entire regiment was ordered to move towards Cagayan de Oro. On our way to town, we rested in Opol, some ten kilometers away. Captain Jose V. Serina, our regimental surgeon who later became the Mayor of Cagayan de Oro, taught me how to catch crabs. We inserted a stick into a hole in the sand and waited for a crab to bite. We caught plate-size crabs!

As we were nearing our destination, we heard shots coming from the Iponan Bridge. We returned fire and then there was silence. We figured that the enemy must have retreated. Later in the day, the bulk of our forces crossed Cagayan River, and we linked up with a contingent of the US counter intelligence unit. The 3rd battalion, which I headed, secured all the major bridges along Sayre Highway from Alae to Malaybalay, Bukidnon. Here I saw truckloads of Japanese POWs being hauled to concentration camps along the beach in the Agusan-Baloy area.

Not long after, the war ended in 1945. Our guerilla units were disbanded. I joined the Philippine Constabulary for five years. It was during this time that I lost my wife to a car accident in Butuan.

I decided to re-join the Philippine Army and got assigned at Camp

Evangelista. I married a Kagay-anon by the name of Carmen Ramos Dacer in 1952. I was transferred from one command to another including Camp Aguinaldo, Fort Bonifacio and Fort Magsaysay. I even had the opportunity to go on an observation tour for two months with the 7th Cavalry of the 8th US Army in Korea in 1962.

Later that year, I requested to be reassigned to Cagayan de Oro where I wanted to settle with my family. On the eve of my retirement on January 22, 1970, my commanding general, Juan B Cruz, gave me a farewell party at his log cabin in Camp Evangelista, Patag. The officers and their ladies attended the *despedida*. I retired as Chief of Staff of the 4th Infantry Division, Philippine Army, with the rank of colonel.

Back then, the socials in the military were formal but fun. The men wore either the black and white tuxedo or the white duck, also known as the white uniform, and the ladies were in their finest and attractive formal attire.

It took me some time to adjust to civilian life. There were mornings when I absentmindedly put on my uniform, thinking I was reporting to duty. I got used to it anyhow. On May 6, 2002, my second wife and I celebrated our golden wedding anniversary with my family and friends in a Thanksgiving mass at Xavier University. Three years later, Carmen passed away.

I am enjoying my remaining years with my children, grandchildren and a great-grandchild. I reminisce the good memories of the old days. I am 90 years old, and I remain a soldier in many ways. As the saying goes, “Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.”



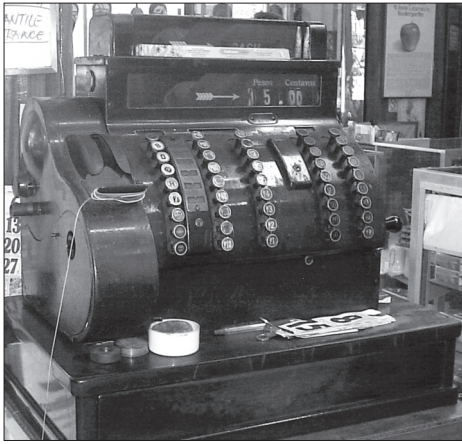
WADHU DHARAMDAS UTTAMCHANDANI

Doors wide open,
doing business the Wadhu way

*As told by Wadhu “Dodong” Dharamdas, Jr.
to Ann Gorra*

My father, Wadhu Dharamdas Uttamchandani, came to Cagayan de Oro in 1936 and put up a retail business that has lasted for 70 years and has become a landmark in Cagayan de Oro. Wadhu’s Quality Store has survived WW II in 1944 and the onslaught of the superstores and the big-box malls today.

Cagayan de Oro was not my father’s first choice of a place. He came to the Philippines from India in 1924 at the age of 12 and stayed in Zamboanga for quite some time working for his uncle at an Indian Bazaar. By the time



Wadhu Dharamdas Uttamchandani, the senior Wadhu, came to the Philippines from India at the age of 12 and later founded the Wadhu store in Cagayan de Oro. The store has withstood the onslaught of big-box malls and continues the tradition of its founder including the use of a 1930s cash register.

he felt ready to be on his own, he thought of Marawi, which was under the Americans at that time. His friends, however, discouraged him from putting up a store in the place due to its uncertain peace and order. My father checked out Cagayan de Oro and saw that it was a suitable place for his retail business. With the way things are going, I can absolutely say that he picked the right place.

The first Wadhu's store, called Wadhu's Home of Quality, was located in Divisoria close to the public market. His business was briefly interrupted in 1942, when he ran to Balingasag, Misamis Oriental to escape WW II. There he met and married my mom, Trinidad Babiera Valmores and was blessed with two children—me and Linda.

When he returned to Cagayan de Oro at the end of the war in 1946, he reopened Wadhu's, a reflection of his persevering devotion to his trade, and moved it two blocks up from the original site, still close to the public market. When the public market was relocated to Cogon in 1958, my Dad transferred the store to its present site at J.R. Borja and Pabayo streets. He built a two-storey building in the new location. The design of the building reflected the times: on the second floor was our residence and on the first floor was our business. The floor upstairs was made of red and white hard wood brought in from Balingasag.

In 1973, management changed hands, and I took over the helm of the store. My father passed away in 1995.

Although, he has passed away for 15 years now, his memory lives on in the continued presence of the store that he built in 1936. It also lives on in the business practices that he started and we continue to follow to this day.

One of the enduring traditions that we still do until today is the "*hangyo*." Filipinos love to bargain because this is part of who we are, and this tradition is not lost on us. One time, we sold umbrellas that the big stores were selling for PHP128. I told my sales clerk: "Write in big letters the price of PHP98 and beneath the price write down in small letters '*naa pay hangyo*.'" The next day a passerby asked me, "*Sir, pila may hangyo?*" I was surprised that he was able to read the small letters. "*Imo diay nabasa?*" I laughed. "*Sige, PHP90 na lang,*" I said. The other time someone negotiated a watch valued at PHP1,295 for PHP1,100. After considering the time of the day and the fact that it was almost closing time, I agreed to the lower price.

Our quickness in decision-making and flexibility in pricing are our ad-

vantage over big business. Our other edge is our open-door policy. This is not a figure of speech; our doors are literally wide open. Our doorway spans more than half of our entrance, and it is open all the time during business hours. Ever since my father opened the business, he insisted on leaving the doors wide open. The rationale behind this decision is quite simple: it would make most people especially the masses feel comfortable entering the store, browse around, and they could easily go out as they came in.

People of different backgrounds feel comfortable coming in. A housewife who just finished her marketing at the Cogon Market came in to check out our merchandise. Her basket was dripping wet with fish. I welcomed her in. “*Manang sulod,*” I said. A customer one time came riding his bicycle. He parked it outside the store. While shopping, he kept looking over his shoulder to check if the bike was still there. I brought the bike inside the store so he could shop free of any anxiety.

One of the most memorable encounters was with a barefooted man. He came to the store at 7 p.m., one hour away from our closing time. He looked around, asked the price of the most expensive watch we were selling and bought it. Before he left he told us: “You are the third store I visited and the only who gave me service.” We learned later that he was from Bukidnon.

The way we treat our customers reflects our belief that business is not only about making a profit. It was always the philosophy of my dad that there is no reason for any business to exist unless it serves the needs of the people. Our business is first about people.

Our staff were trained to listen well to the customers regardless of how small or big the business they might bring in, so they would feel important

and not hesitate to return. People are appreciated when they enter our store whether they make a purchase or not.

The other people that matter to us are our staff. We have six. The longest has been with us for 30 years and the shortest 19. They are a part of the growth of the store, and in return for their devotion, I help them out. They are like family to me. I tell my son who owns the Wadhu's branch in Carmen that when he prospers, he does not prosper alone. His staff helped him get there; he must see that they also grow with him.

Growing our stores requires that we change with the times. In the days before cell phones, watches were the preferred graduation gifts. The mobile technology made that obsolete. Cell phones, among many other functions, give the time. The preference nowadays is for fashion timepieces, which we have included in our line in addition to the real ones that we have been selling since my dad opened the store.

I still enjoy the business. My wife and I live upstairs. I go down at 8:30 a.m. to open the store. I look forward to what surprises the day will bring. I marvel at the 70 years. Not only did the store survive the test of time but it has branched out to Carmen and is being carried on by the third generation of Wadhus. My dad would be proud of his legacy. He surely picked the right business and the right city.