

**Ronald Hector A. Villanueva, the Short Life of an
Engaged Anthropologist:
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"Each of us has a particular path to follow, according to his light. Try to make use of your present circumstances and of your sadness, to place your whole confidence in God, both for time and eternity... The present calamities of which you paint so sad a picture, will, if only for the sake of your own peace, place you under the necessity of making incessantly, very meritorious sacrifices to God. Public misfortunes are great, but the part you can take about them is great also." Jean-Pierre de Caussade.

Late one November night, I was awoken by a phone call that my husband answered. Now that I no longer have drunk friends calling at 3:00am, late night phone calls always make me nervous. It was even worse when my imagination had to take in my husband's response, "Oh, no! That's terrible news! Oh, no. What happened?" After what seemed like an eternity, I found out the news. My dear friend, Hecky, was dead. Forty-three years old, athletic, conscientious about food, occasional cigar smoker and moderate social drinker, and now dead. I felt disbelief and shock, but mostly I felt numb. I tried phoning his wife, our friend Tammy, but there was no answer. There was a sense of unreality that has only lessened as I have spent the past few days reading numerous online eulogies to the self-named "Cute Boy Hecky" Villanueva in preparation for writing this piece. Just as the authors of those pieces have come to terms with his death, I am only beginning the process. When he had moved back to the Philippines and I would not have seen him again, possibly for years, so it was easy to seriously consider that I would never see him again or hear his standard greeting, "Hey, Arctic Fox!".

Ronald Hector A. Villanueva, better known to his graduate school colleagues as "Hecky", was born in Manila, Philippines. His father, Hector Ronald R. Villanueva was from Dumaguete, the Visayas and his mother, Angelina A. Villanueva, was from Davao, in Mindanao. Hecky was born into a life of privilege. He would often remind me how primitive conditions were here in the USA when back home everyone had their own bathroom. His father was a graduate of the

London School of Economics and returned to Manila to be involved with the media and in government positions like Press Secretary of President Ramos from 1996-1999, and most recently as Post Master General.

As a child, Hecky was known as the “straight” one of his three brothers and sisters. He would always have a clear goal and never wasted time. His sister, Michelle Villanueva, recalls:

“As a kid, he would tinker on anything not broken. If broken, he would assess and analyze it so hard you would think it was a frog being dissected and not an electric fan... He was like that. He was always smart. But he backed it up with research. He knew what he was saying so really you couldn’t win an argument with him. He was that good. But I loved to argue with him just for the “heck” of it. He commandeered his way around the house in the absence of my parents... everything must be right, done right, and exceptional. He wasn’t mediocre and he hated mediocrity. So it was a little crazy at home growing up. He was our little terror master.”

Hecky took his elementary and secondary education in a Catholic private school. Of his experiences there, Hecky made it clear to me that despite the relative privileges of his social status, he became very aware of a world far beyond his own – that in this world he was closer to the bottom than the top. Still a mestizo of means, his experiences with the children of statesmen taught him about the corruption of wealth and the stigma of class. After high school he enrolled in the highly selective program of Applied Physics at the University of the Philippines, Diliman (UP). At UP he became an active member of the UP Mountaineers, UP Divers, and had the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life. It was here that Hecky decided to become an anthropologist.

Immediately after college, Hecky became a government employee at the Philippines’ Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). By the early 1990s, Hecky was serving as Project Manager and then as Vice President and Director of the thriving environmental consulting firm, Gaia South, Inc. He was remembered by his colleagues as a compassionate but also a dedicated, meticulous, and firm presence who insisted that his clients – oil, mining and power companies – maintain social responsibility and abide strictly to the reg-

ulations stipulated in the Environmental Impact Assessment process. Those he came in contact with were struck by his simple ways, caring attitude, and passion. He never compromised his principles, which were based on a concern for the environment and a desire to help the Philippines achieve truly sustainable development. He sought to work with communities to help them make informed decisions about whether or not to allow a project to be developed within their community. Even when lengthy consultation and orientation processes frustrated the clients, he refused to compromise even at the risk of losing a job. Hecky was efficient, organized and thorough.

During this time, Hecky married his beloved wife and partner, Maria Victoria “Tammy” Dimayuga, who he had been carrying a secret torch for since university. It was Tammy who gave him the support to accomplish all that he has done since. In 2003, having been strongly encouraged by Dr. William Longacre, the couple moved to Tucson, Arizona where Hecky pursued a doctoral degree in Applied Anthropology at the University of Arizona. Returning to life as a student was a major adjustment for Hecky and Tammy, which they both accepted graciously. As he saw his friends and co-workers back home settle into family life, advance in their careers and continue to accomplish practical work for social and environmental betterment, he would sometimes express a slight yearning, though never regret, for what he was missing.

At the same time, he began to transfer his passion for social and environmental justice from reports to articles and editorials. He became a regular author and contributor at livingplanet.blogspot.com and pinoywired.com, where his writings from 2004 to 2010 can still be found. Hecky wrote about a range of issues related to life in the Philippines and the United States. Just as he had shown a penchant for intellectual debate in his early years, Hecky’s life in Arizona allowed him to utilize this talent on a daily basis. As in his early years, he had a flare for always backing up his arguments with comprehensive and almost obsessive research.

It was in 2006 that Hecky became interested in the Gawad Kalinga (GK) project/movement. He had been searching for a dissertation topic, surfing the internet nearly 24 hours a day, when he stumbled on GK. GK was a development project based on building physical and social communities for the poorest of the poor and was started by Antonio P. Meloto, with the underlying belief that poverty is not about

a lack of resources but about a lack of caring and sharing. The organization originated with a Catholic lay community, Couples for Christ, who held a youth camp for gang members and juvenile delinquents in one of the largest slums of the Philippines. Hecky was blown away by the implications of this project for social justice. Incidentally, Tammy's family was already getting involved in the project, donating land and starting a village in her father's home province.

When he returned to Manila for the first time in the summer of 2006, he immediately paid a visit to the project site. He was passionate about GK because he saw it as a concrete and holistic way to help the marginalized help themselves and each other in a way that promised long-term change rather than focusing on one or two aspects of more material social concerns. For his 25th Homecoming celebrations at Colegio de San Agustin, Hecky and Tammy convinced his cohort and over twenty other high schools from Metro Manila to participate in building a GK Village of 28 homes for marginalized Filipinos at Sitio Pajo, Quezon City. His advocacy with the group continued. He spearheaded two GK villages and organized GK walks in Tucson.

Hecky's involvement with GK also evolved into his more recent passion: bamboo bikes. This interest in hand-made bicycles made in impoverished communities of environmentally sustainable materials was complementary to his involvement in GK community development. At the University of the Philippines, the mountaineers club was involved in renting bicycles and encouraging students to use bicycle transportation rather than jeepneys. Hecky and his UP Mountaineers friends pushed for a bike sharing program and dedicated bike lanes for its students. When he found out that Craig Calfee in California was making bicycles from bamboo, he set out to bring the same idea to the Philippines using GK as a manufacturing partner. KawayanTech, a company he co-founded in 2009, began by training two workers from the GK Sitio Pajo Village. By out-sourcing manufacture to GK villages and making local people business partners, Hecky was working towards his goal of an ideal development model that incorporated both social and environmental concerns. As president of KawayanTech, he authored the KawayanTech Bamboo Bikes 2009 Business Plan that competed in the Business in Development (BiD) Challenge International Marketplace in the Netherlands in May-June 2010. Hecky saw the use of bamboo as bike frames was far-reaching in both promoting a healthy lifestyle and environmental awareness. He was enam-

oured with the versatility of bamboo and called it the most “addictive grass.”

By the time of his death, Hecky had truly come into his own. At the University of Arizona, he was known as a bright and cheerful presence and someone who always backed up his talk with actions. Classmates described him as a “true activist” who adopted the struggles of the poor here in Arizona just as he had those of the socially marginalized in the Philippines. His pen was fierce (and long-winded) in political debate but what he really desired was that his fellow anthropologists stop complaining and start doing. He embodied the ideal of an “engaged anthropologist”. An academic at heart, he was also actively writing blogs, joining and creating development projects that spoke to the underlying concerns of the people, and most importantly, putting himself in the space of those he sought to empower. He not only helped some of the most socially marginalized people but engaged them with a fullness of heart and a love that is an ideal in the Christian faith that was so dear to him.

In a post written a week after Hecky’s death for the Dumaguete Metro Post¹, Jose Mari Jonathan Antonio wrote of his first meeting with Hecky: “What actually got my attention was his passion and sincerity to share his time and resources for a good cause. I have had my share of people trying to change the world, but Hecky was one of those who simply reminded you that everyday heroes are ordinary people you meet everywhere.”

Gawad Kalinga founder, Antonio P. Meloto, wrote the following in an ode entitled, “Hecky the Genius in my Hero”² on the official GK website in honour of him:

“Hecky is the good-looking face of the new Filipino patriot and the pride of my race, the man with an honest mind, an intelligent heart and a spirit that is at peace. At par with the best in the west and at home with the least in the east, with a doctorate in his vest, the world was his yet he chose his country as the best. It is hard to understand the heart of a hero or the genius of a true Filipino, who loves country beyond self and even sacrifice family to create abundance for many, who sees country as gift and opportunity and countrymen as wealth and family.”

1 <http://dumaguetemetropost.com/tribute-to-mr-bamboo-bike-hecky-villanueva-p712-252.htm>

2 <http://gk1world.com/the-genius-is-my-hero>

Since his years as the little tyrant of the Villanueva family, Hecky had mellowed with age that was tempered with a deep kindness and love for his fellow human. Helping the socially and economically disadvantaged members of his own country was not simply a job or academic pursuit for Hecky, it was matter of following his heart. Few people, including his own family, realized the way that he selflessly reached out to those around him who were in need. After his death, Tammy found out that he had paid for the tuition of a co-worker's children for many years, as she was a single mother and unable to send her children to school. Hecky lived the ideals of both anthropology and spirituality, allowing him to accomplish through the use of his heart and mind what many pursue with only intellectual rigor.

On his Facebook memorial page³, his sister Michelle remembered his fearlessness and how that inspired his determination to help others:

"He had left for some school thesis and lived with the poorest of communities in Sorsogon I think and got malaria or some dreaded sickness. I know he's had a climbing accident, probably a scuba scare but he was unstoppable. The Gawad Kalinga movement he was into was really also what he was all about. Giving a decent home and empowering the community to be self reliant. He came to Dumaguete one time and I drove him around all the GK sites and I saw how he talked to the people and asked of their needs, I really saw a different side of him. He told me if I could get people for my spa to train from the GK. And now, with the bamboo bikes and making it part of the GK he was really gonna make it happen. He was unstoppable and he was going to do all he could because maybe I guess he just had no time..."

Ronald Hector A. Villanueva, outlived by his wife and twin children, Bixia and Quintin, set an example of humanity, scholarship, and spirituality that should inspire us all. He and his wife, Tammy, although privileged, chose to reject the accumulation of material wealth and work towards the betterment of their fellow humans. Hecky was not only an inspired and meticulous scholar, he was a man of depth and tenderness, with a spirit of outreach that was not based on pad-

3 <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/pages/Friends-of-Ronald-Hecky-Villanueva-Memorial-Page/174450955905725>

ding a *curriculum vitae* but on following the calling of his heart and on serving the calling of his Christian faith through a spirit of service and faith in God. These principles complemented his determined and fierce character and allowed him to contribute enormously in his 43 years to the betterment of his homeland and his adopted homeland in a process that will have long-term positive effects. Known to many as a true hero, we at the University of Arizona will humbly remember Hecky as our friend and colleague.

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