

# Harnessing Television as a Public Service Medium

Rosa Rosal (Florence Danon-Gayda)

On 31 July 2012, the Gawad Plaridel, the highest award given by the University of the Philippines (U.P.) to outstanding media practitioners, was conferred by U.P. President Alfredo Pascual, in the presence of U.P. Diliman Chancellor Caesar Saloma, U.P. College of Mass Communication (CMC) Dean Rolando Tolentino, and Philippine Red Cross Chair Richard Gordon, on TV personality and film actor Rosa Rosal for her pioneering use of the medium of television for public service.

This issue of Plaridel publishes three documents relevant to the proclamation of Rosa Rosal as 2012 Gawad Plaridel awardee: first, the official citation which enumerates and describes the achievements for which Ms. Rosal is being recognized; second, an essay on the life and works of the awardee by U.P. C.M.C. Broadcast Communication Department professor Atty. Victor C. Avecilla; and third, the Gawad Plaridel speech of the awardee.

## The Gawad Plaridel 2012 Citation for Rosa Rosal

For introducing public service to Philippine television through her landmark programs *Kapwa Ko*, *Mahal Ko* and *Damayan*, that continuously provided for the last four decades medical and other forms of aid to indigent Filipinos, who are sick or disabled;

For using her fame as a popular star of the silver screen and as a respected actress of art films like *Badjao*, *Anak Dalita*, and *Biyaya ng Lupa* not only to solicit all forms of help from private individuals and public institutions but also to raise public consciousness through television about the donation of blood, medicine, and food to the needy and the prevention of AIDS, dengue, and other life-threatening diseases;

For her unquestioned integrity and true compassion in making sure that the help she receives, whether in cash, equipment or services, reaches those who need it directly, immediately, and unconditionally;

For exemplifying the public service program that addresses and tries to solve specific financial and social problems of the poor without making a spectacle of the people's poverty or encouraging dependency and mendicancy;

For bringing the marginalized to the center of public attention if only for an hour a week on television, thereby reminding all Filipinos of the plight of the majority of their countrymen who have been imprisoned in poverty by a rigid class society;

For touching with her kindness those who are afflicted in body and soul, if only to reassure the poorest of the poor that they too are deserving of service, care, and love;

The 2012 Gawad Plaridel is given by the College of Mass Communication of the University of the Philippines to **Ms. Rosal Rosal**, this 31st day of July 2012 at the UP Film Institute Film Center, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City. (Citation, 2012, p. 14)

## **Ms. Rosa Rosal: An Icon in Every Sense of the Word\***

*Victor C. Avecilla*

Some individuals are destined to be icons in their own right. Such is the case of Florence Lansang Danon, the selfless Filipina who came to be known in the public eye as the great Rosa Rosal – quintessential film actress and tireless civic leader with a record of public service virtually unmatched in many aspects. Her adopted screen name suits her perfectly—a hybrid of the rose, the near perfect flower with its overmastering bouquet and intricate petals, and the gardenia, a blossom locally known as the rosal sought for its angelic fragrance suggesting the presence of a princess in a royal floral garden.

For Miss Danon, life as a young girl in quaint Manila was interrupted by the Japanese Occupation. After a brief employment as a news reader in a radio station downtown, she fled with her family to the province where she lived out the rest of the war. When peace was restored in Manila, Florence Danon did part-time clerical work at the radiology department of the San Lazaro Hospital.

In 1946, Florence Danon was discovered by film producer Luis Nolasco. This started her career in Philippine cinema as Rosa Rosal. At 16, she made her debut in *Fort Santiago*. A year later, she was given a small role in *Kamagong*. In 1949, Doña Sisang de Leon of the famed LVN Studios gave her her first starring role in *Biglang Yaman*. This was followed by roles in *Prinsipe Amante sa Rubitanya* (1951), *Biyaya ng Lupa* (1951), *Anak Dalita* (1956) and *Badjao* (1956). Her performance in *Anak Dalita* won her a citation from no less than President Ramon Magsaysay. In addition, she won the 1955 FAMAS Best Actress award for her performance in *Sunny Boy*, opposite then-matinee idol Rogelio de la Rosa.

She also managed to finish her studies, dividing her time between night school and her employment. She eventually graduated with a degree in Business Administration from the Cosmopolitan Colleges.

1950 was an important milestone in the life of Rosa Rosal. She accompanied Ray Higgins, an American civic leader in the Philippines, to inspect his blood donation project at the Philippine General Hospital. At the hospital, she was unsettled by the sight of a young girl in a coma. The girl badly needed a blood transfusion but none was readily forthcoming. She immediately looked for blood donors and, on her call, friends and well-meaning people went to the hospital and donated the needed blood. This selfless act paved the way for the girl's slow but sure recovery.

Two lives were changed that night—that of the young girl and that of Rosa Rosal. The first went on to recover and live. The other decided to live for the recovery of others. On July 4, 1950, Rosa Rosal formally resolved to take the path of public service by becoming a volunteer of the Philippine Red Cross (PRC).

Sadly, her marriage was not as happy as her career. She met Walter Gayda, an American pilot, in Hong Kong in one of her vacations to the crown colony. A romance blossomed and for the next three months, the couple regularly kept in touch with each other. In 1957, they got married in Manila and set their honeymoon for Hawaii.

It is said that Walter was unaware that his sweetheart was a popular film star in the Philippines. An account has it that Walter was very much annoyed by the inquisitive local reporters who mobbed him upon his arrival in Manila. His displeasure was triggered anew when the newlyweds were in Hawaii. Walter also saw his wife on television with the Philippine boxing best of the time, Gabriel “the Flash” Elorde, who had just won his world title. When Elorde presented his boxing gloves to Rosa Rosal in the course of the television show, Walter lost his temper. The couple quarreled and the next day, the husband of a few days left in a hurry, without leave or let go. Any hope of reconciliation was extinguished a decade later when Walter perished in a vehicular accident. Rosa Rosal, however, takes joy and pride that her brief union with Walter was blessed with a daughter, Toni Rose Gayda, who later had a short stint in cinema and television.

By the 1960s, Rosa Rosal focused her attention on a new medium—television. She appeared in several episodes of pioneering television programs such as Cecile Guidote Alvarez’ drama series *Balintataw*. In the 1970s, she was a mainstay in the television situation comedy *‘Yan ang Misis Ko* opposite Ronald Remy. But despite her new career in television, Rosal reserved the bulk of her time for the Philippine Red Cross.

At that time, voluntary blood donation was largely unheard of or was viewed with suspicion, believed to have harmful effects on the donor. Superstitious beliefs aggravated the situation. Determined to change the national social attitude towards blood donation, Rosa Rosal made use of her celebrity status to organize blood-letting campaigns under the auspices of the Philippine Red Cross. She convinced Philippine society that the blood donation program of the PRC was, indeed, for a noble cause, and that there was no threat to the health and well-being of donors. In 1965, Rosa Rosal was elected to the board of directors of the Philippine Red Cross.

Political leaders and heads of both the local and foreign diplomatic community were at the receiving end of her calls for assistance. Her prayers were answered with donations from embassies consisting mainly of badly needed medical facilities. Politicians responded with substantial donations from their “pork barrel” allocations.

Even President Fidel Ramos helped out. Ramos began donating blood in 1953 and since then he made it a point to always donate blood on his birthday, with no less than Rosa Rosal supervising the blood-letting. The future president of the country once described Rosa Rosal as “a very caring person,” and that whenever she whispers anything to him, “it is to request something for someone else.” When Ramos was president, Miss Rosal pestered him to help a distraught Filipina who had been abused by a friend of her employer in Saudi Arabia. Ramos saw to it that the unfortunate Filipina was repatriated immediately.

In coordination with the Philippine Red Cross, Rosa Rosal also established a crisis center for unwed and needy pregnant women. She also sought out homes for unwanted children. To complement this laudable effort, she maintains a scholarship program for poor but deserving students.

In the 1970s, Rosa Rosal got involved in the afternoon television programs *Damayan* and *Kapwa Ko, Mahal Ko* where she invited mass audiences to donate blood to those who needed it. Her strategy was trailblazing, to say the least. At the height of their popularity, her television programs dominated and even defined afternoon programming. The telenovelas of today were unheard of then, and canned programs went on the air only after her shows were broadcast. Through Rosal, the stereotype of the broadcast media as tools primarily for mass entertainment and amusement were debunked. Evidently, Rosal not only became the first woman to start a public service program on Philippine television; she became the personification of the broadcast medium as an instrument of public service.

At the acme of her career, Rosa Rosal was rightfully accorded the recognition she truly deserved but never personally sought. In 1987, she was awarded the *Natatanging Gawad Urian* by the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino* for being an outstanding film and television actress, and for her humanitarian work. She was likewise given the *Ading Fernando Lifetime Achievement Award* at the 2008 Star Awards.

That is not all. Rosa Rosal also received the 1999 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service in recognition of her “lifetime of unstinting voluntary service, inspiring Filipinos to put the needs of others before their own.” She was also the first woman to be awarded the *Ten Outstanding Women of the New Society* trophy for public service during the Marcos administration. Unsurprisingly,

the Red Cross conferred on Rosal its Gold Humanitarian Service Cross in acknowledgment of her selfless service in the promotion of the Red Cross in the Philippines.

Rosa Rosal truly embodies the ideal broadcaster as an artist, as a role model, and as a public servant. It is, therefore, an honor and a privilege for anyone to relate to an icon such as she at the pinnacle of her career. The College of Mass Communication of the University of the Philippines has been given both the honor and the privilege of bestowing upon Miss Rosal the Gawad Plaridel for 2012 in recognition of her sterling accomplishments in the field of broadcasting, particularly as the pioneering exponent and personification of broadcasting as a vehicle for the artist, the role model, and the public servant.

## References

- Citation (2012). UP Gawad Plaridel 2012. [Souvenir program]. University of the Philippines
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## Notes

The foregoing article was based on information obtained from documentation given to the screening committee responsible for the 2012 Gawad Plaridel. Substantial segments were taken from *Rosa Rosal: A Woman for Others* written by Raissa Robles (2012), and *Rosa Rosal: The Vamp with a Heart of Gold* (2010). The writer of this article wishes to thank the authors of these reference materials for the use of the information supplied therein.

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Ms. Rosal Rosal (Florence Danon- Gayda in real life) accepts the UP Gawad Plaridel (2012) Award. From left: UP President Alfredo E. Pascual, Ms. Rosa Rosal, Philippine Red Cross Chairperson Sen. Richard Gordon, UP Diliman Chancellor Caesar A. Saloma, and College of Mass Communication Dean Roland B. Tolentino.

## UP Gawad Plaridel Lecture 2012

Good afternoon!

First of all, I would like to thank the UP College of Mass Communication for giving me this prestigious award, the UP Gawad Plaridel Award, for my contribution to public service through the use of mass media, in particular, television.

I must admit I was pleasantly surprised when I was told that I would be given the UP Gawad Plaridel Award this year. I was surprised because I am getting an award just when I stopped doing the program more than a year ago.

*Damayán* has been one—if not the only one—of the longest running public service programs on television, lasting for more than three solid decades since 1975, until it ended almost two years ago in 2010. It was also one of the pioneering public service programs that brought poor people in dire need of help right on your television set.

I take this opportunity to thank all the people who worked with me and who stayed through thick and thin during my *Damayán* days. I thank especially my loyal sponsor, the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office, whose unwavering support kept *Damayán* on air for 35 years. My warmest gratitude goes to the people who took time to go to the studio to tell their stories and seek for help. They were the life of the program, the main reason why *Damayán* lasted that long.

I am happy that even after the program has ended, people still remember it. This Gawad Plaridel Award shows that the spirit of *Damayán* lingers on. Apparently, it has not been forgotten.

Honestly, I never seek recognition or award for things I do or have done. But I must admit, I like it when I get one. I truly appreciate awards given to me because they mirror the tears and the warm smiles of the people who come to me for help. Their simple “thank you” resonates every time I look at the awards when I am alone at home. Their warm hugs touch me once more whenever I reflect on the different stories of people that moved me.

That is why when I learned of the Gawad Plaridel Award, I was shaken as the memories of *Damayán* flashed to mind. Once again I was moved by the predicament of the hundreds of people who have queued up for whatever help my *Damayán* program can give them. I wonder who can these people turn to now?

I have been requested to speak on “Harnessing Television as a public service medium.” You know, I am a very practical person. I speak straight from the heart.

Television is still the number one and the most influential medium. It has the widest reach as almost every home has a television set. It is unfortunate though, that television is not being used to full advantage to find and build the humanitarian value in everyone. Most of our television programs are purely commercial and have no value at all, except perhaps for entertainment.

Our country is going through difficult times, now more than ever. Every year, our country is plagued by disasters—typhoons, floods, landslides, to name a few. Poverty is growing, unemployment increasing, and crimes rising. As a result, thousands of Filipinos suffer, mostly children, women and the elderly. They are the most vulnerable group who pose the biggest humanitarian challenge to the government, to various sectors of society—the media included, and to us all.

Television can play a vital role in saving our society from rotting. It can change people’s behavior and attitude and help build character with humanitarian value. It can bridge the gap between what our people need, and

what our government and the Filipino can do to meet those needs. Television can serve as a link between the rich and the poor. It can serve as vehicle in bringing service to the poor and deprived.

It is high time that we set a new trend in bringing public service programs on prime time when most people watch. It is time that TV networks compete for the number one public service program that creates impact on the lives of everyone. It is time that we use television to create a culture of humanitarian service among our people and a society with compassion.

How do we do this?

First, TV networks must have a heart for the nation and the Filipino people. They must carry a philosophy of putting “Public Service First and Foremost.” Top TV executives must have a mind set of using television to uplift human dignity, rather than just to gain unlimited profits.

Second, business corporations must have a strong sense of social responsibility to sponsor public service programs. Instead of spending millions for advertisements and promotion, they should donate their money to the program to meet the needs of the people who come for help. They will still be acknowledged or advertised anyway during the program.

Third, we must have young, talented, idealistic and innovative people like you, the students and fresh graduates of Mass Communication, to run the show in volunteer capacity, to keep the humanitarian value of the program.

Fourth, we must have a program host who is energetic and peppy, highly respected and well loved by everyone because of his/her charisma and undisputed integrity. His/her work must also be a voluntary service.

Fifth, the format of the show must be creative, exciting, interactive and alive to keep the interest of the viewers. For every show we must have famous celebrities representing various sectors to interact with the clients and viewers and spice up the program. They too must be volunteers.

Finally, the show will have a “Tree of Life” or “Tree of Hope” or “Tree of Humanity”. Whatever [it is, it will be located], at the center stage of the studio where the names of all sponsors, donors, guests and beneficiaries will be written on the heart-shaped cards and tied to the branches of tree. Follow-up stories from beneficiaries on how the program has helped them can be written and hung on the tree as well. The success stories will serve as fruits of the trees, which in reality means the success of the program.

The program can be a 30-minute or one hour program weekly on prime time. The time slot must be provided free by the TV network. The public service program will be our donation to humanity.

These are my candid thoughts, straight from the heart. Some may agree. Some may not and say, “Good, but it is easier said than done.”

But it is not impossible either. Good things are not always easy to come by. But if we put our heart and soul into it, nothing is impossible.

This is a challenge we must pursue to make television an agent of change. This is a challenge we must take to make this country a better place to live in. This is a challenge that should define our self worth, our dignity as a people and as a nation.

We have what it takes to give every Filipino a shining moment by living for others.

Thank you.