

# Gulfan, Alberto Cuyos, Jr. (1950–2015)

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TERESA COSTELLO

Teresa Costello, born in the southwest United States, has served as a missionary in the Pacific under the Far Eastern Division and southeast Asia under the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) for more than 15 years. With bachelor of arts degrees in English and religion and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, she served in the SSD Communication department from 2012-2017 and is currently (2020) the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* editorial assistant for SSD. With a background in education, journalism, communication, and public speaking, she is a storyteller who enjoys gathering life experiences from those she meets during her travels with her family.

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Alberto Gulfan Jr. was an evangelist, pastor, chaplain, and administrator in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

## Early Life

Alberto Cuyos Gulfan, Jr. was born on December 1, 1950, in Cataingan, Masbate, Philippines,<sup>1</sup> to Alberto Duarte Gulfan Sr. and Bienvenida Sayson Cuyos,<sup>2</sup> the 3rd of 12 children. He was raised in the Seventh-day Adventist faith.<sup>3</sup> The family attended the small local Adventist church whose congregation consisted largely of the extended Gulfan family.<sup>4</sup>

His quiet, compassionate leadership was evident early. As the second oldest son, Gulfan Jr. functioned as the big brother to his younger siblings because the eldest brother, William, was away during part of their childhood years.<sup>5</sup> The Gulfan siblings describe their brother: He was “slow to speak and would rarely get angry. [He was] firm and consistent and showed us a good example in being obedient children to our parents. [He was] a leader both at home and in our local church. . . . [He] showed us by example that we could earn people’s respect as a religious minority even if we lived differently from our predominantly Catholic peers.”<sup>6</sup>

His leadership skills were combined with a noticeable stage presence. During his senior year at East Visayan Academy in Talisay City, Cebu, Philippines, he won first place in a city-wide temperance oratorical contest.<sup>7</sup> He went on to win the same award during his freshman year at Mountain View College in Bulacao, Talisay, Philippines.<sup>8</sup> This cemented his reputation as an engaging and effective public speaker, a skill that he would use throughout his career.

## Education and Marriage

As Alberto grew and moved into his college years, God continued to develop the humbleness and concern for others that he learned in his early life at home. This manifested itself in a deep desire to share the gospel.

While at Mountain View College, he and his younger brother Edwin conducted evangelistic series during school breaks.<sup>9</sup> During the summer, they worked as colporteurs together.<sup>10</sup> They even explored new ways to share the

gospel when they were among the first student broadcasters for DXCR, the AM radio station that opened in 1973 on the Mountain View College campus.<sup>11</sup>

This missionary zeal was further honed as he and Edwin served as early *sulads* (student missionaries from Mountain View College) together in the mountains of Santo Domingo, Valencia Bukidnon. Now known as SULADS-ASIA, the organization started as a local Adventist student missions program to meet the needs of the indigenous Manobo mountain tribe in practical ways such as education and health.<sup>12</sup> The brothers' pioneer missionary work among the cultural minorities of Central Mindanao at the second mission school in SULADS history earned them the title of the "Missionary Brothers" when they returned to Mountain View College.

Once back at college, this experience of merging family and faith further blossomed as Gulfan Jr. noticed Helen Bocala, a well-known minister's daughter and active ministries leader in her own right.<sup>13</sup> Thus began a new chapter of his life and the kind of love story that lasts a lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

They continued their romance long-distance<sup>15</sup> after his 1976 graduation from Mountain View College with a theology degree.<sup>16</sup> During this time, he completed a ministerial internship at Camotes Island and Tagbilaran City under the Central Philippine Union Mission (CPUM), now the Central Philippine Union Conference.<sup>17</sup>

They were married on August 8, 1977.<sup>18</sup> By then, Gulfan Jr. was the Tagbilaran City church pastoral intern.<sup>19</sup> Over time, children were added, and thus Helen Zella, Albert Lloyd, and Jarbien Pol made their little family complete.<sup>20</sup> Even though Gulfan Jr. was given more and more responsibilities as the Lord called him to new positions, his family remained most important to him.<sup>21</sup>

## Ministry

While his family was never far from his mind, he always carried a joyful zeal to expand the family of God. He conducted up to six evangelistic series per year,<sup>22</sup> a habit he continued throughout the years until the last year of his life.

He was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister in July 1978 in Cebu City, Philippines.<sup>23</sup> Afterward, he was a local church pastor and then district pastor in the Tagbilaran City, Bohol, and Tubigon District during 1978 and 1979.<sup>24</sup> From there, he was asked to serve as the church pastor for the larger Capitol Center Church in Cebu City from 1980 to 1984.<sup>25</sup> In April 1984,<sup>26</sup> he and his family were sent to the Philippine Union College, now known as the Adventist University of the Philippines, in Puting Kahoy, Silang, Cavite.<sup>27</sup> There he completed his master's degree in public health in October 1985.<sup>28</sup>

From November 1985 to December 1986, he was a hospital chaplain and health educator at the H. W. Miller Memorial Sanitarium and Hospital,<sup>29</sup> now known as Adventist Hospital-Cebu, in Cebu City, Philippines.<sup>30</sup> In January 1987, he was called to be the CPUM Health and Temperance department director.<sup>31</sup>

Almost three years later, he was elected president of what was then the East Visayan Mission in December 1989.<sup>32</sup> He served as such until June 1993, when he was elected as the CPUM executive secretary and then president.<sup>33</sup> When CPUM achieved conference status in 1998, he was its first president,<sup>34</sup> a title he held until 2003.<sup>35</sup> On March 17, 2003, the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) Executive Committee elected him as the president of the SSD, effective in June.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Gulfan Jr. succeeded his father-in-law, Violeto F. Bocala, who served as the first president of the newly organized division until his June 2003 retirement.<sup>37</sup>

During his 12 years as SSD president, Gulfan Jr. conducted evangelistic series and many public meetings in 11 of the non-Christian countries of SSD as well as other parts of the world.<sup>38</sup>

## Later Life

In April 2014, he traveled to the General Conference headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A., for the Spring Council meetings.<sup>39</sup> As he gathered his bags after going through immigration at Dulles International Airport, he felt severe pain in his back.<sup>40</sup> He was in considerable pain during the night and went to the General Conference nurse right after worship the next morning.<sup>41</sup> Dr. Peter Landless, General Conference Health director, assessed him and took him to the local Adventist hospital, then Washington Adventist Hospital<sup>42</sup> in Takoma Park, Maryland.<sup>43</sup> There, tests revealed he had cancer.<sup>44</sup> Thus began an approximately 18-month battle against multiple myeloma.

Throughout that time, he continued to maintain his personal connections with people while filling his leadership role as he was able. In March 2015, he received an honorary doctorate degree in theology from the Adventist University of the Philippines.<sup>45</sup>

In the last few months of his life, he painstakingly handwrote and sent letters of appreciation and encouragement to various individuals, further evidence of the quiet but affirmative leadership that marked his life.<sup>46</sup>

Even in the last few weeks of his life, he continued to exhort people to be faithful to God and look toward their heavenly home.<sup>47</sup> He passed away on September 26, 2015,<sup>48</sup> at age 64 at Manila Adventist Medical Center,<sup>49</sup> now known as Adventist Medical Center Manila, in Pasay, Metro Manila, Philippines.<sup>50</sup>

## Legacy

Gulfan Jr. served the Adventist Church for 42 years.<sup>51</sup> Throughout his years of service, he led large evangelistic campaigns that resulted in an estimated several thousands of baptisms as well as local church Happy Family seminars<sup>52</sup> designed to strengthen families and encourage closer bonds.

Perhaps, though, his greatest missionary work was done among those who saw his daily life up close. Division employees observed that he put into practice what he taught in seminars by bestowing flowers and thoughtful

gestures upon his wife.<sup>53</sup>

This thoughtfulness extended to others. He was known to ask for and offer forgiveness graciously. Once, as an administrator, he became aware that he had inadvertently “hurt the feelings of one departmental director and the other, a pastor,” his wife reported. She continued,

[Of] one . . . he was aware because it was during a meeting. . . . After that he could not eat and could not sleep well that night. The following morning, he did not eat breakfast. Instead, he went to the office and waited for the director to arrive. He then asked him for forgiveness. Together, they cried and prayed. With the pastor’s case, he [Gulfan Jr.] was not aware at first but upon knowing it, he immediately went and settled the matter with the pastor.<sup>54</sup>

He also encouraged his office coworkers and members at the church he attended not only to conduct evangelistic series but also to empower members of all ages and backgrounds to be evangelists in their communities. Myron Iseminger served as SSD’s associate treasurer with Gulfan and felt that “Pastor Gulfan’s legacy was his passion for evangelism. . . . That’s where his heart was. He loved holding evangelistic meetings.”<sup>55</sup>

He especially felt that women and children could be very effective in sharing the gospel. Linda Mei Lin Koh, who worked with him when she was the SSD Children’s/Family/Women’s Ministries director, remembers this well. “When he came to the division, he also encouraged all directors and everyone who works at the division to hold evangelistic meetings for children, women, and families. . . . But he especially reminded me to train the children and women to hold evangelistic meetings, too.”<sup>56</sup>

In such ways, he encouraged and supported individuals’ evangelistic efforts locally in his home church and in SSD countries. Ultimately, through his gracious ways and servant-leadership style, he left a legacy of inspiring others to reach out to those in need of the hope that only Christ can give.<sup>57</sup>

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