

BEHIND THE LINES

BY BOB JALDON

Los Angeles, CA. — It was three days after Christmas in 1995 that we had breakfast at Sunburst Fried Chicken (Zacky's). He politely asked me: "Do I run for congress when my mother ends her term?" "Or, do I accept an appointment as chairman of the Zamboecozone?"

Fast forward. In 1998, a star appeared on a white house adjacent to a catholic church and opposite a building where some of the biggest campaign donors would recreate in one of the rooms at the second floor. He wasn't to be denied a special place in Zamboanga's colorful history, being the eldest son of a patriarch-philanthropist who masterfully and gracefully applied the virtues of love, compassion and charity. He was sarcastically dubbed as a "nonentity" by his critics for he depended on the mighty clout of his beloved ma'. Nevertheless, the star glittered ... even until today.

So it came to pass that an expensive road project was to be undertaken with the use of city funds — money that wasn't readily available unless a huge loan had to be made from local bank. Was it anomalous? Nah. But the thought of it sparked public outcry, for why was the city going to borrow money to undertake a project that is national in scope? Using her influence, Mrs. Maria Clara L. Lobregat initiated an inquiry in the House to dig into the project. Her special resource person was going to be her son. The respondent was Mayor Vitaliano D. Agan.

Thus, the face that launched a thousand questions came to life — CELSO LORENZO-LOBREGAT. The rest about the Zamboanga-Licombo highway concreting project is history. The World Bank took care of it at no expense to the city.

The doubting Thomases never gave him a chance (he had only two - slim and none) against a formidable (remember this word used to describe Romeo Jalosjos?) adversary who neither was a local nor spoke chavacano. Aside from his family's wealth, he had only his name. So did Atty. Agan, and a string of cases (all dismissed) filed against him.

Mr. Lobregat carried with him his outstanding credentials as a student of both De la Salle University and Ateneo de Manila University and former employee of a giant corporation that distills crazy water. He played soccer for the Brothers and basketball for the Jesuits. He enhanced his knowledge of economics and management by studying at the Asian Institute of Management. Gaining some legal knowledge from his closest friend at that time, he mastered the art of legal research that at one point he didn't seem to need a legal counsel.

It is difficult for the younger generation to understand or imagine what Zamboanga was like 40 years ago, especially under the iron fist of Ferdinand E. Marcos. The people who opposed him were either neutralized or jailed, depending on the gravity of their offense and how deep their hatred was for the dictator. Zamboanga was moving at a turtle's pace in all aspects. No wealthy local, and even now, would venture to invest in their own city, although the opportunity to make money, legally or otherwise, was ever present. Zamboanga being a trading post, the chinks preferred to invest in retail that bazaars and small shops sprouted like lightning-grown mushrooms.

Again, fast forward. For 18 years, Mr. Lobregat ran the show in Zamboanga, dictating the pace of socio-economic advancement. That's why the slogan ADELANTE ZAMBOANGA heralded his reign. Yes, Zamboanga became more than just a bedroom city for salesmen and visitors, for soldiers and tourists. He tied the city's promising future to the quality of life he offered to the people anchored on social justice, innovation, expansion, wider education, health services, better living conditions for the poor and the availability of jobs. Light infrastructures that created jobs was the foundation of his economic thrust.

This pioneering spirit carried Mr. Lobregat through six overwhelming elections as he ambitiously expanded his political clout to as far as the corridors of Congress and Malacanang. He obviously worked on a strategic plan that would enhance the progress of a city neglected for almost half-a-century, a well-calculated direction that will keep him in place.

I see him standing proud of our immediate brilliant past. Perhaps, with his stay in congress for another 3-6 more years, he shall forge our bright future.