
SECRETARY GINA:

A TRUE *RARA AVIS* FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

An Environment and Natural Resources Secretary like none before her, a true *rara avis*. That, in a nutshell, is Regina Paz L. Lopez, the new head of the DENR.

Even before she was appointed as chief steward of the environment and natural resources of the Philippines, her hardline views have been cheered by environmentalists and challenged by giants of the mining industry. She was not known to flinch or waver when a heavyweight blocked her path, for she could like a typhoon swirl around obstacles. Yet there was no violence behind her toughness; it was the inner peace born of meditation that steels her, rather than brute force or the threat thereof. And though born to an affluent family, and though she could have led a luxurious and carefree life, she chose to blaze her own trail the hard way, in the dirt, serving the poor as an activist and crusader. Jee Y. Geronimo recalled in a profile in Rappler.com: “At 18 years old, she left home, renounced her life of privilege, and became a full-fledged yoga missionary in Portugal, India, and Africa. There, she had to constantly look for money for her own survival, and for the needs of underprivileged kids she served.”

And because she cared so deeply for the poor, she had to care for the environment that is key to improving their lives. Back in the Philippines, she later came to lead the reforestation of La Mesa Watershed and La Mesa Ecopark, and in 2010 was named chairperson of the Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission, which led efforts to resurrect the historic river. For her work with Bantay Kalikasan, she received the 1997 International Public Relations Award for Excellence for the Environment and the 2009 Outstanding Manilan Award for the Environment. In 2011, as managing director of the ABS-CBN Foundation, and working with partner organizations, she also launched the Save Palawan Movement, a signature campaign to mobilize protection for key biodiversity areas against mining.

Such is the person – Gina – now at the helm of the DENR.

Fierce as she is in her advocacies, Gina has a soft spot for the rank and file. Just ask Atty. Alvin Joseph G. Constantino, president of the Kalipunan ng mga Kawani sa Kagawaran ng Kalikasan (K4), the umbrella organization for DENR employee unions across the archipelago. Recalling his introductory meeting with her, he said: “She’s really approachable, easy to get along with, ‘di ka matatakot.” He added: “From my first encounter with her, she already said she will support all the rank-and-file employees and think of programs that would benefit the employees of the DENR, and for that I appreciate her.”

Gina has many plans for making the DENR more public service-oriented. To be able to pursue those plans efficiently, she plans to upgrade the quality of the workforce, from the ground up, “to make it fit what I want to do.”

The leadership she brings to the DENR has been honed by decades of first-hand experience working among the poor as well as in the wilderness. Those are already formidable credentials, but she has more, academically: she studied at Assumption College and the Newton College of the Sacred Heart in Boston, earned a master’s degree in development management from the Asian Institute of Management, and was bestowed an honorary doctorate in humanities by the Ateneo de Naga University.

Her physique might look frail, but make no mistake: Gina is lean and mean, tenacious as visionaries come, yet sensitive and profound. She is a champion, and means to make the DENR one too. (*Jesus Delfin*)

