

A School Par Excellence for Judges

The long and tortuous journey to build the PhilJA Center in Tagaytay is a chronicle of faith. The journey started on July 19, 1995, when President Fidel V. Ramos turned over the present 3.3-hectare facility^[1] to the Supreme Court. The turnover was formalized through the transfer of 51 percent^[2] of the shares of a government-sequestered corporation to the Court at no cost, thanks to the initiative of then Presidential Legal Counsel Antonio T. Carpio, now a distinguished member of this Court.

I remember that it was also during the term of Chief Justice Andres R. Narvasa, almost eight years ago on November 23, 1998, when the cornerstone of the Center was laid. In a simple ceremony, we had hoped then that the actual construction of a new and improved Center would follow not too long after. You see, the facilities had originally been intended for a recreation club; hence, many design and structural adjustments were necessary to convert it to a training institution. Until now, the most important requirements have been additional lecture and classrooms,^[3] related offices, dining lounges and other rooms needed to increase the existing capacity of the facility.

With no government funds forthcoming, my illustrious predecessor, Chief Justice Hilario G. Davide Jr., decided to seek external financial assistance. In June of 2000, he convinced the Academy to apply for a grant from the Japan International Cooperation Agreement under Japan's Grant Assistance Program (GAP). For reasons not connected with this application, however, the GAP was suspended in 2004. So, he coursed a new request for funding through the Japanese government's Non-Project

Grant Assistance (NPGA) Counter Value Fund. Even as an associate justice, I personally and persistently followed up this request with the Japanese government, essentially through His Excellency, Ambassador Ryuichiro Yamazaki.

It was during my term as Chief Justice, specifically on January 26, 2006, when Ambassador Yamazaki handed over the ₱300 million grant (NPGA) from the Japanese government to the Philippine government, and then to the Supreme Court. Thus, very soon, the long-aspired for realization of our vision of a PhilJA Development Center will at last take place.

Preparations for the PhilJA Center

I am happy to note the positive steps to accelerate the immediate construction of the Center. Already, the PhilJA Development Center Project Implementation Committee,^[4] created as a result of the Action Planning Workshop held on February 22, 2006, has drafted and approved the Terms of Reference (TORs) for the Detailed Architectural and Engineering Design (DAED) and the Project Management Consultancy. The budget for the DAED Contract, as well as the timelines for the project, has likewise been approved. The TORs, the approved budget, and the timelines have been referred to the Bids and Awards Committee (BAC) of the Action Program for Judicial Reform (APJR), which is tasked to handle all the bidding procedures for the services, works and goods relative to the project.

Accordingly, the APJR, BAC has caused the publication of the invitation to apply for eligibility and to bid for the DAED.^[5] So far, 12 have expressed their intentions to bid.

If things work out as planned, construction is expected to commence by next year.

Onward with the Tradition of Excellence

As envisioned, the renovation and construction of the PhilJA Development Center will make the standards of the Academy comparable with those of other training institutions, with respect to academic programs and facilities. In particular, the expansion program will transform the Center -- the first and only training school for the Philippine judiciary -- into a national and, I hope, an ASEAN regional hub for (1) continuing legal and judicial education, (2) pre-judicature training, (3) judicial career enhancement, and (4) various programs in specialized areas of the law.

The construction of the Center will come at an opportune time. The Supreme Court will have already firmed up linkages with the best judicial institutes of the world, including those of Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. Recently, on June 30, 2006, I signed -- on behalf of our Court, the PhilJA, and the Judicial and Bar Council -- a cooperation agreement with Spain. The agreement seeks to promote knowledge-sharing and technical cooperation in judicial education and training, among others.

Similar agreements are also being drawn up with the judiciaries of France and the United Kingdom. With those agreements in place, we hope to open up more training programs and courses to our judges, not only here but also in the foreign judicial institutes mentioned. The exchanges to be generated through these

cooperation agreements -- both in terms of sharing knowledge, best practices, and technical cooperation -- will also definitely contribute to the improvement of our standards of training and education in the Center.

Of course, I also recall recent discussions with Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, and other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. These exchanges have highlighted to us the possibility of adopting common curricula for justices and judges in the region, especially on judicial education and the environment. This undertaking was proposed on separate occasions: during the first round-table discussion of the Asia-Pacific Judicial Reform (APJR) Network in Australia and also during the Asian Justices Workshop on the Environment -- both in March of this year. Should plans for the adoption of a common curriculum materialize in the near future, then the PhilJA Center's curricular offerings would have to be on a par with those in the region.

Parenthetically, I am pleased to note that our country has taken the lead in judicial education in our Asian region, through the organization of the Asia-Pacific Judicial Education Forum. In this forum, our esteemed PhilJA Chancellor Ameurfina A. Melencio Herrera sits as chairperson of the Executive Committee. She is also the deputy regional president for Asia and the Pacific of the International Organization for Judicial Training (IOJT).

In line with efforts to provide continuing legal education, researches to advance the frontiers of judicial science and court technology will also have to be prioritized.

Thus, the PhilJA Board of Trustees has prepared the way for our renewed focus on science and court technology. For this reason, it has named Atty. Emmanuel L. Caparas as the new chairperson of PhilJA's Court Technology Department. Named as members were Attys. Jesus M. Disini Jr. and Ray C. Espinosa. The court technology group is helping the Case Flow Management Committee link up with the Court

Management Information System.

Stricter Admission and Passing Requirements

Eventually, under the aegis of PhilJA, we hope also to establish a special school for young lawyers who aspire to become career judges. We foresee this special school of judges to be similar in concept and orientation to our very own Foreign Service Institute. As such, entrants will pass through a battery of very competitive examinations and interviews, aimed at gauging their preparedness and suitability for judgeship positions.

Competitive examinations would ensure equal opportunity for all. Thus, no one who passes the rigid entrance requirements would be denied enrollment, simply on account of poverty. I am taking steps to ensure that the Center will be able to grant scholarships and extend financial assistance to poor but deserving applicants.

By ensuring that only the best and the brightest will be trained for a career in the judiciary, we hope to bring about professional judges who will not just be steeped in the law, but also be deep in ethical and moral values. The graduates will then be assured of a place in the highest echelons of the judiciary.

Already, we are looking at the judicial institutes of other countries -- Japan, Korea, Australia and France -- as models for the organization and structure, as well as the licentiates and/or diplomates that will be offered in our very own school for judges.

All in all, I look forward to a school par excellence for judges, one that will be

a **center for judicial education** not only for the Philippines, but for the whole ASEAN region.

Addressing the Problem of Judicial Incompetence

As you know, at the beginning of my term as Chief Justice on December 21, 2005, I immediately vowed to lead a judiciary characterized by four ***Ins***: **in**dependence, **in**tegrity, **in**dustry and **in**telligence; one that is morally courageous to stand its ground against the onslaughts of **in**fluence, **in**terference, **in**difference and **in**solence; and that is impervious to the plague of “ships” -- kin**ship**, relation**ship**, friend**ship** and fellow**ship**.

I also announced my commitment to continue the ongoing Action Program for Judicial Reform by focusing on four basic problems, which I have code-named ACID: limited **access** to justice by the poor, **corruption**, **incompetence**, and **delay** in the delivery of justice.

In line with these objectives, the construction of the Center and the strengthening of PhilJA as the primary education arm of the Supreme Court rightly deserve priority under my watch. After all, the intensified campaign to eradicate the corrosive effects of ACID can be waged much faster and more successfully if we start at the very foundations of judicial training and education. That, we can and will do through the PhilJA Development Center!

[1] The 33,151 square-meter facility was formerly owned by the Ridge Resort Corporation (now the PhilJA Development Center, Inc.).

[2] The Supreme Court now has two-thirds control of the PhilJA Development Center, Inc., a

government-owned and -controlled corporation, which has been running the Center since October 2000. The Court's control was made possible by 171 donors, who donated their shares in the former Ridge Sports and Country Club Corporation to the Supreme Court for the use of the Academy.

[3] Presently, the facility has very limited space that can accommodate a maximum of 60 persons only.

[4] The Committee was formally constituted on March 31, 2006, upon my signing of Administrative Circular No. 34-2006. The officers and members are as follows:

Chairperson: Justice Ameurfina A. Melencio Herrera (PhilJA)

Vice-Chairperson: Justice Minerva P. Gonzaga-Reyes (PhilJA)

Members: Justices Presbitero J. Velasco Jr. (OCA), Francisco S. Tantuico, Jr. (PhilJA), and Jose C. Vitug (PhilJA); Attys. Edna E. Diño (OCAT) and Corazon F. Flores (FMBO); Dean Cesar L. Villanueva (PhilJA), and Director Evelyn Dumdum (PMO)

Resource Persons: DCA Jose P. Perez (OCA), Directors Susan N. Gavino and Cecile V. Dumdum (both of the PMO); and Mr. Policarpio G. Felicidadario Jr. (PhilJA).

Technical Operations Group: Engineers Leonel Urdaneta (PMO) and Joan Cabe (OHJ), and Architect Dennis Velasco (PMO).

Recorder-Secretary: Atty. Ma. Melissa R. Dimson-Bautista

Asst. Recorder-Secretary: Ms Ma. Luisa A. Magno

Support Staff: as may be designated

[5] The publication was in compliance with the requirements of the Implementing Rules and Regulations of Republic Act 9184.