

Arlene S. Villaver – Visual Artist

## **A Girl's Art To God's Heart**

*Jonnie Aristorenas Anzures*

*Arlene Villaver drew people and scenes from her school and characters from Pilipino comics when she was five years old. Eventually, her art brought her awards (including one from the Cultural Center of the Philippines' 13 Artists Awards), recognitions and a promising career. But little did she know that her fascination with sketching and painting would also bring her the things she craved above all – peace, fulfillment and a life purpose.*

Arlene stared tenuously at her teacher but she wasn't listening. She felt so bored that all she could do to ease her mind was to do the one thing that brought her relief and diversion, and it was to draw.

Despite being uninterested in the lessons, Arlene graduated with honors from the public elementary school. Before she finished high school, she told her father that she wanted to continue devoting time to her favorite craft by studying Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines in Cebu. But her father had other plans.

"My father wanted me to take up Commerce and I really did not want to. The rest of my eight siblings were already studying Commerce, plus my father was an accountant. So, to save money, since the textbooks were already available, he urged me to take up the same course."

Her father said that if she wanted to take up Fine Arts it would be better for her not to go to college at all. Arlene convinced him that she'd take up Commerce after she finished her Fine Arts course. Her father agreed.

College nurtured and developed her talents further. "During college, I was winning awards from art competitions. Before I graduated, I won the prestigious Joya Award for Representational Art. I also set up art exhibits every school year. My father, who was a weekend carpenter, helped me make the frames for the paintings. What started as an objection to my art career soon turned into a father-daughter tandem."

## **Profession to Idolization**

When Arlene graduated in 1982, her professor convinced her to showcase her work in Manila for the needed exposure and opportunities in the big city. Since her parents did not have the

financial capability to send her there, she raised the funds necessary for that trip by holding workshops and exhibits. In 1985, Arlene finally arrived in Manila.

But Arlene's real purpose in going to Manila was not just for fame or fortune. "My life was my idol. My god was my art. My purpose in going to Manila was solely to become an excellent artist. Nothing was more important than that. I wanted to prove to everyone that I was a good artist." Slowly, her family lost its significance and she spent less time communicating with them. Eventually, this caused problems within her family and in her own personal life.

### **Crisis to Christ**

The Lord used that family crisis so that Arlene would seek answers. Her search led her to seek the help of her concerned friends who prayed for her, and eventually, they started a Bible study every Thursday at an art gallery.

"From 4:00 PM we'd have a sketching session and a Bible study at 6:00 PM. I did not attend the first day of the Bible study because I believed that faith is a private thing. But deep inside, I just did not want to be taught what's in the Bible. I had this really big pride in me. I knew I was a very good artist and I just plainly did not want to be taught. In fact, I met a teacher of mine in the street and I just opened up to her about my frustration and anger about the whole Bible study thing until ten in the evening. I was complaining about why the organizers for that sketching group had to have that activity."

She could have easily left that sketching group but it was composed of very interesting people, and Arlene was the youngest and the only female among these artists who were already well known. So, although she hated the Bible study, her love for art forced her to stay.

The next week, she joined the Bible study, she had a chance to talk to an accomplished painter and printmaker Romulo Olazo whose career has spanned over forty years and a wide range of artistic approaches, earning him a significant reputation in the Philippine art scene. "I greatly admired his work even when I was just starting out in Cebu. The owner of the gallery introduced me to Mr. Olazo and Mr. Olazo asked me, 'Do you know your God?'"

That really hurt because "it was like saying I didn't know the Lord and he was the only one who knew Him! I said, 'Well, maybe.' He pointed to the Bible and said, 'It's good to know your God through this book.'"

His words kept spinning in her head like a broken record. It reminded Arlene of her situation and her uncertainty about God. "I realized that Mr. Olazo was right. I never knew my God. In fact, it was the first time for me to know about some of the Bible stories and characters

that we studied.”

She decided to attend the Bible study regularly. But like her elementary days, she just pretended to listen. After all, her real motive was to join the sketching group. “Eventually, the sketching sessions ceased, but the Bible study remained and sometimes it lasted until 1:00 AM the next day. And the surprising thing was that I kept attending it for five years!”

Arlene realized that there were more important things than sketching. The truths from the Bible study were so penetrating that she sometimes left the meeting with tears in her eyes. She did not want people to see her crying and the fact that God’s Word had struck a nerve in her heart. She prayed, “Lord if you’re really who you say you are, teach me to love Jesus.”

She discovered that the Lord reveals Himself to people when they really seek Him with all their hearts. Matthew 6:38 , “*Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you*” – inspired Arlene in her search. Years later, it would be one of her life verses.

In 1988, as she continued to attend the Bible studies, a point came when Arlene just had to rush home because she could not contain her emotions anymore. “I just felt this overwhelming love for Jesus. I cried and I knelt down beside the back door of my kitchen. I looked up into the sky and I cried and shouted, ‘Thank you Father God for teaching me to love Jesus.’ The following year, I attended church services regularly.”

Since then, the Lord has shown Arlene that He can use her art to glorify Him by answering her prayers for opportunities to showcase her talents here and abroad. Painting for God’s glory is a great honor for Arlene. As a little girl who just loved to draw, she has gone a long way from just being amused or relieved.

“Visual art is a powerful language that I believe needs to be handled responsibly. It was only having the Lord in my life that I came to realize this power and responsibility needs to go together.”

Through her art, Arlene has found both artistic fulfillment and a spiritual life purpose.