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22 DASH CALZADO
30 GNARLY
34 UZI EMPERADO
40 RHIPSTOP

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Gnarly!

“Crazy sh*t.” that's how EJ Reyes of Gnarly! describes his brand. And if you know Gnarly!, we're sure you'd agree. We mean, with designs revolving around Fudge, Gnar City, Gremnar, and Gnarticon, this brand's hard illustrations are pretty wild.

Fudge: EJ and How The Brand Started

But Gnarly! didn't start out all that crazy. With Fudge as its first character, things were a little more mellow. If you're not familiar with Fudge, he's the cute character with puffy cheeks and a serious expression who's bursting out the seams of his yellow button-up. You'd always see him wearing his G! bow tie loud and proud in the Gnarly! products he stars in. And we even heard that he was actually created in the likeness of EJ himself. That's probably one of the crazy sh*t he was talking about.

But what's really crazy is how EJ came up with the idea of putting up a brand. From importing sneakers to the Philippines, he started Gnarly! because of a friend's suggestion.

EJ wasn't sure of the whole thing at first, admitting he's no designer and all. But if the friend who suggested this to you is Nick Automatic's Nicolo Nimor, you'll surely give it a shot. As EJ recounted, “The Cebuano kids really helped me a lot, they were the one[s] who really pushed me to start the brand. ”

Gnar City: The Community

And just like how from Fudge, Gnarly! designs evolved into Gnar City, it was this group of friends and the community that really helped the Gnarly! name grow.

“Gnarly! is made, siguro, through the community itself,” as EJ would say. And he just doesn't say this because of his friends' advice, but also because the advice he's getting is coming from G! fans too. You read that right, the people of Gnar City have a voice.

With feedback on products coming in their website, social media, and even weekly gatherings in the Gnarly! HQ, the G! team comes up with new designs and collections according to what their customers want. “[Kapag] gumagawa kasi ako ng products, I don't think of them buying it na eh. I just think of products they want,” is how EJ explains this process.

And in line with this, they also have a couple of projects coming up that you should really watch out for—the Gnarly! Cares Campaign which is like an after-sales program catering to the fans' needs, and the battle between Fudge and Gremnar on the Gnarly! website.

Gnarticon and Gremnar: The Competition

Yep, there's going to be an epic battle between Fudge and his arch enemy, Gremnar. It's something you have to watch out for on gnarly.ph, and we'll tell you know now—your voice will really affect the new designs of Gnarly!

But while we're waiting for that, we'll give you the dirty details on Gremnar. We've told you about Fudge and all his seriousness, but Gremnar is different. He's the alien from Gnarticon, and if you noticed from designs featuring this character, Gremnar is really out of this world. He's Fudge's, and Gnar City's public enemy #1, and he's here to make some noise. He brings out the craziness of the Gnarly! Designs, the other side of the brand. He's Fudge's number one rival.

He's kind of like the “big brands”, while Gnarly! is Fudge. Like EJ said, “The big brands [are my biggest competition]... ‘Cause I felt like they’re really, really shoving the products down to their customers’ throat.”

And while these big brands are Gremnar and Gnarticon at that, we can also say that Gnar City is the local scene of streetwear. Because if you ask EJ, “I don’t see other brands as competition, because kami-kami lang rin naman nagtutulungan to lift up the Philippine market for in this streetwear thing.”

And since we're sticking with this analogy, we're going to let you in on a tip on how this Gnar City can defeat the Gremnar of the streetwear scene. This is what EJ has to say, “I think everyone [should] really work [together] to build the street wear we’re talking about, I think it’s gonna be dope.”

We're sure it's going to be. Fudge says so, after all.

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1) How did you start Gnarly!?

-How did you come up with the idea?

Probably because before, around 2006, I was selling shoes online. I was with Kim Francisco, Paul Pamilyaran(?). Tatlo lang kami nun, when we started. But like, everyone started selling shoes because it was really easy. Before, one of my friends, si Nicolo Nimor of Nick Automatic suggested that I should open up my own clothing line. And I [was] like, really? 'Cause [I think] I don't have style. But he was, like, yeah, you can do it. So, tinulungan nila ako, basically. The Cebuano kids really helped me a lot. Even with the production. They were the one[s] who really pushed me to start the brand. And some of my friends here in Manila, some of my partners Carlos San Jose and Kiks Suarez(?) also pushed me to start the brand.

Tapos, with the name, I got it from one of my best friends. It started there...I saw the gap lang between, ‘yung mga clothes lang before, nakakabili lang sila sa brands sa mall. And like, konti lang yung brand na local. Konti lang kami before!...Tapos, now ang daming mga brands na. Actually, walang brands before. Team Manila, THE, ako [Gnarly!], unschooled...konti lang talaga. Tapos ngayon ang dami, crazy. But it's okay. At least may edge na kami. We know how to market our product, stuff like that.

-Has it always been a dream, or did the idea/inspiration for the brand just suddenly come up? (So, it was really just an idea that you can sell clothing?)

Yeah, it was an idea 'cause basically Gnarly! is just, it's a really fun brand. Basically, it's just hard illustrations, mga crazy shit lang talaga, it's just all in my mind. But the thing is, I'm not a designer. I don't draw, I don't even think I'm artistic enough to open up my own brand. So what I did [was] I...[got in

touch with] people, designers, who can really help me out (rin) with the whole project. So I got **Melvin Rodas(?)**, since 2008, magkasama na kami. Tapos yun, lahat ng ideas ko, nagagawa nila into a design.

(So everything just really started from an idea, and then you got people to execute it for you?) Exactly. Because it was a frustration for me before because I stopped college. When I was in 2nd year college, because like shet! I'm lazy na. So my mom and dad was like, "Okay, whatever. What do you want to do?" If I wanted daw to handle [our] family business--we sell guns, we've been in the gun business for more than 60 years already--but I'm like, no po. Ayoko dun. So pumasok na lang ako sa importation ng shoes, and it started from there. It started there, and eventually it grew. Because parang, gusto ko lang patunayan sa kanila na I don't really like guns...I don't like that idea...I don't like doing deals with old people. I like doing deals with, like, kids like me. It all started there, basically.

- (What was your marketing strategy?)

It was basically really online. And, how did I market it? I really did not market it or advertise it, I just made products where people would really be happy if they see it. And like, when I made Fudge, that cute character, siya na lang 'yung nagmamarket. Kung baga, sa kanya nag-evolve 'yung designs. Like, I made a city, it's called Gnar! City. Para maging mas madali 'yung design process. For example, we have Gnarly Burgers, other characters, we have Gremgnar, nag-aaway sila sa city. It all started there—very comics. Comics lang talaga.

How did you get the people to notice the brand?

I don't know. Maybe the colors. Gnarly! Is not the kind of a brand that chugs products to you. We make products and eventually, if the people doesn't want it, we won't make it anymore. Because Gnarly! is made, siguro, through the community itself. I think that the customers, or rather the community, is a **brand-gettter(?)**. Like, sila mismo yung gumagawa ng brand. Like, online, we have this private group where we have our really, really super loyal customers are helping us out. And that's why I opened this studio because I want the customers to be involved talaga. They actually go here, like every Saturday, and they also pitch in...and I guess that's our marketing? But not everybody knows that, 'cause ayoko naming sabihin sa lahat ng tao. **"Yung customers talaga mismo 'yung nagdedesign"**

(When they asked for an iPad, Gnarly gave away an iPad—ang daming shares) Because of my customers, naging ganun yung advertising ko. Baka medyo FGD 'yun. That's how I market it, with the customers.

2) Gnarly! has been around for about four years, what were the challenges/milestones you've encountered along the way?

CHALLENGES

- **People not taking my brand seriously.**

At first, for me, it was hard for me to talk to the suppliers...They don't take me seriously. They're not taking me seriously because of my age. That was a HUGE challenge for me. That's why I grew my bigote...before I was really clean. So 'yun, na-overcome naman siya.

-(focus) The next is, ano bang gagawin ko sa brand? Gagawa ba ko ng store? Or mag-fofocus ako sa online store? So, ayun. Nag-focus na lang ako sa online store. I [did] open up a store, [pero] hindi siya Gnarly!, sa Greenhills. I sell parang mga arcade stuff there, novelty stuff, tapos doon ko nilagay 'yung Gnarly!. So, for me to maintain the online vibe, hindi ko siya pinangalang Gnarly!, pinangalan ko siyang ibang brand—*Parafreaq*. Kung baga 'yun, challenging 'yun. Kasi hindi ko alam kung anong gagawin ko eh. **Gagawin ko bang online? Or gagawin ko bang physical store?**

-**Competitors** and “haters” (as much as I hate to use that word.) Ang daming nag-hehate sa’min lately eh ‘cause they’re inggit. *Kidding*. So, a lot of hater. Like, inside the community rin...may nararamdaman ako na hate. But it was okay. That helped my brand a lot.

-**Handling a team** na hindi pa sanay masyado. It was really hard for me ‘cause currently the Gnarly! team, this office, we have 11 employees. And it was so hard for me to handle them one by one, ‘cause they’re all creative, and all creative are really crazy. ‘Di ba? Why would you listen to me?

-**Production**, of course. Pero easy [problem to solve]

MILESTONES

Probably the **website**, because it was the first website na interactive, na brandeded talaga here. It’s made by one of the best designers I know—‘yung partner ko nga—si Christian San Jose (CSJ). Like, he made websites for Kobe, Wade...And naging stepping-stone niya rin ‘yung Gnarly! eh. ‘Cause he made it for me for free...He needs daw to do something, to prove himself. Gnarly! was his first website. And now he does *fuckin’* corporate stuff. And he has a studio and, like, a lot of designers working there...So parang nagsimula kaming dalawa and that was...milestone.

-Tapos, **opening this studio**. Because opening up a studio is kinda expensive, and, like, maintaining your employees. And, like, I felt na, okay naman siya. There’s a reason for me to celebrate. Iba eh. Sarap nung vibe dito eh.

-How did you celebrate them?

[By making] more. ‘Cause it’s not enough na parang ganito lang ‘toh. I wanna make more. Now, I’m trying to expand [internationally]...and I have five other brands. Gnarly!, The Artisan, etc...So hindi lang Gnarly! work ‘yung ginagawa ditto. For my other ventures din...for my brand in Denmark, we do the website here, we do the production...But right now I’m trying to focus all my staff sa Gnarly! **I think that’s a challenge**. Kasi ang hirap, kung pano ko ba i-focus ‘yung ano ko sa Gnarly! lang. ‘Cause it’s the breadwinner of the whole company... We just focused on Gnarly! (about) two months ago? Like, before, it was all half-baked. And naisip ko, what if ilagay ko lahat ng effort ko dun sa Gnarly!?...that’s what I’m doing right now. And ‘yun na siguro ‘yung biggest challenge ko...Hindi ko alam kung saan i-focus eh. Everything, lahat, startup eh. So kailangan, lahat 100%...it’s hard.

3) What makes Gnarly! different?

-What distinguishes it from other brands?

I don’t see Gnarly! as different, siguro. Kasi I’m really into the local scene. I really want to help other brands too. Maybe that’s what makes me (Gnarly!) different. Parang I don’t see other brands as competition, because kami-kami lang rin naman nagtutulungan to lift up the Philippine market for this streetwear thing. ‘Cause Filipino people aren’t really aware of the movement pa. Medyo matagal na siya (6-7 years na yata ‘toh). So that sets Gnarly! apart from other brands, probably—na gusto naming tumulong lang. And we don’t care about competition, we’re really into collaborations. I like helping out other startup brands. For example, ditto sa HQ, I get a lot of startup kids—other [people] na gusto mag-negosyo ng ganitong damit. Pupunta sila dito..para matulungan sila mag-startup ng sarili nilang brand. Kasi tulungan lang naman ‘yan eh... ‘Cause I’m already here, and they’re starting naman. And I think that’s what sets Gnarly! apart—na mahilig kami tumulong sa iba. Hindi lang sa ibang brands, na sa ibang tao na rin.

And recently, we launched a new campaign, it's called Gnarly! Cares. Parang after-sales program siya ng Gnarly!. Once you get the shirt, some of my people will call you, send you more tinkers...like pupunta sila...like, if they ordered a month ago, after a month, pupuntahan naming sila. Babalita kami, how's the shirt? How can we make it better?

And [also on Gnarly! Cares], I'm starting a re-selling program. But I won't indulge on that yet...[it's too early to talk about it], so you have to watch out for that...but it's gonna be awesome because we're gonna really help out everyone. If they want to make money, if they want to help out the community, they could be part of the Gnarly! reselling program. It's gonna be dope. That's what makes it different.

-Why should people who are into comics, music, skateboarding, and street food buy Gnarly!?

-Why should people who are NOT into mics, music, skateboarding, and street food buy Gnarly!?

...I think our brand is just really transparent. Walang angas, walang yabang. Like, okay, if you don't want to wear our stuff, we don't give a damn. We just want you to be part of the community.

Gumagawa kasi ako ng products, I don't think of them buying it na eh. I just think of products they want. If you want to buy it, buy it. Share it, tell your friends. Hindi kami yung sales na parang salesman talaga. Honestly, sa Gnarly! wala kaming sales...talagang gumagawa lang kami ng products sa tingin naming magugustuhan niyo. So, I really don't know. I've been here 4-5 years...I really don't think of selling Gnarly! as selling [products]/something. I just think of it as making happy designs na magegets nila eventually. Hindi siya parang, mahirap tanggapin. It's not really about selling.

(So parang the product sells itself?) Yeah, parang ganun. ...we never did the "HEY, BUY THIS!" Medyo weird yung concept na pagpapatakbo ko sa Gnarly! eh. That's why it's working. I can't even explain what I'm doing.

4) You have such quirky designs for G! that are distinct to the brand, has it always been this way?

-How did you develop the characters?

Fudge, was like, it was the concept of my ex-girlfriend...that's me daw eh. Not the face, he's really cute, but that's me. Yung characteristics niya, ako. So, dyan nag-start si Fudge.

But before Fudge, wala akong character. It was just the Gnarly! logo, tapos lahat ng mga designs...the first collection, the second collection, dyan naming binase. Then, nung lumabas na sila Fudge, si Gremnar, naging mas madali sa'min gumawa ng design kasi meron na siyang story behind it eh. Hindi lang siya logo, hindi lang siya...meron talaga akong storyang sinusunod. So, I think yun yung prosesong ginagawa naming sa paggawa ng designs, yun lang.

(These are all from ideas)...from the characters itself...para maging mas madali yung design process namin, we thought of making a city—Gnar City. Parang, may burger joint dun, may city, kung ano-ano, so dun nanggagaling yung design, sa mga city nay un.

[Our other character], si Gremnar, he's an alien. He's from Gnarticon....Lahat sila magkakamukha sa Gnarticon....From Gnarticon and Gnar City, dyan din naming kinukuha yung mga designs namin.

...Gremnar, he's gonna run for mayor kasi...in Gnar City... It's really political...'Cause I'm into that shit too. ...[Gremnar] wants Gnar City to be like Gnarticon, to be self-sufficient, hindi na nila kailangan pumunta sa ibang planets or sa ibang city para kumuha ng gas, parang ganun. And people can vote on the

website [soon]. (Either Fudge or Gremnar can win), and we're going to produce stuff on that soon...So it's really interactive.

...

Laging yung community...lagi kaming sa customers...So, I think dun nagstart yung process naming of deciding, and really it revolves around Fudge and Gremnar.

Where did you get these characters?

(Gremnars) I got it from **Raftink**...this is where we got the concept. If you see Gremnar, laging planets, laging galaxy, wala nga akong design na si Gremnar nasa Gnar City...that's why we thought of doing the election-thing (the campaign), para pwede namin siya ilagay na sa Gnar City.

Gremnar is like the cat in Tom and Jerry...opposite ni Fudge [na] paupo-upo lang. Pero kay Gremnar, pwede ako gumawa ng crazy designs...and I don't really want to make new characters, I'm happy with that na.

(So, it's really because of the designs? That's why you made new characters?)

Design lang...Kasi ayoko yung puro logo lang G!, Gnarly! Walang story behind it...so all my stuff are really into these comic-type [design], kaya naging madali sa'kin mag-design. 'Pag si Fudge, malinis; 'pag si Gremnar, magulo. Like, I can't make a Fudge na [Gremnar].

-How did you come up with the Gnarly! logo?

It was not me, it was Christian San Jose again. Probably because I like the color yellow. And yellow, sa brands, basically walang gumagamit ng yellow because they're all scared...to use the logo. But, it was hard kasi to design tapos lalaki pa yung may-ari....'pag yellow kasi iisipin mo, cute na kaagad eh...the font factored.

Sinabi ko lang sa kanya noon [CSJ], I want the logo to be really happy, and para sa tao. Hindi para sa masa, hindi para sa upperclass. Para lang talaga sa tao itself. Alam mo yun? Wala siyang marketing-target. I just wanted yellow, I want an icon...done.

-Who is your artist?—Would you say that your artist is actually the people?

I think they are. Because all of them [my team/artists now], were all fans of Gnarly! Paano ko sila nakilala? Si Melvin Rodas (Art Director now), from Gnarly! lang rin. He bought shoes from me before, and he like, sent me all these stuff. And I was like, this guys has potential. And we started working na...nag-eemailan lang kami, it started from there. And for the other staff here, yung mga designers ko, just posted them sa Gnarly! page...I got a lot of applicants, and I got 10 lang. And they're really good. And they're all Gnarly! fans. Almost all of them when they got an interview, naka-Gnarly! sila. I think they're part of the people I was telling you about. So, they're part of it, they are.

5) Who buys Gnarly!?

-Who are your usual customers?

-Is there a particular Gnarly! 'personality' (in terms of customers)?

Lately, yung bumibili ng Gnarly!, mga hiphop/FlipTop fans. Because one of my endorsers, Ron Henley, is lakas mag-endorser kung endorser siya eh. So, yun. Sila yung bumibili ngayon. Typically, mga hiphop fans. Parang, I think they see a similarity sa **Baked, kay Niko kasi yun talaga isa sa influences ko.**

Before, 2009-2011, puro rock scene. Kasi endorsers ko sila Chicosci...more rock scene, underground scene. But then, when lumapit sa'kin sila Ron Henley and his crew, sila Lumi, sila Abra...I really liked their

movement din kasi...Maganda yung buong brand identity ng hiphop sa Philippines, so I want to be involved in that. So, that's why I supported it rin...I'm focusing now to target, sa mga hiphop scene.

-Can you name some "big names" who are Gnarly! fans/ambassadors?

Probably my models...Yung mga sa tingin ko, magfit dun sa Gnarly! type na hindi mayabang,, yung mga online personalities. Sarah Gaugler was my first model. She's from Turbo Goth...Si Joyce Pring. She has been supporting our brand since day 1. Even if she wasn't part pa of the Myx VJ-thing pa. And then nung naging Myx VJ na siya, she was wearing Gnarly! the whole time she was in Myx. And after Myx, still Gnarly. So, parang na-embrace na niya yung buong Gnarly vibe.

6) What can you buy from Gnarly!?

-What's your bestseller?

Logo shirts. And the jackets—we make awesome jackets. Like, iba yung material na yung sa labas. 'Cause we really thought of yung people ditto sa Philippines, we like wearing jackets pero ang init! So, what we did, sa loob niya, may fiber na siya. It's our fuckin' best seller.

Also, caps.

-What item are you most proud of?

The Gnarly! concrete. 2008, available siya, and until now available pa rin siya. And people are really buying it. Some, like, they buy it and they collect it. Ah, lately. Ang napapansin ko, people are collecting Gnarly!. And sometimes they sell it sa Sulit, sa Ebay, may bumibili naman. Parang nagkaka-value siya...even if [we don't brand our products as limited]. Gagawa pa kami para sa'yo, hindi kami snob...pero pag natatagan sila na mag-realease kami ng bago, bibili na lang sila sa ibang tao...kaya may value yung Gnarly! shirts—I think that's a milestone. I don't know, probably.

(...I don't think about my milestones eh. I don't think I have enough pa. Kulang.)

-What are the unique pieces we can get from the brand?

Maybe the jackets, 'cause it's awesome!

7) What do you think about the emerging competition?

-Who do you think are your biggest competition? (local/international brands)

The big brands [are my biggest competition]. The huge brands, 'yung mga available lang sa mga mall. 'Cause I felt like they're really, really shoving the products down to their customers' throat. And I think that's bullshit...sila lang yung kalaban ko 'cause ang dami nilang pera to market ...yun lang competition ko, not the local brands. ..kasi tulong-tulong talaga 'yan. Ang competition namin, siguro 'yung mga big brands.

-How can you compare them to the Gnarly! brand?

Gnarly! is easy to sell—the lifestyle aspect of it. Yung mismong may-ari yung kausap nila, yung may-ari mismo nagtitiklop ng damit. Yung laban naming na local, mas **personal**...it's really personal.

-What do you love about the (clothing and lifestyle) industry;

-and what do you hate about it?

It's okay, but it's moving pretty slow. 'Cause everyone pa rin is thinking like, I want my brand to be better than your brand. So I think everyone [should] really work [together] to build the street wear we're talking about, I think it's gonna be dope. That's what I love about it, if that happens.

But currently, now... I just want them to support each other na lang. Kasi isa lang naman yung kalaban naming talaga eh, that's corporate stuff, man. Yun lang yun. Drama nun, ah.

I'm very positive about the local scene, but it's really slow...tulong-tulong lang. It was dope before...Commune in Makati. Commune is Unschooled now. Like, kami yun. Kami yung andun before...and yung mga brands namin [ngayon] na existing, it's really making a difference.

-What advice can you give them (the new brands)?

Stay true, don't sell out that much. You can sell out a little, 'cause we all want to make money. But kung ano yung pinapahiwatog ng brand mo, try mo lang gawin yun per collection, and it will be strong. At first, if you want to support the hiphop scene, support it all the way. Yun yung mali ko before eh, ang dami kong pinapasukan na market, uy, emerging market yan eh. Yun ang ginawa ko. And when I did that, it was so stressful for me. Because pa-ikotikot kami. But now, yung sa hiphop lang. We [even] made the album art for Ron Henley.

My suggestion is, focus on what really, just focus lang sa branding nila. Matinong branding lang, athuwag silang mag-release ng panget na design, para lang gumanda yung buong pangalan ng Pilipinas sa streetwear.

8) What's new with Gnarly!?

This HQ, the Gnarly! cares campaign, collaborations with brands, na hindi nila ineexpect na makipag-collaborate kami—and everything local. 'Cause I could like do collaborations with international brands, but I just want to keep it local first.

And Gnarly! is releasing a collection, it's called basic collection...I'm really excited about this. Ano siya, mas malinis na Gnarly!, mas malinis na design...hindi na siya hard illustration, very clean, iba 'toh eh. Gnarly! Basic is our new project. G! but on the cleaner side, kumbaga.

-What do you have now, that you didn't have from when you started five years ago?

EXPERIENCE. Mas alam ko na yung ginagawa ko ngayon. Kasi dati, when I started, I was 18, and hindi ko alam gagawin ko. My family was really behind me the whole time. And yung business nila, yung business-process nila, nakuha ko...nakuha ko yung alam nila nad ininfuse ko siya ng alam ko. But probably the experience. If I had the experience I have now when I was 18, oh God, hindi ko na lam kung nasan yung Gnarly! ngayon.

9) If Gnarly!, as a brand, had a playlist of songs, what would be in it?

Jamiroquai! That's Gnarly! Also, [songs from] Mama's Gold, Michael Jackson, and Daft Funk. I guess you can say it's [a] funky [playlist]. I want it to be sexy, but it's not. So, [I'd say it's] funky.

10) What's your own personal favorite Gnarly! item?

-Do you have something from your first collection that you keep in a safe somewhere?

The first shirt...I produced 25 of that for my first collection and no one bought. Like, walang bumili nun, ha. Like, honestly. Yung first collection ko, namigay lang ako. It was so sad, I wanted to give up. But that shirt, I kept it. I can say it's a reminder na parang, before 25 lang ginagawa mo, ngayon tatlong-libo na, per shirt diba? That's why it's my favorite. It's called trend-estimation.

And I will never release a shirt like this, ever.a guy sold it on EBay, he sold it for like P3,500.

-Is there a particular piece you have that reminds you of an epic story?

The Gnarly and Nick collaboration [experience] was pretty dope.