

*Alex Baluyut: The Man Outside the Formula*

When asked about his calling as a mentor, Alex Baluyut, heralded by the Invisible Photographer Asia (IPA) as one of the 20 most influential photographers in Asia, said his commitment is to the photographers in the Philippines. He had no intention of being an international hub for photography. He only wanted the next generation of Filipino photographers to have a shot at their own big break.

In an interview last October 18, 2013 conducted in his humble home inside the University of the Philippines-Los Banos campus, Mr. Baluyut candidly shared his first big break which was being one of the very few Filipinos to be a photographer for the Associated Press. Before working for the AP, he was with the Nuclear Power Plant at the time it was already embroiled in controversy. It was where he learned to be a photojournalist. Even without political leanings, his gut led him to leak photos to the opposition because there was so much corruption happening around him. He trusted his intuition. He believed in his purpose. From the very beginning, he wanted to tell stories, good ones, from the perspective of his lens.

Alex Baluyut had three brothers and all of them were into photography at a young age. His older brother Butch traded a stereo sound system for a decent Nikon camera which they shared and Alex admitted that it would take miles and miles of film before they learned how to take good pictures. During those early years, the only photojournalism magazine he was exposed to was Life Magazine and the works of the likes of Eugene Smith, Larry Barrows, and the rest of the Life Magazine photography staff. He also perused The Manila Times and the strong work of the staff inspired him as well. News photography caught his imagination and attention. In school,

he gravitated towards the visual subjects and when that Nikon camera arrived into their household, he came to it “like a sea otter to the sea.”

Mr. Baluyut already admired the work of The Manila Times long before his stint with the premiere newspaper in the whole of Asia several years later. At the height of the Times’ prestige, they had 20 photography staff members and their own helicopter called the “News boy.” It would seem to be a foreshadowing of future events, as a young boy who admired the vibrant, strong work of the very same photography team he would become a part of in his career as a photojournalist. His two older brothers, Butch and Teddy Boy, would eventually go into Portraiture and Advertising respectively. Both were a big influence into his decision of becoming a photographer professionally.

In the beginning, he did not know the difference between Photojournalism and Documentary Photography. He was not able to verbally articulate what it was, but he knew that there were differences in the works being published in Life Magazine and The Manila Times. The photo essay and the news; with the former trying to tell a longer story and the latter boxed within the parameter of capturing the one photo that tells you everything to make it to the front page. Mr. Baluyut had to follow the pattern of the “one photo story” in order to survive as a photojournalist. However, at the back of his mind, he told himself, he wanted to follow the style of Eugene Smith, Life Magazine, and telling longer stories. He was hardly ever late to his assignments while he worked with newspapers because he wanted to be in the venue early to capture the whole story. He would start taking shots early into the day, wait until it builds up to the main event, cover the event, and be the last to leave. He did not just go there for one shot. Part of his self-training was to immerse himself in the very environment the story was to take place. This was the style of the Life Magazine photographers.

Getting into the Associated Press was the biggest break Mr. Baluyut got. He persevered to get there and remembers the story of how he got the job so clearly in his mind, like it was yesterday. On the first day, when he applied for the post, he asked if they needed a photographer and they said they did not so he went home. He then realized that in order to get this job, he must go straight to the boss. The next day, he went back, saw a photographer and went directly to ask him the same question, "Do you need a photographer?" Andy Hernandez, at that time, was the only photographer in the Associated Press and he kept requesting for a second one for the longest time. Mr. Hernandez then asks back, "Who are you?" to which he replies, "I'm Alex Baluyut." Recognition sets in, "Ah, you're the brother of Butch? Yes, we need a photographer." Mr. Baluyut was introduced right away to Billy Mann, then Bureau Chief, with Mr. Hernandez quoted saying, "Billy, I need someone, and you promised me someone, I kept on requesting for a second photographer." That very day, Mr. Mann kept his promise and Alex Baluyut became one of the first few Filipino Photographers to work for the Associated Press.

Although the AP was a good training ground for a photojournalist, Mr. Baluyut realized that it was not good training for his artistic side. The parameters, standards, formulas tended to constrict his style and found himself stuck. This is the tunnel vision that comes with being a photographer for the news. He thought the AP was something he wanted and persevered even though the pressure was high. There were three news cycles in a day and he could not think of anything else except for that one paragraph he needed to score. For three years, that would be his whole life. He did not get to see his family, not even for Christmas. He fondly remembers one photograph he took for the AP during the "Balikatan Exercises" way back when there was no Visiting Forces Agreement in place. His mind was still on the "one picture story" mode and he composed the shot in his head of the best picture possible to capture this event which would be

of soldiers walking down the landing crafts by the beaches of Aurora, Quezon. Unfortunately, he had no idea where exactly the contingent would land and when the time came, he was so far from both landing crafts he got really bad shots. The kind of photographs his Bureau Chief would grimace at hours later but would have no choice but to send it because of time constraints. Mr. Baluyut was so hard on himself that he cried over it and went back to the dark room. While taking a second look at the negatives, he saw a picture he really liked but did not fall into the formula. It was a photo of four American soldiers walking down the beach looking like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, with a chapel in the middle of the beach, a cross on top of it, a child watching them, and the whole thing reflected into a pool of water behind the soldiers where the river met the ocean. He liked it but he thought it was not good enough and his Bureau Chief went inside the dark room, saw the said picture and ordered him to send that. It became the front page of The International Herald Tribune the next day.

Documentary photography never left his consciousness and when he got the opportunity to go to Mindanao to take shots of the New People's Army, he left the AP along with the hefty paycheck and started on a different journey. Photos from this stint ended up in the National Book Award-winning, "*Kasama: A Collection of Photographs of the New People's Army of the Philippines*," and would lead to the name "*Alex Baluyut*" to be always connected to conflict photography. When asked if a photograph is ever worth a photographer's life, he readily answered, "of course it's worth it." He already knew that going into conflict photography would be dangerous. He would talk with his fellow photographers hour after hour of possible situations. What to do if a grenade went off, what would you do if you got hit by a bullet; and prepared himself mentally already. He shared he could have died when he did the NPA story but he took a

chance. Carrying the equipment alone puts photographers' lives at stake and as soon as he made the decision to be a photojournalist, he accepted that fact.

He would continue to find himself in dangerous situations. After spending months in Mindanao, he started working for the Malaya, part of the media opposition during the Marcos Regime. They were called "the Mosquito Press" because they were like the pests the government could not get rid of. He believed his work then fueled anti-Marcos sentiment at that time and that was what gave him the energy to continue the work. They were always under threat. If ever Malaya was raided, they already had an emergency escape plan which was to roll the presses, the negatives, and run to a second printing press that was always ready to run. Mr. Baluyut considers himself lucky that he did not get arrested or killed like what happened to some of his contemporaries then. For him, it was all about conquering his fears and doubts. In a much unguarded moment, he shared his experience during the Manila City Jail riot of '93 when he was the first one to approach the inmates who were threatening to let go of a grenade. He walked towards them while taking shots with flash and tried to calm them down. For a split second, he thought of grabbing the grenade himself, be the hero of the day, and probably die doing so. He changed his mind and after getting the shots he wanted, disappeared back into the crowd.

Even with so much experience under his belt, Alex Baluyut does not believe in the monopoly of pictures or that one's career can be guided by a major award like the Pulitzer. For him, it was all about one's whole life's work that says a lot about an individual's career as a photographer. He did not rest on his laurels and continued on to learn more about writing a good story, mounting exhibitions, and mentoring the next generation of Filipino photographers. He considered the profession to be so secretive during his time; the older photographers did not want to share, were so jealous of others, and protective of their own work. If you were a new

photographer trying to make it in the field, you had no support group and will experience a hard time. It got so competitive in the news photography dark room to the point of switching chemicals behind someone's back to ruin another photographer's work. They went to the lengths of tasting the chemicals themselves just to make sure they were not to become a victim of crab mentality. That kind of attitude and practice in the industry made Mr. Baluyut decide that early that if ever he would get a chance to teach later on, he would do so to jumpstart and fuel the learning curve to go faster. He wanted teaching photography to be institutionalized. Years later, he founded Ateneo's Diploma Program in Photojournalism and currently teaches his own Master Class in Documentary Photography (MCDP) online. Eight batches into the MCDP, he can already see the talent and the commitment of the brave handful who decided to fully commit to the field. Presently, he can see a shift in perspective and the development of a new paradigm where conceptual photography, photojournalism, and documentary photography are starting to merge. As a personal project, he wants to create an online magazine to develop and make sense of this new paradigm and share it to everyone.

This researcher's interview was conducted eight days after the book launch of "*Mysteries of Chance*" in the Ayala Museum and Mr. Baluyut's long unpublished photographs from the Cordilleras to Mindanao were featured in an anthology of photographs alongside Al Buenavente, Luis Liwanag, Raymond Panaligan, Rick Rocamora, and Sonny Yabao – a gathering of the Philippines's finest photojournalists and documentary photographers. Alex Baluyut shows no signs of slowing down and continues the discussion with his colleagues of taking Photography in the Philippines outside the box, beyond the ordinary, and to even greater heights. This researcher believes that Mr. Baluyut, through his projects and photographs, will continue to be an influential icon in his field not only in Asia but also throughout the globe.