

Legacy Is What You Do For Others
First Dr. Wilmer G. Memorial Lecture

By Dr. Estherbelle Aguilar Heceta
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Before I proceed, I would like to express my gratitude to Class '73 for initiating and sponsoring this lecture series in honor of my late husband. My appreciation also goes to AFUSA in general and especially to Chairwoman Dr. Isabelita Casibang and President Dr. Elmer Gilo, our visiting Alumni from the Philippines – Dean Alfaretta Tan Reyes, UERM President Dr. Divinagracia, and Liaison Officer Dr. Borromeo. I would also like to thank our indispensable friends, National Convention Commissioner Dr. Susan Suntay, MAAI President Dr. Neda Ballon Reyes, and MAAI President Elect & Convention Chairman, Dr. Hamor for putting this program together. Let's give them a hand. Thank you. To all Fellow Alumni and Guests, welcome to the first Dr. Wilmer G. Heceta Memorial Lecture.

It was once said by Kalu Ndukwe Kalu, "The things you do for yourself are gone when you are gone, but the things you do for others remain as your legacy." Wilmer truly lived out Kalu's quote and this is evidenced by our youngest daughter Wuela's reflection of her father. She said "Anybody that knew my Dad could attest to the fact that he was always the one to give his last piece of bread, his only coat or pair of shoes and share the roof over his head to anyone in need. The most profound impact he had on me was his tireless desire to give and sacrifice for others." This sentiment of Wilmer was also shared by Dean Retta who wrote: "I hope we are all in support of this worthwhile endeavor as our gratitude and tribute to a great man who has served as a source of inspiration, as a mentor and as a respected role model to the alumni for

his loyalty, dedication, gratitude, commitment, and unrelenting efforts to help the Medical Center in general and his efforts to strengthen the faculty and student development programs". Wilmer truly lived a life of service to others and in doing so he wore several hats.

As an alumnus of two great universities in the Philippines, Silliman University where he took his pre-med courses and The University of the East Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Medical Center (UERMMMMC), where he earned his medical degree, he led by example. The much coveted honor of Outstanding Sillimanian Award in Medicine was given to him by Silliman University in 2005 and the Outstanding Leadership Award in Medicine by UERMMMMC in 2007. Some classmates and alumni considered Wilmer as a mentor and a role model, and some of our graduates even regarded him as an ICON of UERMMMMC in general and an ICON of the ALUMNI in particular. One of our classmates wrote to him saying "You are a role model with magnanimous gestures that strongly separates you from the rest of us, and puts you on a pedestal so elevated that no one else in our class can reach." A colleague of his at the Bellaire Medical Foundation once asked this question "How could a little boy that grew up in a small Island in the remote Pacific get to be so knowledgeable and become such an outstanding leader?" The answer would be that God had a plan for Wilmer.

Jeremiah 29:11 states "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and hope." Well God's plans for Wilmer started even before he was born. He was the oldest son of Espiridion Heceta, Sr. and Ginesa Gao-ay Heceta. He was born on February 29, 1936, in the small town of Guihulngan, Negros Oriental. The older Hecetas were both employed by the public school system in the Philippines, Espiridion was a High School Principal and Ginesa was a Guidance Counselor. After a few years,

Wilmer's parents were transferred to Larena in the Island of Siquijor, Negros Oriental. This is where Wilmer grew up, where Wilmer spent his four years of High School, and where Wilmer graduated as Valedictorian. Wilmer was a dutiful and respectful son to both parents who were a great influence on his life. The firmness of his resolve, his untiring pursuit of excellence, the depth of his sense of obligation, and the purity of his commitment to a cause were inculcated in him by his parents, which he applied to all his endeavors.

1 Peter 4:10 says "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various ways." Wilmer was gifted with a superior intellect, a personal charm, and a sense of humor. As far as his sense of humor is concerned, our daughter, Elgine made the comment that the kind of humor her Dad used was the kind that makes one laugh for five seconds and think for ten minutes thereafter. She said "he was the perpetual philosopher who spoke in riddles and used humor to teach life lessons." His superior intellect enabled him to get good grades. He finished his Pre-med education with High Honors and acquired academic scholarships, (including the Belman and the Winthrop-Stearns Scholarships) throughout Medical School, which lessened the financial burden on his parents. His untiring efforts in the pursuit of excellence, coupled with his remarkable intellect rewarded him with the distinction of *graduating as cum laude*, at the top of our class in 1961.

With his degree in hand, he took his residency in General Surgery from 1962-1967, in Youngstown, Ohio. The succeeding five years were spent in Manapla, Negros Occidental, Philippines, where he practiced General Surgery and served as Assistant Medical Director of St. Joseph's Hospital. This had to be part of God's plan, as Wilmer was able to participate in a Rotary project in Manapla. There he helped many needy patients at no cost to them by fixing

their cleft palates and harelips. Although he had no formal training in Plastic Surgery, he just read-up on the procedures necessary to perform this very specialized surgery and these patients were very grateful for the Rotary Club and even more grateful for his service. Wilmer's next transition would be training for Thoracic Surgery at the University of Tennessee in Memphis from 1972-74.

Romans 12:8 states "If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. If you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly." With that in mind, we must revisit God's plan once again. Wilmer was equipped by God with the ability to lead and, also was given qualities of compassion, kindness, and benevolence. Our daughter Cris once said: "what inspired me most about my Dad's gifts were those showing kindness to others, plus his compassion, and generosity." Such qualities were utilized by him in his profession as a Board Certified General and Thoracic Surgeon, not only here in the United States, but also in Medical Missions to the Philippines and to Mexico. A younger surgeon who worked with him was in awe of the mastery of surgical skills and the superb clinical judgment that Wilmer possessed. While another fellow surgeon made the remark that Wilmer set the tone and atmosphere of pleasantness in the Operating Room, which resulted in joy for every member of the surgical team, and further remarked that Wilmer's prowess as a surgeon was legendary.

His God-given talent to lead was exhibited in several phases of his life, and was manifested in the various positions of responsibility and authority made available to him. First and foremost, his leadership capability shined as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Alumni Foundation of UERMMMC, Inc., a position he held for twelve consecutive years, from 1983-94

and as Chairman Emeritus of same Organization for eighteen years from 1994-2012. Wilmer was the first alumnus to ever hold this position and as one of the first graduates belonging to the Pioneer Class, Wilmer felt a great sense of commitment to our Alma Mater.

He would spend all his spare time trying to think of ways to help our Alma Mater. It was this strong feeling of gratitude to our Medical School that motivated Wilmer to give something back in return.

This is how he got involved in the Alumni Foundation or AFUSA, but his involvement with our Alma Mater was not limited to that. There were Book Scholarships, Professorial Chairs, and much needed equipment that he funded from time to time. In times of natural disasters that affected the Medical Center, Wilmer was also more than generous in donating money. After typhoon Ondoy, where the Medical Center was flooded again, he donated a whole month's SSS check, to the Relief Fund, and long before that he also bought a Life Insurance policy with AFUSA as his beneficiary.

In the mid and late eighties there was a consideration of closing UE due lack of funds, and there were actually several interested parties that offered to buy the school. This speculation upset Wilmer to no end, so on his own initiative, he started calling and talking to all Alumni that he could get hold of, to try to ask for donations for UERMMMC, in an attempt to save our Alma Mater. He did this on his own, with no outside help or funds, and continued to do so in spite of the apathy from some alumni. He donated not only his time but also his money and never sought to be reimbursed for per diem or travel expenses. However, the accomplishment that he was most proud of was his brainchild, the 333 Endowment Fund.

In Wilmer's own words he said "Imagine what we can achieve if we act to give a little, knowing that there are almost 4,000 of us here in the United States today. Your gifts are valuable. Money talks and does wonders." In one of his e-mails he wrote "In the past three weeks I have sent 150 letters and only 7 have responded. I hope I get a check every day till the end of 2001, but I will continue till we get the 333 fund to \$100,000.00 or more. All of Wilmer's efforts were given purely for the love of giving and the love towards our Medical School. This love would be returned on June 9, 2009 in recognition of his effort, when the Foundation Board of Trustees voted unanimously to rename the fund the Dr. Wilmer G. Heceta 333 Endowment Fund.

When Wilmer introduced the concept of the 333 Fund in 1995, his idea was that it would be easier to request \$333.00 from a donor every year for three years to make a total of \$1,000.00. All donations to this Fund are tax-deductible, and since the Fund is an Endowment the principal is always intact. The investment's proceeds or earned interest from this Fund helps to pay for carefully screened and selected programs of our Alma Mater. All Alumni are urged to donate to this Fund and to try to convince other classmates and friends, (Alumni and non-alumni as well) to join them in donating to this worthy cause. We should not only donate \$333.00 for 3 years to our Alma Mater, but continue to do so for many years to come. It was Wilmer's dream to get this Fund to a total of \$100,000.00 by 1999. Unfortunately, Wilmer did not see this happen. This goal however, can be realized even if only 1,000 Alumni respond to the appeal of \$333.00 per year, for 3 years. It behooves all of us to donate to this Fund and to continue giving, so UERMMMC will remain as one of the premier institutions in Medical Education and Health Care Delivery in the Philippines.

Besides all the work that Wilmer gave to our Medical School, he was also involved in other leadership positions at different times in his life. One of these outstanding leadership positions was as Medical Director of the Bellaire Medical Group in Ohio (late '70's and early '80's). This position he performed with consummate ease and superb efficiency, leading the organization to greater heights for the next two decades.

This Medical Group would have social affairs and at one of these gatherings, Wilmer's leadership was recognized by an anonymous poem. In the interest of time I will only read excerpts of the poem. It reads:

TO HONOR WILMER G. HECETA

He can make light of our weaknesses, because he recognizes them in himself,

He can laugh with us, because he can laugh at himself.

He can trust our strengths, because he knows they are in each of us.

He can play with us, because he's retained the joy of a child.

He can understand us because he's wise in the ways of human nature.

He can help us, because he'll give his all.

He can ask anything of us because of his own examples.

With a laugh he often hides his own pain but brightens the days of others.

With caring that comes from within, he soothes and heals

With his loud voice, he makes us listen.

With his competency and outstanding ability, he practices as a physician/healer.

With his hurry-up approach, he gets the job done.

With wisdom and empathy, he explains hard realities.

With teasing and kidding, he's always noticed.

With support and hope, he's standing to the end.

With dedication, he accomplishes what most men never dare.

With love for all people, he served tirelessly and endlessly.

He can lead us because he is Wilmer G. Heceta.

As far as his personal life is concerned, I can attest to the Fact that Wilmer was a devoted and thoughtful husband whom I considered to be the “wind beneath my wings.” He was also a proud and loving father, and a doting grandfather.

Our grandchildren shared their sentiments of him. Danielle wrote “Grandpa left me with a very important legacy – to dream. An important message he left me was that “I have never lived until I have helped those who could not repay me.” Ian shared - “My grandfather was a healer in every sense of the word, who played a great role in my goal to become a physician. He quietly led by example, and helped to shape my life and my goals”. Tyson and Braedyn, are both in agreement about their Grandfather and they said “Grandpa always preached the value of education and of saving money.” Brooke said “I love my Grandpa very much and I miss his smiles and jokes.” Dalton and Dylan both loved Wilmer dearly, and wished they could have spent more time with him. Wilmer truly loved his family and the poem entitled “A Measure of a Man” by Grady Poulard expresses just how much he meant to all of us.

It reads:

A Measure of a Man

By Grady Poulard

The measure of a man is not determined

By his show of outward strength

Or the volume of his voice

Or the thunder of his actions

Or of his intellect or academic abilities

It is seen rather in terms of the love that he has

For his family and for everyone

The strengths of his commitments

The genuineness of his friendships

The sincerity of his purpose

The quiet courage of his convictions

The fun, laughter, joy, and happiness he gives to his

family and to others

His love of life

His patience and honesty

And his contentment with what he has

In conclusion Dr. Wilmer G. Heceta was a scholar and a gentleman, an Alumnus for all seasons, an ICON of UERMMMC, a devoted family man, a born leader, and a role model in his professional and daily life. He was a generous person who utilized all of his God-given gifts to

serve others. His legacy of service will live on in those who knew Wilmer personally and in anyone who visits his gravesite. His autobiographical epitaph reads: “And when come the sound of low music, the scent of sweet flowers, the crunch of footsteps on the gravel, make the ceremony short, and the epitaph simple Here lies the man One who was of service to others.”

As the quote from Ndukwe Kalu affirms “the things you do for others remain as your legacy”. Wilmer’s legacy truly was in his service to others, to God, to his Alma Mater with the founding of the Wilmer G. Heceta 333 Endowment Fund, and above all, his service to all humanity.

MAY GOD BLESS OUR ALMA MATER – THE UERMMMCM!