

The 4,700 square meter Washington SyCip Garden of Native Trees has over 100 species of indigenous and endemic trees.



WASHINGTON SYCIP: LEARNING AT 92

By Leah Z. Caringal

WASHINGTON SYCIP HAS NEVER BEEN SENTIMENTAL ABOUT BIRTHDAYS. AT THE START of the year, founder of the pioneering accounting firm SGV & Company and the prestigious graduate school Asian Institute of Management pragmatically sends out birthday gifts in the form of checks to all his children and grandchildren, "so I don't have to keep looking at the calendar," he explains.

As to what he does whenever his birthday rolls around, SyCip, who turned 92 on June 30, shrugs and says, "Nothing. I never plan anything."

Those closest to him, however, do. When he turned 88, staff of SyCip, Gorres, and Velayo tied up with Gawad Kalinga founder Antonio Meloto and built 88 houses in Sycip's honor. For Birthday No. 92, a tree garden bearing SyCip's name was presented to top brass of the University of the Philippines in Quezon City. Daniel Zuellig, director of Bridgebury Realty Corp. and owner/developer of the iconic Zu-

ellig Building, led the presentation.

Situated between the UP Film Center and UP Theater by Magsaysay Avenue in the state university campus in Diliman, and comprising of about 90 species of endemic and indigenous trees, the Washington SyCip Garden of Native Trees was initiated by the Zuellig Group to commemorate the 90th birthday of "Wash," a long-time friend and associate. The trees, sourced through the San Beda College Alumni Foundation, a partner of the Department of Education, are in keeping with Presidential Order No. 23 (The National Greening Program), which

aims to establish urban forests by planting native trees in public schools. Indeed, more than a welcome sight for city dwellers whose views have been limited to the dreary grays of the urban jungle, the refreshing green garden exposes students to species of trees they might have never known existed.

"The Washington SyCip Garden of Native Trees celebrates Mr. SyCip's lifelong dedication to growth through education and business development. These trees will also support and promote the conservation of local biodiversity and protection of the environment, which

can greatly contribute to a nation's success," said Daniel Zuellig.

SyCip's lifelong advocacy for education – particularly access to basic education for children in far-flung and impoverished areas of the country – stems from his own experience as a student of the Philippines' public school system during its glory days. A proud product of P. Burgos Elementary School and the V. Mapa High School, SyCip says he "could compete with any Ateneo or La Salle graduate, no problem. Nowadays," he rues, "you cannot."

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Once a staunch supporter of higher education, he has, of late, directed his attention and resources to "reducing the dropout rates of poor families," he said in a forbes.com interview.

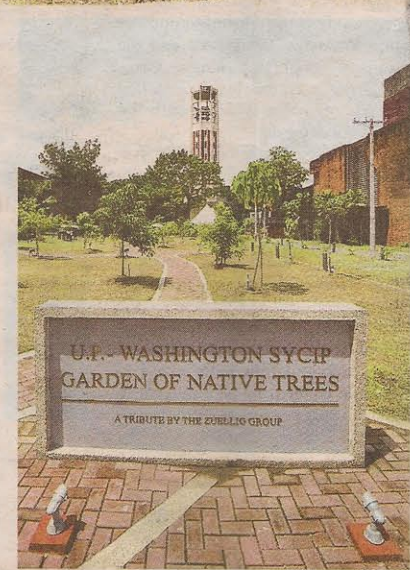
Groups like Synergeia Foundation (which helps ensure poor children finish grade school) and the Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, Inc. (which addresses growing poverty in communities in Laguna, Mindoro Oriental and Occidental, Marinduque, Masbate, and the Bicol region) are so far benefiting from SyCip's generosity.

But the race to beat the illiteracy rate from rising – two million Filipinos at last count, reports SyCip – is far from over. Saddened by what he sees whenever he visits the country's rural farms and fishing villages – picture families with eight or nine kids and only half of them in school – SyCip says he cannot help but do something. "When you have all the advantages of life and come from a privileged group," he reflects, "you have to give back to society."

As such, the man who has earned every right to relax after years at the helm of the Philippines' most respected business institutions continues to maintain the routine of career people half his age. Reporting to the SGV office in Makati at 7 a.m. daily, including weekends ("when you are resting," he teases), his schedule consists of board meetings, social events, and the occasional interview – all of which he gives equal importance to. "Okay, let's get going," says the still sharp and enthusiastic SyCip from his desk piled high with countless documents.

Besides leaving him with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, work, SyCip points out, allows him "to earn my keep. How can I afford to send all these children to school?"

More importantly, work exposes him to a world that continues to educate him on life, even at 92. Tapped to participate in a recent fashion



Kasigod Jamias, Bridgebury Realty Corporation president; Daniel Zuellig, Bridgebury director; UP Diliman chancellor Caesar Saloma; Mario Deriquito, Undersecretary of Education for Partnerships and External Linkages; environment advocate Karen Davila; Washington SyCip; and Thomas Zuellig, Zuellig Group vice chairman inaugurate the garden (top).

show featuring various ambassadors and their spouses, the *barong Tagalog*-clad SyCip walked down the runway twice – first by himself and then with Fortune Ledesma, organizer of the fund-raising event.

"I've never seen the backstage of a fashion show," marvels SyCip at his first catwalk experience. "Everything happens so fast. There's this one man who looks at the ladies' hair, fixes it, then sprays it." Chuckling at the memory, he concedes, "I wouldn't know how to do it. You learn something new every day." 📷