

- A Filipino woman is here presented whose energy, objectivity, and ability have made possible the gradual development of a sort of an Asian Nobel Prize in this part of the world.

THE LEADER IN THE MAGSAYSAY AWARD

For a number of months each year, an attractive Filipina with laughing but discerning eyes goes sleuthing around Asia — from Afghanistan to Japan — in the finest fashion of Scotland Yard.

But unlike Scotland Yard detectives who are usually out for criminals, Miss Belen Abreu scouts for spirit of service akin to the late President Magsaysay from anyone, anywhere in Asia — be he a highland eye doctor, a woman educator, a labor leader or merely a prime minister.

As executive trustee of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Miss Abreu is charged with the responsibility of examining on the spot the nominations for the coveted Ramon Magsaysay Award. Her findings and the material she gathers about nominees become the

basis for the deliberations and final decision of the seven-member board of trustees.

Belen Abreu's ability to distinguish chaff from the grain — an oftentimes painstakingly difficult job as the chaff is frequently almost as good as the grain — has resulted in a consistently high quality of awardees since 1958. Today the R.M. Award has come to be known as the Asian Nobel prize.

As the "workhorse" of the foundation's board of trustees, Belen is its prime mover, it is she who gives direction and *esprit* to the foundation's activities which promise to branch out in diversified intellectual endeavours with the completion of the 14-storey Ramon Magsaysay center soon.

Among the projects envisioned by the foundation are the expansion of the Ramon Magsaysay Asian Library to

50,000 volumes, making it the largest library of its kind in the country, the Vital Issues Series, a sustained series of studies on national problems and the Magsaysay Papers and Memorabilia.

At present, Miss Abreu is busy with her pet project in raising funds for the construction and establishment of the RM center. The fund campaign, headed by Col. Nicanor T. Jimenez, seeks maximum involvement of the barrio people in whose unselfish service the late beloved Chief Executive made his greatest mark.

The fact that a woman should shoulder this varied responsibility is no wonder at all in Belen's case, for she has brought to the job long years of training in responsible positions, intense personal discipline, a good head and single-minded devotion — qualities exceptional even in the supposedly more efficient male sex. This combination of assets has drawn unqualified praise from admirers here and abroad.

Belen's training had its roots in her early years in Mexico, Pampanga. Her father, Apolinar Abreu, a

teacher of the old-school type, was a firm believer in the value of higher education and personal discipline and sought to instill this belief in his children. As a young girl, Belen wanted to study stenography instead of playing with other young girls soon after elementary school. In high school, this knowledge of stenography fared her well: summer vacations saw her working as secretary to the representatives of pre-war American companies such as General Motors and United Steel. Years later, studying for a degree in public administration in New York University, Belen supported herself by accepting typing jobs for her American classmates at the standard rate of 25 cents a page.

After high school, she decided to take up law in U.P. which was interrupted, however, by the war. She took the bar immediately after the war, garnering a grade of over 90. During the war years, she assisted at the U.P.'s Marina Institute, a free school for poor but deserving students organized by the U.P. Alumni and

named in honor of Commissioner Jorge Vargas' wife, Marina. Belen taught stenography for free. From her secretarial jobs she moved on to the Commission on Elections as a stenographer.

In the Comelec she fell under bosses steeped in the old school who, as she loves to relate to her staff, "would throw a piece of typewritten job in your face when it doesn't come up to their standards." She disliked them for it then, but soon discovered that she was the better for that kind of training. Doubtless she developed her keen sense of perfectionism from them.

From stenographer, Miss Abreu rose to become chief attorney of the Commission on Elections. In that job, she was in charge of setting the machinery of elections in motion, following strict timetables which could not be disrupted without causing nationwide repercussions. It involved everything, from the simplest mechanical preparation of election forms to actual troubleshooting. Belen Abreu's name for years was on the lips of every Comelec worker in the country.

In the commission, Belen's good mind and sound judgment became her staple stock and politicians learned to rely on her for advice. At present, years after she has left the commission, senators and congressmen still run to her during election quandaries.

In 1957, the Rockefellers, shopping around for an executive trustee for the newly organized foundation, quickly signed her up for a nine-year contract which was renewed in 1965. Belen Abreu had not known Ramon Magsaysay personally, but she had tremendous admiration for his performance in keeping the 1951 elections clean and for his program of government.

As executive trustee of the foundation she puts in regularly more than ten hours a day; during the March and August seasons, the death and birth anniversaries of the late President Magsaysay, she would ordinarily pack an 18-hour day, only to go home for a quick shower and come back fresh and about her work. Her young female staff members (the foundation has an all-girl staff)

feel squeamish about leaving at five on the dot, for their boss never leaves that early, not even when sick. Arriving for a long trip abroad, it isn't surprising to find Belen catching a taxi at the airport and heading straight for the office, bags and all. Sundays usually find her making a quick trip to the office before proceeding to her farm in Tanay, Rizal. The foundation's peekaboo efficiency, particularly during the climatic month of August, the award season, makes outsiders wonder, especially when they find out how small the actual working staff is. At present, no ceremony of Malacañang or the department of foreign affairs could quite equal the flawlessness of a Ramon Magsaysay Award ceremony.

A lioness for efficiency, Belen has cultivated intense personal discipline over the years. Her large spacious home on Samar avenue, Quezon City, is spotlessly clean, "like a hotel before the occupants arrive," as one staff member described it. The gardens are well-attended under her personal supervision. About her person,

she is neat and well-groomed, rather than stylish and fashionable, although she can be so when she chooses to be. Every morning she takes her "constitutional walk" around the block before breakfast and then drives herself to work in Malate. When weight problems begin to slow her down, it is time to take up her hula lessons at the YMCA. She recently took to modern dancing and her skills are usually displayed during office parties. Physical exercise is usually accompanied by disciplined dieting, consisting of meat without any seasoning and some boiled greens.

Gifted with a quick and curious mind which reaches out in long-range projections, Miss Abreu has strong opinions about almost anything, from vocational education to the Luneta beautification project of the First Lady. Once, passing in front of the St. Jude church on J. P. Laurel street, she commented unfavorably about the way vendors have made a marketplace of the place of worship. Her female companion remarked that this was part of the Filipino way

of life and that these vendors had become an institution for the children. Whereupon she turned around and exclaimed with full conviction: "But we have changed our way of life if we are to progress. Nor everything that is part of our way of life is good for us."

A mind as lively as hers needs sustenance, and Belen manages to insert at least an hour before retiring for the day to catch up on her reading. The leading Asian dai-

lies are part of her reading material. To encourage intellectual curiosity in her staff, she initiated an office practice whereby staff members report on a book or a periodical of their choice on a rotation basis, one report per week.

It is a tribute to Belen that male professionals of high standing regard her as a peer. — *B. Olivares-Cunanan, Manila Bulletin, Mar. 20, 1966.*

LOW RATING OF POLITICIANS

The man who can make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass, grow on the spot where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and render more essential service to the country, than the whole race of politicians put together. — *Swift.*