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FULL MANY A GEM: The Quiet Brilliance and Noble Service of Dr. Ciriaco B. Gato, Jr. (1959-2026)

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Our father was a proud member of the *Ivatan* tribe. He was born in *Sabtang*, raised in *Itbayat*, and eventually made his home in *Basco*. In those small islands of Batanes all the way up north, his dreams were forged.

The middle child of six siblings, born to a teacher and a telegraphist, he once endured the ridicule of his relatives who thought that his dream of becoming a doctor was beyond reach. But he refused to let their doubts define him. Through sheer tenacity and determination, he rose above his own circumstances and graduated as class valedictorian in both grade school and high school.

He left Batanes to pursue higher education, earning his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of the East before entering the University of the Philippines College of Medicine through its Regionalization Program. Upon becoming a doctor, it was then that he came to understand one of life's greatest lessons:

You do not have to begin as the best. You simply need the courage to continue. *Tibay lang ng dibdib. Lakasan lang ng loob.*

He did more than believe in these words. He built his whole life around them.

He began his career as a general physician, returning to Batanes several times a year to conduct medical missions and serve his fellow *Ivatans*. He completed his residency in Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery at the Philippine General Hospital and slowly but surely built a 30-year career as a specialist.

But no matter how far his career took him, he never lost sight of where he came from. He continued to undertake solo medical missions in the province, without fail and without charge. For him, Batanes was never simply the place where his story began. It was a community to which he would spend the rest of his life, giving back.

His experiences as a physician made him increasingly aware that healing often required more than treating illnesses. It also meant addressing the systemic barriers that kept patients from receiving proper care, from the lack of adequate healthcare facilities to the limited availability of basic and specialized services in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs) like Batanes.

This conviction led him to enter public service. He became the Representative of the Lone District of Batanes in 2019 and was subsequently re-elected, serving through the 18th, 19th, and 20th Congresses, where he authored 98 bills and eventually became Chairman of the House Committee on Health, championing legislation to improve healthcare accessibility, strengthen healthcare systems and facilities, and bring essential medical services closer to underserved communities.

Among the significant pieces of legislation he worked on was **Republic Act No. 11959,** or the **Regional Specialty Centers Act**, of which he was a principal author. The law brought specialized healthcare—including Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) services—to DOH hospitals across the country's regions.

Notably, he also authored the **Virology and Vaccine Institute of the Philippines Act**, the **Philippine Medical Act**, the **Universal Health Care Act**, free professional examinations for qualified members of Indigenous Peoples groups, increased hospital bed capacity in regional hospitals, and the strengthening of audiology and audiometry services in the country.

Our father believed that entering public office did not mean leaving medicine behind. He would often say that he had simply found another way to practice it. Over the years, he came to understand that he could serve his patients not only by treating them one-by-one, but also by working to change the systems and institutions that shaped their access to care.

Beyond his accomplishments as a physician and a congressman, he was also a devoted husband and father, roles that were just as integral to the life he built. Shortly after completing his residency, he married our mother, **Dr. Jade Oliva Soledad B. Gato**, an Obstetrician-Gynecologist, and together they raised us: **Dr. Patricia Jade Gato-Suzara**, who followed in his footsteps as an ENT specialist, and **Atty. Georgina Mia B. Gato**, who serves in the Philippine foreign service as a diplomat.

And so, while the world may remember him for his medical service, legislative work, and unwavering devotion to the *Ivatan*, we will remember the man behind these accomplishments: our husband, our father, our Papa. You gave us a lifetime of your love, your kindness, your friendship, your patience, your humility, and, above all, your service.

You used to say that your proudest accomplishment was our family. But we would say that **we are the proudest of you.** Not only for everything you achieved, but for the person you remained through it all.

You died a hero, but more importantly, **you lived as one too**. Always in the service of the *Ivatans*. Always giving everything you had for the benefit of our country.

We will carry your lessons with us, finding the courage to continue, just as you had taught us once before. And we hope that someday, somewhere beyond this life, we will find our way back to you.

We love you so much, Papa**.** Always.