**Kara Magsanoc-Alikpala**

**Remarks at Silver Linings Opening Ceremony**

September 28,2019

PICC Plenary Hall

I met Crisann Celdran twenty years ago. Our friendship is as old as ICANSERVE. I met her through a common friend, and we were instant friends. Both of us are only girls in the family, with two brothers. Cancer intensified our desire to become mothers. We have our own sets of friends but our friendship seemed just as long and sometimes deeper, because we knew the journey of each other’s soul.

Twenty years ago, we hung out a lot with two other breast cancer survivors, Bet Lazatin and Becky Fuentes. Unfortunately, they can’t be with us today.

Little did we know our friendship would be the start of many more friendships that would build the ICANSERVE Foundation.

We spent time meeting newly diagnosed breast cancer patients over merienda or visited them in the hospital. The exchange of stories was always healing and cathartic. There was never enough time. A lot of the meriendas spilled into dinner. Even for us veteran survivors. There’s a wisdom to be learned in each re-telling of our story and in hearing a new one. Each story was unique .

But there were many common issues especially for the poor and lower middle class. They didn’t have enough financial resources to afford quality care. We created a resource guide book so patients would know where to get help. We gave the book away for free. We launched two editions of the book, one in the year 2000 then 2003 . You can say it was a best seller even when we were down to giving away photo copies of it.

Through the years, we couldn’t cope with the many patients calling us and wanting to meet. Most of these women didn’t come to us crying. They were strong women determined to live, who craved information and hope.

You can say, we **scaled up our merienda get togethers** when we created Silver Linings. We wanted to create a safe space for people to share, to learn and to meet others like them so they didn’t feel alone or like a rare species to be ogled at, talked about behind their back, or talked about as if they were the walking dead.

Silver Linings was everything we envisioned it to be and more. It’s a friendly place where everyone seemed to be a long lost relative. And family is where you’re loved the most.

Whenever we stage Silver Linings, we never know what to expect. We never know if we can pull it off. We don’t have a professional events team, this is mostly volunteer-driven. We try our best and God does the rest. He always makes it better than we planned. And as the late Alice Orleans, our former executive director would say, Silver Linings is a God-size event.

After the high we felt after the first Silver Linings in 2005, life as a cancer patient advocate continued to become painfully real.

We met a woman being treated for lung cancer when in fact she had breast cancer. We met someone whose husband thought her cancer was contagious, he sent her away. She died alone. We met a family who moved heaven and earth to buy cancer medicines for their mother. And when the mother died, the family tucked in the leftover medicines in her coffin. They treated medicine like gold, something that was very unattainable for them.

We tried to create a bolder response to the growing problem. Shortly after Silver Linings in 2006, we harnessed our friendships, put in more structure, and created a set of board of directors among the most active volunteers. From being an association, ICANSERVE earned the status of foundation.

We went all out with high impact media campaigns and aggressively deployed everyone in the speaking circuit. In schools, private companies, NGOs, corporations, international conferences.

Three years later, the breast cancer landscape didn’t change. Still, many women didn’t have access to resources to get well or to get the right information. We decided to be part of the solution. We created Ating Dibdibin with a grant from the American Cancer Society.

Ating Dibdibin is a partnership with local government to institutionalize via a local ordinance, programs on early breast cancer detection, access to correct diagnosis, timely treatment, and access to free or affordable treatment and community-based patient navigation. That one time grant project has since become the flagship program of the foundation.

We have partnered with 5 cities. The cities of Marikina, Panabo, Taguig, Muntinlupa and Malabon. And in a few weeks Tagum City. And in a few days, a 2.0 version for the whole of Metro Manila in partnership with the Metro Manila Mayors Spouses Foundation.

The partnership has yielded encouraging results, self-care habits have improved, more women do breast self-exams, more women visit the barangay health center for breast check-ups. They fear less because they know help is available to them in our partner cities. Cancers are being caught earlier and more lives are saved. But despite the wins, we realized that we cannot partner with all 145 cities or 81 provinces in this country, in our lifetime.

We didn’t have the resources nor the manpower. More than that, there were many obstacles in the health system that needed fixing.

It was getting more heart breaking to witness unnecessary suffering and deaths.

ICANSERVE banded with other cancer advocacy groups in the same bind. We felt we needed to scale up our programs, we all had hit the ceiling because of limitations in the health system and limited access to resources. We needed the whole of government, the whole of society to make meaningful impact and so we formed the Cancer Coalition Philippines and lobbied for the passage of the National Integrated Cancer Control Act.

And after three years, the cancer bill was signed into law last February. If and when it will be fully implemented, which will take many years, government should give quality and affordable care, sometimes free of charge, to patients with **any kind of cancer, any stage of cancer**. There will be cancer control policies in the workplace, in schools down to the communities. There will also be a Cancer Assistance Fund.

There will be more cancer centers nationwide, so more are served. Standards of care will be upgraded. The status of cancer patients as PWD will be formalized so you will all get that discount once the guidelines are finalized… There is a session at 10 am on what the cancer law is. Please join that if you want to know more.

One of the things government health officials have to resort too is prioritization. I guess because resources are limited but that word scares me. Because it means you choose who lives, and who dies.

Let’s work hard to make sure the Cancer Law **works,** so we reach a **point** where officials will no longer have to make **tough decisions** like that. Everyone is worth a fight. Extending the life of a patient for **one day or one year** is equally precious to a family.

The Cancer Law is unique in Asia. The only other country with a Cancer Law in the region is Japan. Am proud of how national, local government, civil society and the private sector came together.

One of the things I learned the past few years, is that for one’s advocacy to be effective, you have to first acknowledge that you can’t do it alone. You need friends. Friends who are experts, and know better. The more varied the background of your friends, the better.

I learned that you have to build a community and nuture that community. When you join forces with other groups, the names of your organizations shouldn’t matter. Titles shouldn’t mean anything. No one should count who did what and who did more. The bigger the community, the stronger. The more united, the more powerful. When it comes to cancer, we should consider ourselves a republic onto ourselves facing a common enemy of the state.

This has been the ICANSERVE journey. We learned how to advocate for ourselves, then for other patients. We’ve worked with other patient and advocacy groups, then with cities and barangays, and now we took the journey to the national level. It’s a journey we invite you to join because we need all of you. We need you to guard the gains of the Cancer Law. We need you to make sure it stays responsive and relevant. This will be a lifetime work for all of us and to the **young in the room,** we appeal to you to keep it alive.

The World Health Organization predicted that in the next 11 years, cancer incidence will increase by 80%. We haven’t been responsive to the problem now. What chance do cancer patients have in 11 years?

With us today is Ranjit Kaur Pritam Singh, a global patient advocate based in Malaysia, a convenor of the Southeast Asian Breast Cancer Symposium, among many other awesome things. Thank you for coming. We’ve working on a regional partnership in the region. In fact, we are hosting the next Southeast Asian Breast Cancer Symposium in 2 years.

We made it to 20 years because of all the friendships forged in and outside this room. Thank you to all of you have been part of our 20 years. I can’t mention all of you but will single out a few and please if I don’t mention your name it only means I have chemo brain.

Local governments of Marikina, Malabon, Taguig, Munitinlupa, Antipolo, Tagum, Panabo, the Metro Manila Mayors Spouses Foundation. Ang tunay na bayani ng Ating Dibdibin ay ang mga barangay health workers and doctors, (tayo po kayo). Kayo talaga ang bumubuhay sa mga programa. Cancer Coalition,Philippine Cancer Society, Project Pink, Project Brave Kids, Carewell, Philippine Society of Oncologists, Philippine Society of Medical Oncologists. Thank you to the patient groups who have embarked on the early detection campaigns and helped us campaign for the Cancer Law. ICANSERVE Cebu Chapter, thanks Me’anne the advocacy is so loud in Cebu. Thank you Marivic Bugasto, President of Minda’s Buddies in Baguio. She almost didn’t make it to this trip she was busy finding a free coffin for a cancer patient’s relative who passed. Thank you Melina Avila and Gilda Ruyeras of Tagum. They flew in with 6 or 7 cancer survivors who took their first trip on the plane. Kumusta na? hope hindi kayo nahilo. Thank you Karen Lluch of Thrive CDO.

Thank you to the ICANSERVE board Thanks to you, your family and network of supportive friends. Thank you to our sisters in the board who have completed their mission and have gone ahead: Judith C, Marissa N, Alice O, Pamsy T, Lian C. Thank you Crisann and Miguel for your trust and TLC towards me, my family and ICANSERVE.

I thank mine too. Dondi, Ariana, Dad, Nikko, Marti my brothers waive their fees for our patients. Mommy Digas, Tita Nette, Eileen, Dicky. Monica my niece you were in my daily radiation sessions. You were 2 then now you’re 23. And now a volunteer for ICANSERVE

And to my late Mom I pay tribute. My biggest prayer warrior and cheer leader for ICANSERVE. She had the names of every sick breast cancer patient on a laminated paper. She prayed for them every day.

Here’s to meeting more friends, building a community and saving lives.

To reiterate what Lea Salonga said in the video, In our 20 years of existence, we’ve come to know these things to be true.

The army of love, hope, knowledge and power is always stronger than breast cancer.

We are the ICANSERVE Foundation.

Twenty years proud and strong.

**END**