

A close encounter...

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was actually a problem for us to dispose of everything.

So I thought hard... how can the King of Pop meaningfully join the affair? I couldn't possibly have him be with the kids in the palayok game or the palayok as he might end up being mobbed! And since the annual event was really all about giving, I mustered all my courage and told the Mamarao guy that the best thing I could think of was for Michael to literally be present to help distribute the loot bags, sign autographs and pose with the children for photos.

"Wow, that may not be easy. You're talking about handing goodie bags to 300 children and I can just imagine the chaos. We'll see. I'll get back to you," he said.

Lunch break came and it was the most hurried one I ever took in my life. It wasn't until after 5pm. that Michael's aide came back and said, "Michael is more than happy to do whatever you suggest. How do we go about it

tomorrow?" I wanted to scream. I had to calm myself and regain composure as the Lizzie Maguire in me said, "Get real, get back into focus."

We agreed that Michael would come in after the games, musical program and snacks, at the last part to give out the loot bags. My colleague Annette Africano and boss Dulce Aguir requested for additional security around the garden and the stage area as this was where we decided to distribute the gifts. We made sure the children would form an orderly line.

Then the moment arrived. It was at the Champagne Gardens on Dec. 7, 1996. I was surprised to see him walking towards us, guided by his aide. Michael came up to me as I had to brief him.

"Hi, how are you? Thanks so much for letting me in, I know I'm early 'cause I didn't want to miss the program."

I said, "Are you kidding? Thanks so much for volunteer-

ing! Here's what Michael - why don't you just sit here and watch the musical numbers before we



The author (right) shares a light moment with Michael Jackson during a Christmas party for orphans in Manila on Dec. 7, 1996.

get into the gift giving. I will have to tweak the program a bit."

He replied, "Sure, anything you say... (pausing to look at my name tag) Gwen!" I was stunned at how incredibly sweet and

modest he was. And in my mind it was, "Oh my God, this is really happening!"

Amazing how he patiently sat through the whole program. Carol Banawa, then an *Ang TV* mainstay couldn't believe MJ was watching her perform. She

hot with his black long-sleeved signature attire and hat.

"Are you alright Michael? We can let you take a break," I asked.

He said, "I'm cool, Gwen. Just imagine how Santa feels inside his velvet suit and beard. We'll be fine."

I never heard him complain or say a word about how hot it was or how long the line was. He had the most beautiful manners. He didn't even ask for a drink or a towel to wipe his sweat but one of our banquet staff made sure he got a glass of fresh orange juice.

An hour passed and we were halfway through gift-giving when we noticed that the garden was getting filled up. Suddenly, there were people from media, politicians, officials and hotel guests, including those in a wedding reception at the nearby Champagne Room who deserted the newlyweds just to get a glimpse of the King of Pop.

"Oh, this isn't supposed to be, I'm so sorry," I said.

"It's all right, we'll get through it," Michael said, smiling. As we finished giving out the last loot bag to an 11-year-old orphan, a new line of more kids and adults formed. Michael's bodyguard, Wayne, said, "We can leave now."

Michael replied calmly, "We can't leave when there are still people in line. It's Christmas, dude."

I felt my heart beat faster and the hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood up. He wasn't just the most electrifying performer, but the most generous person.

One of the most memorable moments was when a lady came up to him for an autograph. Laughing and holding his tummy, he said "Hey Gwen, you've gotta check this out." He whispered, "It's a blank check. The lady is making me sign on

a blank check."

We laughed hard and little did we know that it wasn't even half of the comedy. He later showed me and Wayne other stuff people would use or pick up on the ground when they couldn't find paper for him to sign on. One lady made him sign at the back of her elegant, designer Filipiniana gown. One teenager came up to him holding a dead leaf and another one, a popped balloon. Imagine how our laughter ballooned as well.

It was an amazing, genuine experience. At one point he asked if I was going to catch his *History* concert and I said, "Tomorrow night."

"Oh, you'll have a blast!" Michael told me.

At this point he became concerned about the stage as adults outnumbered the kids. His face had nervousness written all over it but he still didn't complain. He tapped the wooden floor with his foot several times making sure it was sturdy enough not to fall apart.

"I've experienced the stage collapse and I just want to make sure we're all safe here," he explained.

Half of me wanted the line to finish because we were literally melting and worried about our safety, but half of me didn't, knowing that once the line ended, Michael would leave.

At some point it did end. I managed to get an autograph for my sisters and me before our general manager, Clem Pablo, requested him to sing *Give Love on Christmas Day*.

Cesar Sarino, one of the hotel's officials, addressed his thank you note to the King of Pop. Then I saw his guards and aides whisking Michael off stage. I said in my mind, "Oh man, I didn't even have the chance to say goodbye."

Suddenly, I saw Michael return on stage and say, "Thanks so much to you and your team, Gwen. This really means a lot." Then he held me beside him and said, "I'll see you at the concert."

As Michael Jackson is laid to rest and returned to pristine condition in the afterlife, these two incredible acts of the King of Pop - volunteering for charity and unselfishly spending time with the less fortunate - will forever be the way I will remember this man. ■

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SEAFOOD CITY HOME COOKING CLASS
 LESSONS FROM OUR CHEF

Here are some of Chef de Castro's delightful recipes!

Students of the Month Mother-Daughter Team: Sandra & Elvia Morales

Sandra Morales and her daughter, Elvia, may not always agree about everything. But one thing they both do enjoy is cooking - so at Seafood City in North Hills, they found something they were definitely able to agree on: Joining Seafood City's Home Cooking Class.

"We are Hispanics and we go to Seafood City to buy fish. While shopping, we saw the posters about the Cooking Class and decided to register and learn," said Sandra.

Since the Home Cooking Class was launched June 6 at the North Hills location, it has gained some loyal following among Seafood City customers. Those who have attended the sessions have learned valuable skills from renowned Chefs Cecilia de Castro and Reggie Torres.

"We liked the BBQ Ribs and the Asian Salad. Our families liked it too. It's great that we learn new recipes every Saturday. And so far our families liked the new cuisine we cook for them," Elvia said, adding that, "We learn how to present different dishes for everyday meals. Aside from learning new cuisine, it adds more family time because the dishes become family conversation pieces."

Sandra also described the Cooking Class experience: "It's fun and exciting as we can shop for ingredients right away after class at Seafood City and prepare and cook once we get home."

The mother-daughter tandem looks forward to more exciting events at Seafood City. "We hope to see a Hispanic chef teach at Seafood City and we look forward to learning inexpensive and delicious Hispanic meals. We have invited more of our friends to participate and register."

For a limited time, you can sign up for classes for FREE. Register at Seafood City North Hills, Panorama or at www.seafoodcity.com.

SEAFOOD CITY SUPERMARKET
 At Home Abo Sa'yo!

Ginataang Laman ng Dagat at Lupa

(Seafood & Vegetables in Coconut Sauce)
 Serves 6 to 8.

Today, one can buy excellent quality canned coconut milk to make any Ginataan (cooked in coconut milk). You can also prepare this dish without any of the seafood.....in fact, my vegetarian friends always request a version of this dish.

1 tablespoon Pamana cooking oil
 1-inch fresh ginger, peeled, julienned
 1 small onion, peeled, thinly sliced
 2 cups Pamana coconut milk
 2-4 chillies, split in half
 ½ pound kalabasa (Asian squash or Kabocha), core and seeds removed, cut into cubes
 4 ounces sitaw (Asian long green beans), cut into 2-inch pieces
 4 ounces shrimp, peeled and deveined
 4 ounces calamari, trimmed, cut into rings or strips
 4 ounces crab meat
 Pamana Patis (fish sauce), to taste (optional)
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1. In a wok or large saute pan, heat the oil. Over medium heat, saute the ginger and onion until aromatic, about 1-2 minutes.
2. Add the coconut milk and bring to a boil. Add the chillies, kalabasa, and sitaw. Cover and allow to simmer in the coconut milk until al dente, about 4-5 minutes. Remove the cover.
3. Season the seafood mixture with patis, salt and pepper. Add to the simmering mixture, and cook just until the shrimp change color. Serve with a bowl of steamed rice.

Asian Chicken Salad

Serves 4.

8 ounces grilled chicken breast
 6 ounces salad mesclun or mixed baby lettuces or your choice of lettuce
 1 ounce carrots, julienne
 2 green onions, julienne
 ½ bunch cilantro, trimmed, optional
 ½ cup grape or pear tomato, cut in half
 1 cup Mandarin orange segments, supreme
 Salt & freshly ground black pepper
 1 cup julienned wonton, fried

Sesame Dressing:
 1 ounce Pamana Cane or Palm vinegar
 1 tablespoon calamansi juice
 1 tablespoon Pamana soy sauce
 ¼ cup Pamana vegetable oil
 ¼ cup sesame oil
 Salt & freshly ground black pepper, to taste
 ½ teaspoon toasted sesame seeds

Cut the grilled or roasted chicken into bite size pieces.

In a bowl, prepare the Sesame Dressing. Add the salad greens, carrots, green onions, cilantro, tomato halves and mandarin oranges.

Toss until well blended. Transfer to a platter or 4 salad plates. Top with the chicken pieces and fried wonton sticks. Serve immediately.

Chicken Roll Sliders

Serves 4

1 chicken roll or pork roll
 8 mini pan de sal (rolls)
 Mayonnaise, optional
 Banana ketchup
 8 pieces of curly green lettuce
 8 slices of plum tomato
 Salt & freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Preheat grill.
 Slice the frozen chicken roll into 8 equal slices. Cook the sliced chicken rolls and grill for 2 to 3 minutes or until grill marks appear. Turn and cook until done (minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees F). transfer to a platter and allow to cool for 1-2 minutes.
 Meanwhile, prepare the sandwiches. Slice the pan de sal in half crosswise. If you like, spread mayonnaise on the bottom half of the bread. Top with a slice of warm grilled chicken roll, top with a whisper of banana ketchup, lettuce and slice of tomato. Secure with a cocktail pick. Repeat the process to the remaining ingredients.
 Transfer to a platter and serve with fried kamote (sweet potato) chips and a cold drink!