Streamers around Dumaguete City proudly announce the golden anniversary

Daily from Granada to Valencia and back did Jimmy Abad and I wend our way over the week just past the third and last of the 50th edition of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop.

Sunday before last, we flew in to Dumaguete City to assume our annual advocacy as guest panelists. We found ourselves billeted at the Granada Suite of Florentina Homes, which is owned and managed by newfound friends Wing and Nonoy del Prado. It was a spacious, apartelle-type unit with a living room, dining room, kitchenette, balcony and two bedrooms where we had hoped our fellow poets Ricky de Ungria and Marne Kilates would eventually get to join us.

Our first evening was spent in fine company over dinner at Gabby’s Bistro, a few steps from our lodging quarters. Joining us were National Artist for Literature Dr. Edith L. Tiempo, our beloved Mom, with her daughter Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas who’s on her second year of having taken over as the Workshop director, and the steadfast and loving caregiver Helen.

The other threesome that completed our modest guest list was family, too, in more ways than one: Annabelle Lee Adriano, who may now have the largest private library in Negros Oriental, her husband Edo, and their precocious and pretty 15-year-old daughter Ana, also known as Suyen, now nearly as stalwart a football player as her dad. We have become fast friends with the Adrianos over the last four years, thanks to a common fondness for books, photography, and the sea, in whichever order.

The Del Prado couple whom Annabelle and Edo had introduced to us on a previous visit also happened to drop in that night. They said they were so honored to have our National Artist dining in their son’s bistro.

We recalled how last summer, their daughter Carmen had screened her fine video docu on Dumaguete as an artists’ haven right where we now sat. Mom Edith had lent that docu her venerable presence as well as her usual words of wisdom. Now here she was, feeding happily on fish and chips, looking regal at the head of our table, smiling quietly, eyes twinkling, occasionally drawing us in when she found her hoarse voice.

She had certainly gained weight since I last visited her in Montemar last December, when she was nursing a cough and looked so frail. Jimmy and Annabelle agreed that now she looked elegantly abloom, still hale if taking mincing steps at 92. And Rowena was very happy to hear that.

Early on Monday morning, we are picked up by Rowena and Mom’s trusty driver Fred, my tocayo, who deposits us at the parking lot fronting Katipunan Hall in the SU campus. There we join up with Dr. Cesar Ruiz Aquino or Sawi, who’s been a longtime workshop and campus fixture, together with a couple of arrivals from Mindanao as sit-ins for our sessions, and Philip Van Peel of the English Department, who has tasked himself to drive us daily in his shuttle van from the city to the Writers Village on the foothills of Mt. Talinis, a 40-minute ride.
What used to be known as Camp Lookout, established by the university decades ago for its commanding view and cooler environs, is in the municipality of Valencia. Thus, Jimmy and I realize that for five days in May, we will be transported from Granada to Valencia and back, early mornings and late afternoons.

The sessions’ venue is formally known as the Mary Rose Lamb Sobrepeña Writers Village, for which all writing fellows and panelists must thank Enrique Sobrepeña, a Silliman alumnus who studied under Mom Edith, for the generous donation that has spruced up the place and installed five cottages that can accommodate 20 visitors at a time. These are all so prettily ensconced in a garden setting profuse with flowers and vines amidst grassy lawns, stately old pine trees, and stands of torch ginger and varied heliconia.

Here the “Golden Batch” of 16 writing fellows stay for three weeks in May, their manuscripts evaluated and discussed by different sets of panelists each week, as well as by their own peers.

The 2011 batch consists of Charmaine Carreon, Evangeline Gubat, Jeffrey Javier, Allen Samsuya and Alyza Taguilaso for Poetry; Glenn Diaz, Christine Lao, Emmanuel Lava, Andrea Macalino and Marius Monsanto for Fiction; and Philline Donggay, Rogelio Garcia, Jr., Miguel Sulangi, Elaine Tobias (UP-Diliman), and Maria Villaruel for Creative Non-Fiction.
Taking turns helping Workshop director Rowena and Dumaguete-based writers Dr. Aquino and Myrna Peña Reyes were guest panelists Susan Lara and Danny Reyes for the first week, Dave Genotiva and Ricardo de Ungria for the second week, and Jimmy and I as the “closers.” Sitting in with us on the third week as the special Asian panelist is the internationally acclaimed Singaporean writer Kirpal Singh.

Thanks to Kirpal, who teaches at Singapore Management University, fellowships were granted for a couple of young Singaporean writers. Unfortunately, one of them had to forego his stint owing to a pressing family matter. But Jasmine Teh did manage to join in, and loved every minute of it.

Also lending an international flavor to this summer’s historic proceedings was the participation, if only for a couple of days, of a large contingent of students from the University of Iowa, mostly enrolled in the Creative Non-Fiction program under its director Robin Hemley.

In 2005, Robin had brought in a dozen of his students from Ul. This time around, 27 signed up for a traveling writers’ workshop that has taken them to Manila thence Dumaguete, Siquijor for the nonce, Cebu later this week, and back to Manila thence a three-day stay in Corregidor.

Of course this year is a special one for the National Writers Workshop established by Edilberto and Edith Tiempo in 1962, making it the mother of all creative
writing workshops in our part of the world 25 years younger than its own progenitor, the creative writing workshop begun in the University of Iowa.

On the last week of this 50th edition, many alumni came to join the golden anniversary festivities, bonding once again with one another and meeting up with the younger batches for the first time.

While the finale was the formal program held last Friday at the Luce auditorium, billed as “Gaudeamus: Gala Night,” many other highlights marked the celebration of fellowship. These would include a day in Antulang Resort in Siaton, from where the fellows and alumni were treated to a cruise along the coastline and into Tambobo Bay, the Wednesday Reggae Night carousing at Hayahay, nocturnal beer fests at the Blue Monkey Grill at the corner of the seaside Rizal Boulevard fronting SU’s Alumni Hall, and the dinner and street party last Thursday courtesy of Negros Oriental Gov. Roel Degamo.

Surely the most memorable, however, was the spontaneous welcome address by Mom Edith during the Director’s Dinner held at historic Alumni Hall. A video of this highlight has been posted on Facebook by former fellow Nerisa Guevara, who introduced it thus:

“After the endearing presentation by the 50th Batch of the Silliman Writers Workshop which involved multimedia and music and skits, Mommy Edith chided, ‘If I didn’t know that I was with writers, I would have thought I was with TV and movie actors. Fiftieth anniversary... amazing.’”

What follows is 15 minutes of a mother’s engaging talk to all her kids, on what writers are all about. She ends it in this wise:
Balik-fellows Doug Candano, Joel Toledo, Peachy Paderna, Sawi Aquino, Gilbert Tan and Dr. Noel Pingoy with panelists Kirpal Singh and Jimmy Abad at the Blue Monkey Grill

“What else do you want me to tell you? You can ask of any writer and they will try to come up with the goods. Would I dare to say that writers indicate to everyone what it is to be openly human, would I dare to say that? Yes I do, yes I do.

“Tell me of any other entity of society outside, of course, of the cultural centers tell me who can say as much? Ask the writer any question you want answered. The writer is not all-wise, but he welcomes being asked something he cannot answer. He will like that because he tends to even more extend himself beyond the group of writers like himself.

“What else can I say to you except that I am happy, happy to be with you as I have always been happy all these 50 years with writers, and I hope that each one of you will be happy to say that, ‘Oh, I was last night with a 92-year-old woman who claims she is a writer.’

“Welcome. Welcome.”