

Felisa Ramos

By Yahoo BD Tharp

Growing up in the Philippines, Felisa Ramos often played at the rice mill her father managed. "We'd go into the rice house and slide down the shoot," Felisa said. "And even though our back yard was the river, I never learned to swim." Her father, a consummate gardener, had 3 gardens and lots of fruit trees. "When I was in college I'd sit under a tree to study, and eat the fruit. My husband was a good gardener, too. But I'm not good at it."

Inspired by her father who brought music to life on the piano as successfully as he grew things in the earth, Felisa began playing when she was 6. Her Aunt who taught piano had a studio with 2 instruments, so she gave lessons to 2 students at once. "She was a very strict teacher, using a ruler to straighten the position of your fingers," Felisa said. The older student would coach the younger one on timing and reading music. "That was my first job, but I didn't get paid," she said.

She remembers playing 4-hands with her father, and enjoyed playing for the school. "I was offered a music scholarship, but Dad suggested pharmacy." So, Felisa studied pharmacy in the Philippines. "Even though I was still in college, my Dad bought a drug store." They hired a pharmacist to work the business until she graduated, but the pharmacist talked of training programs being offered in the United States and that peaked her interest.

In June of 1960 Felisa came to Wichita under contract with St. Francis Hospital for 1 year of clinical training. "After graduation you were automatically hired," Felisa said. During the 60's a new profession called "medical technology" caught her attention, so she attended training and stayed with her two brothers, who were doctors.

Her brothers lived on a stipend so affordable housing near the hospital was a must. During this time Felisa met Faustino "Ray" Ramos. "I asked him if he might know where to rent and secretly hoped he'd help us move," she said. "I didn't really like him, he had a flat top hair cut and he didn't dress nice like my brothers. Besides, I was dating a doctor then."

When her physician/boyfriend moved to another state, Felisa decided to give Ray another look. "He kept coming around and always invited me and my brothers over for Filipino cooking. We missed home cooking." Although he was 9 years older than Felisa, she came to admire him. "He was a very good man."

"I knew that if I married here I'd never make it home to the Philippines," she said. But in January of 1962, Ray and Felisa married and stayed here. "We never moved away from Wichita. I've been back to visit the Phillipines, but I love it here, it's my home," she said. "All my friends are here."

Recently, Felisa helped her granddaughter create a display of Filipino items for Peterson Elementary School's multicultural day. She enjoys telling them stories about their heritage. "My Father never made it to the United States, even though he tried twice," she said. "Sometimes when you plan your life, if it's not really for you, it will not happen."

Ray and Felisa's three daughters attended parochial schools here. "Lisa currently lives in Kansas City, Emilene "Mimi" lives in Virginia, and Melissa "Missy" is an Optometrist here in Wichita," she said. "All 3 of the girls took piano lessons and Lisa is very good. Mimi really has no desire to play."

Ten years ago, after nearly four decades at St. Francis Hospital, Felisa retired. "Ray was very sick. And it was too stressful working in the blood bank and dealing with Ray's illness," she said.

After the girls left home Felisa remembers Ray cleaning up after dinner while she played. "I never accepted that I was good [at playing the piano]. But, I never stayed anywhere without one." Her desire to be a pianist as a profession never dimmed over the years.

Following his death, Felisa kept busy caring for 2 of her 6 grandchildren, volunteering at the hospital flower shop and church, and playing piano on the elder care floor of St. Francis hospital. Her brother told her she should make money playing piano, so he made her some business cards. Felisa used them and now plays frequently at local country clubs, health care and retirement facilities, hotels and private homes.

Felisa says that God is the one who gave her the talent to play, so she dedicates her music to Him. "If you put your heart and soul into it, even simple music is wonderful and it shows," she said. "I'll play even if I only have 5 minutes. It's a part of me and I enjoy it very much." When she watches television she has one ear on the dialog and the other on the music. "If I hear something I like I run to the piano to play it."

She recently recorded her first CD titled "Simply Elegant on the Piano" by F.R. and has sold more than 600 copies. "I was very shy when I was younger," she said. "After the CD I am more confident."

Her goal these days is to help bring former pianists back to their instrument. "I've talked quite a few people into returning to piano," she said, and has inspired two of her grandchildren to play, as well as her daughter, Missy.

*When you walk in the door of Felisa Ramos' home the first thing you see is a grand piano, beautiful orchids, and angels. Lovely Chinese furnishings and accents blend with oak and light colored fabrics. This tiny woman with her huge smile played for me after our interview. As I watched she and the piano seemed to flow together, creating beautiful music, filling the house and me with the comfort of her hospitality.*

