

# DARA: THE EXPLORER

"THE JOURNEY OF A  
YOUNG ARTIST BEFORE  
SETTING SAIL TO EXPLORE  
THE VAST WORLD..."




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*“A little thank you to those who stuck by me through the years. I would also like to dedicate this to my future self, hoping that it will serve as a friendly reminder of who I am, in case I lose myself in a forest of doubts.”*

— Dara Estioko

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## INTRODUCTION

*"Life happens wherever you are, whether you make it or not."*

— Iroh, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*



Like most people, I experienced a generous amount of trials and tribulations. However, even if those moments are undeniably hard and discouraging at times, I would not have had it any other way. That is why I decided to open my introduction with a quote from one of my favorite TV shows — *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, because of its fitting words. I

have become the person I am because of the lessons I gathered from those experiences. Without it, I could be an entirely different person from how I am. Those challenges taught me to embrace every inch of myself, perfect or imperfect. I learned to acknowledge my flaws and use them as a strength to face whatever I must. More than that, one of the most valuable lessons I ever received is to possess the desire to improve whatever I have to, every aspect of myself and life, every nook and corner of it.

On the other hand, I also believe I would not have come this far if it were not for the people who stayed by my side through it all. Without my friends and family, my process of growth might have been slower. It is not to say that I am weak or overly dependent but filled with gratitude knowing that there are people like them willing to be there for me despite whatever I went through.

Even at the school I attended — Community of Learners Foundation (COLF) — from kindergarten up until my very last year as a senior high school student, I learned plenty from the teachers who helped guide me whenever I stumbled or found myself uncertain. Despite the transfer of campus from one place to another, I was always thankful for the safe and welcoming environment.

More than that, I met long-term friends who I already consider as family. Even if the campus physically changed, the warmth and love I felt from the people there will always be the same. It will always mean something to me. The memories still vividly run through my

mind, making me laugh or cry. Although some memories are overwhelming to think about, I will cherish those emotions and carry them with me always.

Still, even though I have grown so much as an individual, I cannot deny that there are still occasions when I question my capabilities, talents, skills, including my passion, and drive. However, there is a vast difference between how I would face my self-doubts currently to how it would have been five years ago. If it were not for the experiences, there would have been no lessons to collect from. I gained more confidence in myself through the years, and needless to say, I have grown stronger. There is more courage and trust in all that I can offer. That is what makes my situation better. That is what makes me proud of how far I have come.

As my high school teachers would always tell me, we, as humans, are all different. Thus, all of us are unique in one way or another, and there is no denying that. We just have to look hard enough to see that we are enough.

## CHAPTER I: Kinder-Garden



Every time I look back to my younger years, my mind immediately focuses on my kindergarten memories. I am not sure why but perhaps it could be the simplicity and innocence of those days. Life was simple with little to no worries. It was like the whole world was a garden in my eyes.

Looking back, I remember how much I enjoyed my childhood very much. I remember the enormous bahay kubo I would play in with my friends, feeding the pet rabbit, hanging on the monkey bars, riding on the swing, and playing various other games. I also remember our dramatic play, when a bunch of us would gather and let our imaginations take flight. I especially loved dramatic play simply because it allowed us to explore different roles. We did not have any rules but to be whoever we wanted to be. I thought that was very special.

Among all the activities we had to do during kindergarten, my ultimate favorite ones were those related to arts and crafts. Of course, the imagination of a child is naturally robust and clever. Therefore, thinking outside of the box, especially when it came to the arts, was something I enjoyed doing so much. There were no rules to restrict me from creating whatever I wanted, whether I was told to use paint, macaroni, beads, glitter, cut-outs from magazines, etc.

Personally, the artworks I loved doing the most were ones where we had to trace our hand, cut it out, paint or decorate it, and create something out of it. There were also painting activities, as well as puppet making. Those were my absolute favorite activities.





Another would probably be the homework where we had to cut out letters or images from magazines, and we had to bring them to school the next day to make collages. Although this was not exactly my favorite, I did have the best memories with this activity. I remember I would wait for my dad to come home after work to ask him to help me find images and letters in the magazines we had. Every time he arrived, he would happily help me, gathering as many magazines he could find and two pairs of scissors for both of us to use. It was one of my favorite bonding moments with him.

Another memory I really enjoy looking back on were our field trips to the Ark Avilon Zoo. Although that memory is slightly blurry in my

head, as it happened a long time ago, I will never forget the excitement I shared with my classmates during the ride and visit there. We always had so much energy on the way to the zoo, but even more when we arrived. I remember how we would line up to get a chance to feed the rabbits and hamsters, head to the fish pond and feed the koi fish, and snap a picture with either the snake or the orangutan.



Another thing I remember about that trip was how we gathered all together in one area to draw the animals we saw and which among them were our favorites. Even if I do not precisely recall which ones were mine, I clearly remember how much effort I put into those illustrations. Actually, I was very interested in that activity, especially sharing what I drew with my friends. It is simple but one I like to revisit from time to time.

What makes my kindergarten years all the more special are the lifelong friends I made. I am lucky enough to actually have friends I have known since I was four years old. Because I have known them for so long, I already see them as family. We witnessed each other grow up. We celebrated birthdays together, sat beside each other during lunch, napped together, begged our



parents or guardians to give us another extra few minutes to play in the playground after school, attended school programs, participated in fairs, worked hard on group projects, and so much more. These are people I know I will never trade anything for, and I am eternally grateful to have met them in this lifetime.



My mom would tell me how back then, I was always excited to attend classes. She told me how happy she was to see such eagerness in a child to want to go to school. She said she has never seen anything like it. Because of that, my mom and my dad decided that COLF was the right school. They knew that enrolling me at COLF would allow me to develop an attitude of lifelong learning.

Those who I also want to mention are the teachers and aunts I had during this time. One of the biggest things I will always thank them for is not limiting the children, including myself, to explore whatever we stumbled upon. We had that freedom to nurture our curiosity about the world. I say this often, but I think that if I was not given that chance to let my imagination and inquisitive nature take flight, there is a possibility that I might have grown to be someone who lacks creativity and interest in many things. Hence, I am always grateful for them because they were the ones who helped me build that foundation of lifelong learning.

Personally, I still do not think that I fully mastered that yet, but what I do know is that I do not want to stop exploring. Just like how I was many years ago, I want to make sure that no matter what, I still see the world as if it were a hidden garden waiting to be found - that the journey continues.



## CHAPTER II: Entering Elementary

Something I will never forget is the summer before I entered the first grade. I specifically remember the excitement I felt. Whenever the topic of moving to the next level came up at home or anywhere I was at that time, my face and mood would immediately light up, rambling nonstop about how thrilled I was to enter elementary school. I joke about it now, but perhaps, back then, it was probably the biggest dream I had. Back then, when the campus was still in Castilla, once you reached grade school, you had to transfer to the other campus across the street. We even used to say it was where the ates and kuyas stayed.

However, my memories from the first grade are slightly foggy. I wish I remembered the tiny details about that school year, not only the highlights. I still vividly recall when my batch and I performed Thriller by Michael Jackson for the yearly school event, Music and Dance Festival (MDF). We took the whole dance number seriously and gave our best effort to showcase an impressive performance. We even had face paint and wore tattered outfits to imitate the zombies in the original music video.



Indeed, that was a memorable performance. I remember how much fun we would have when we knew it was time for dance class. We helped uplift each other's spirits when someone felt discouraged or uncertain about doing well. Again, it was another simple memory from simple times.



Similar to the first, my memory of the second grade is pretty cloudy, as well. I do have a favorite memory from this school year. I am not sure how this started, but every Tuesday, since we did not have PE as part of our schedule for that day, we made it our "fashion day." I remember our homeroom teacher, T. Mical

would call us one by one to stand in front, and she would let us have a mini show and tell to talk about our outfit for that day. I thought this is another memory worth sharing, simply because some of us would use this day to bring or wear wacky pieces of clothing to show the class. Honestly, it was an energizing way to start the day — a laughter-filled sharing.

Other than that, a few more memories I have from that year were the Scholastic book fairs. I was not entirely a huge fan of reading back then, but I was interested in some books available sold at the fairs. Because my allowance was not given by large sums, I would make an effort to save my money to make sure I could purchase at least one book. I learned how to save money and started budgeting that early because I was determined to buy something from the fair.



Unfortunately, I did not know it was my last year on that campus before moving to another. I really do miss Castilla, and I wish I got to spend a little more time there. However, I am still thankful that I experienced studying there, despite it only being two years. I got to experience running on the huge football field, the playground, eating in the canteen, walking down the steep ramp to go to the dance room, play around the fish pond, experience an actual bonfire, and perform song and dance numbers in our own campus. I am happy I got to experience it, even for just a short while.

Before we entered the following year, everyone in my class was extremely excited to see the new campus located in Averilla. We knew it was going to be smaller compared to the original location of COLF. Still,

from what I remember, we did not mind as much because we were just overjoyed to see one another and finally enter the third grade after a long summer break.



It was in Averilla where we spent the following two grade levels — three and four. These grades were when we learned how to play the melodica or melodion, and every time I look back on these memories, I cannot help but smile, simply because of how much we struggled to play at the beginning but eventually got used to it. Our music

teacher, T. Lito, taught us how to read and write the basics of musical notes and how to play certain songs, such as Bahay Kubo and Sitsiritsit on the melodica or melodion. On the other hand, when T. Anto became our music teacher the following year — grade four, we had the chance to perform songs in front of the class we specifically chose. One of the songs one of the groups performed actually became a song we, as a class, enjoyed listening to for the rest of that year — Ho Hey by The Lumineers.

To be honest, it was much harder to be in Averilla because we had to adjust to working in smaller places. It was more challenging to have PE class because we had to run and play on steep ramps. Assemblies also felt more cramped since there was not much space available, and we also had to cross the road every time we had music and dance class.



Despite it all, I still made good memories there. The changes we experienced then, I considered it all as the charm of the campus. It was different from what we were used to, but it was alright because we all still had each other, making the most of our time there. The two school years spent in that location did not seem too bad after all.

After two years in Averilla, the school moved to another campus again, and this time, it was located in Addition Hills. I do not recall expecting much about the new school, but

I did hear from fellow classmates that it was more spacious, unlike the one prior to it. So after hearing that, I began expecting that there was an actual field to have PE class in or simply a place to run or walk around.

Eventually, after seeing the new campus, I was happy since there was more space to move around. There was no field, but I was satisfied with the gym on the very top floor of the building. The classrooms had a substantial size, and the hallways were wide enough to fit at least three rows of people. No longer did we have to walk and cross the street just to have dance or music class since there were dedicated rooms for it. I did not mind that the canteen was not big enough since there were plenty of tables in the hallway and space in the classrooms to eat. Honestly, it made these breaks all the more fun since we would usually gather together on the floor or sit at one table and eat together.



Grade five was the year when the morning and afternoon class of my batch merged into one. We actually already knew one another because we either played together after school, were bus mates, or part of the school's dance team, so it was not entirely overwhelming to share a single classroom with everyone. In fact, it felt kind of nice since there were more people. More than that, everyone was friendly with one another, and we got along so well. It really is one of my favorite years, just because I had this opportunity to make more friends.

Among all the projects I experienced making during this grade, the most enjoyable one was the scrapbook for our Social Studies class containing facts about our chosen country. For my project, I specifically chose France but focused on its capital, Paris, the most. I had fun memories completing this project because I was always interested in France. To add to those good memories, this is another project I made with my dad. It was another opportunity for us to bond together, hence why this project was one of my favorites to look back on.



Overall, the fifth grade was a pretty enjoyable year, especially since we learned about China. We learned about its arts and culture, traditions, people, and history. We did many other projects, such as making our own paper dolls dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, reading about some of its mythology, religion, had field trips, learning tai chi, the ribbon, and umbrella dance.



Our potluck for that year was also one of my favorites to remember. It was an 80's themed one. I will never forget how much effort everyone put into that potluck. Many of us even stayed behind after class to take 80's inspired photos to present, work on the script, games, and make decorations.

If I could choose my favorite year among all elementary grade levels, I would most likely pick this one. For me, it was not just based on the academics and how well I did, but it was more so because of the memories from this year.

To be honest, the sixth grade was not exactly the best year. Many things happened during that time that I wish did not. It was one of the lowest points in my life. In summary, mentally and emotionally, I was not in the best shape. Although I have already moved on from what happened that year, I still cannot help but wonder, "what if" I did



things differently back then? What if I knew myself more? Would I have easily let go of something that was no longer healthy for me? Every time I look back at my experiences, my problem did not actually seem too big. In fact, if I were to go through something similar to that time, I would have handled it better — maturely, if you would call it. However,

during that time, I was very inexperienced. It was my first time going through a difficult moment, hence why I was gravely overwhelmed by the outburst of emotions.



Still, to be fair, despite all that I had to go through during that year, I also had good memories. I became closer to one of my closest friends, Jedi, who, at this point, I can actually call family. She is someone who I always thank for sticking by me, being there through thick and thin. Grade six was also the year we graduated from elementary. In all honesty, if it were not for her, I would have spent the last year of elementary school unhappy or unsatisfied. Our friendship is one of the relationships I will cherish the most.

My elementary years will always have a special place in my heart — a time I will remember. So many events happened that I did not realize back then but would actually help shape me to become the person I am.

## CHAPTER III: Junior Dreamer

Perhaps, my junior year in high school would have to be the most interesting time in my life. I could not stress how much I learned about myself as a friend, a student, but most importantly, myself as an individual. It might be cliché to say, but it is high school — a time of learning and self-exploration.

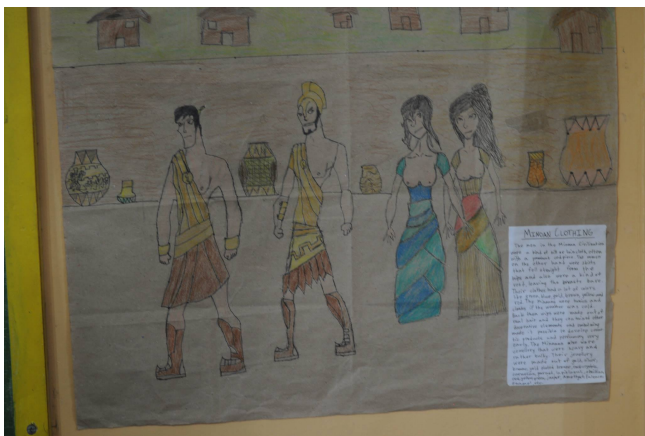
Since I was young, I always had a love and passion for music. My mom used to sit on the piano whenever she could and play different pieces, or she would accompany my sister and I with the song we were singing. So naturally, music became a big part of my life and who I am. Music meant so much to me, even up until now, that I decided the profession I want to pursue is that of a musical theatre actress. Singing has always been a huge part of who I am, and I always enjoyed telling stories very much. I want to add emphasis to this because the years I spent in junior high school were what I like to call the "breaking out of my shell" years. It was during these times when I learned so much about myself as a performer. I learned about my strengths and weaknesses, all the way to the healthy mindset I had to develop, including the trust I built for all that I am capable of doing.

Identifying what I wanted to pursue at such a young age became an advantage because not once did I have difficulties trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I was able to pinpoint my priorities, especially as an artist. Often, I knew what I wanted. When someone would ask me what kind of person I wanted to be, I seldom felt pressured since I always had an answer.

Honestly, being in COLF helped me a lot. What I will always admire about this school is its openness to all forms of art, such as dance, music, visuals, even applied arts. I love how they made sure to integrate it into our general academic subjects. I think that kind of training helped most with my creative thinking and skills to produce something different.



For example, during the seventh grade, one of our assigned readings for that year in English was *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. T. Joy was always very creative when she assigned projects, so it was not a surprise when she gave our class a challenging yet exciting one. She told our class that we had to make a musical out of the book, which meant we had to compose songs and choreograph a few moves. Since T. Joy permitted us to use the melody of existing songs, my group decided to use some from *Les Miserables*. We had such an enjoyable and unforgettable time writing the lyrics, choreographing, and practicing our parts together. I loved every moment of it. Everyone got along really well, and that is what made the experience all the better.



Another project I enjoyed very much during the seventh grade was when we illustrated posters with ancient Greeks during specific periods or civilizations. For my group, we had the task of researching about the Minoans. We gave our best to try and capture the traditional clothing of the Minoans since that was

what we had to present about — their attire, including what fabric they used, the color scheme they preferred, and their accessories. I sincerely had a wonderful time doing this project, especially since my groupmates enjoyed it as well.

I think the most memorable event that happened during the eighth grade was the Carol Fest. It was similar to our annual Sabayang Pagbigkas. The only difference about it was that each class had to perform a Christmas medley. Carol Fest will always be special to me because this was the first school-related event I took the initiative in leading. I loved brainstorming with the class on which songs would be best to perform and helping them learn the medley. It was the first time I felt like I was capable of something.







We practiced hard and gave our best effort to produce a well-done performance. I cannot deny that I was nervous, even my classmates, despite having had adequate practice beforehand. I was genuinely proud of everyone, including myself, for the hard work we all exerted to do the best we can. Although we did not win first place, we did win second. I was happy for us, nevertheless. It was an experience that I will surely never forget. Having been able to experience Carol Fest is something I will surely never forget, simply because I realized how much I love being on stage and performing for people. Preparing for the performance also helped me see how despite the hardships and challenges anyone encounters during practice, it will all be worth the amount of sweat and effort you put into your craft — and I loved every second of it.

I was also in the eighth grade when I auditioned to be a part of the school choir. Back then, I used to be extremely shy. I would always choose my pride over doing something I genuinely wanted to try. However, if I kept the kind of attitude wherein I always choose to stay in my comfort zone instead of trying something entirely new, I might regret many things later on in the future. Since I did not want that to happen, I put a lot of thought into deciding whether it will be worth it or not.

I love to sing — it is a huge part of who I am. For once, I wanted to do something I was not told to do. So on the day of the auditions, I mustered up the courage to enter the music room and sing what I had prepared. I got accepted and became a member of the school choir as a soprano. Looking back, it did not seem all too bad. Of course, back then it was different, but I will always give myself a pat on the back for taking that leap of faith and trying something new.

Grade nine was the year I gradually started stepping out of my bubble. Although I led my class' Carol Fest performance and joined choir prior to this year, I believe it was when the Performing Arts Committee cast me to play the role of Little Inez in their production of Hairspray the Musical. Since I was able to participate, I was able to have exposure, and because of that exposure, I gained more experience in performing. Another thing that helped me build my confidence is that I was not yet a member of the

PA committee during that time, which meant they could have gotten anyone else to fulfill that role. Still, the leaders personally asked me to join, and it made me feel as if people were beginning to recognize me for my capability in singing and acting. It made me feel happy because I felt like people had faith in me as an artist — as a performer.



Fair enough, learning the character of my assigned role was not entirely a piece of cake. Let's just say that I am a perfectionist when it comes to any performance. Thus, I always ensure that what I present to people is well polished and supported with a significant amount of practice. I was also new to performing solo parts because I had only been in choir for a year, and I was used to singing with a group, so holding a mic alone felt extremely nerve-wracking but exhilarating at the same time.

What made my experience as part of the Hairspray production all the more special and memorable were the friends I got to make. Again, I am often shy around new people or people I do not speak to, so it was a big step for me to take. If there is one thing I



learned during that whole experience working with different people, one must hold great value for accountability and professionalism. Talent and skills could not stand on their own if people lack respect for you.



When I entered the tenth grade, I was overwhelmed with excitement, yet felt bittersweet knowing it was my last year before becoming a senior high school student. Therefore, I wanted to make sure I did what I could to make the most out of that year. Besides dedicating plenty of time to spend with my friends, in or outside of

school, I wanted to perform as much as I could so I would not have any regrets. So, I joined the band electives, switched from my old committee to Performing Arts, and diligently attended choir.



I would be lying if I said band elective was not the highlight of that year because it definitely was. I learned so much while I was there. I remember I was always especially happy or relieved when it was time for electives. I enjoyed every moment of it, no matter how stressful it sometimes was. I knew what it was like performing with a choir, but I never realized how different you had to be and the level of stage presence you had to deliver when it came to a band. I learned how to perform as one with the group while maintaining a sense of individuality. It was undeniably hard at the beginning, but I eventually got used to the difference.

Aside from that, the overall experience was simply wonderful — no other words but that. My band and I had the opportunity to perform various songs during several school programs, such as Acoustic Night, MDF, and Christmas Program. The parts were often equally distributed so that each member had the chance to



showcase their strengths and talents. I loved the teamwork we had as a band. We got to know each one well, so it was easier to figure out if someone had difficulties with the performance. We did our best to support each other and value each person's role.

For PA, we did quite a few short plays for children to watch, most of which were performed during their assemblies, such as the annual Buwan ng Wika and Book Month. Often, we would find relevant stories for children and make a whole production out of it. For example, during that school year's Book Month, one of the plays PA showcased to the kids was based on Marcus Pfister's book, *The Rainbow Fish*. We also performed a few songs as openings for those programs.

T. Elfio also had many plans in store for the choir. He wanted to do something slightly different compared to the usual songs he would have us sing. I remember how he constantly asked a few members, including myself, what are good song options for our performances. We would brainstorm and eventually arrive at a decision. I did not know T. Elfio planned to have a few people sing solos for the songs he chose, so when I entered the choir room after he had announced we would sing Hallelujah for the MDF, I was surprised to find out that he had given me a part in the song to sing solo.

Besides my performance with the choir, I also had other ones for band electives that day, hence why I was exceptionally anxious about messing up. I had a total of three performances to fulfill throughout that school event: Hallelujah (choir), Seasons of Love (band electives), and Attention (band electives). For days, I would practice, meticulously checking if I was singing flat, sharp, enunciating the words correctly, or using the appropriate technique. Although the dedicated part was not long, I still wanted to do my best, so my efforts will not get thrown in the bin.

When the day came, I felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest. I have never performed this much in my whole life. My hands were almost uncontrollably shaking while I felt like my knees were about to give in. Thankfully, my friends were very supportive and encouraging. They helped lessen the pressure that clung to my shoulders, making me feel a little lighter.

As for the performance, I think I did a job well done, considering it was only my first time to have that many song numbers in a single event. When I got on stage, all my worries felt as if they floated into thin air, and I directed all my energy to the performance. Because of that focus, I managed to push through with a well-prepared show. Most importantly, I enjoyed myself out there. I very much had a blast with the people I performed with, and I will always cherish those memories.



Another great memory during the tenth grade was Acoustic Night. It is my favorite student-led school music program simply because of how intimate and atmospheric it is. The overall mood and atmosphere of the event help me enjoy the music a little more. However, what made this Acoustic Night

particularly memorable is that it was the first time I co-hosted the event and participated in the performances.

Compared to MDF, I was a lot calmer. As I mentioned, there was something peaceful about the entire atmosphere of the event. That helped generously to lessen my anxiety. Overall, I had a wonderful time. I would not say the way I hosted and performed was perfect, but it is an experience worth remembering.

Something that makes me laugh every time I revisit memories from the tenth grade was our Culinary class. To give a little context, I am not a skilled cook or someone who knows how to work in the kitchen. If I did have a task in the kitchen, you would often find me slicing or chopping the ingredients, washing the dishes, or, as funny as it may be, tasting the food. Nevertheless, I learned a few things that helped expand my perspective about those working in culinary. Because I have never worked in a kitchen, I did not realize how difficult each person's respective job is. Without the class, I would have never known how important the role of a dishwasher is to the entire system of the kitchen.



What I especially loved about the tenth grade was the culinary field trip we had. That trip, in my opinion, is one of the highlights of the tenth grade. I had such a wonderful time there. It was different working in the actual kitchen of a restaurant, making the experience all the more real. The whole time, everyone was smiling and generally having a fun-filled trip. If I could, I would want to experience something like that trip in the future with my friends.

If I think about it, my journey throughout junior high school was a journey of growth, self-acceptance, and finding confidence in all that I am. I learned to embrace every inch of myself, no matter how flawed I might possibly be.

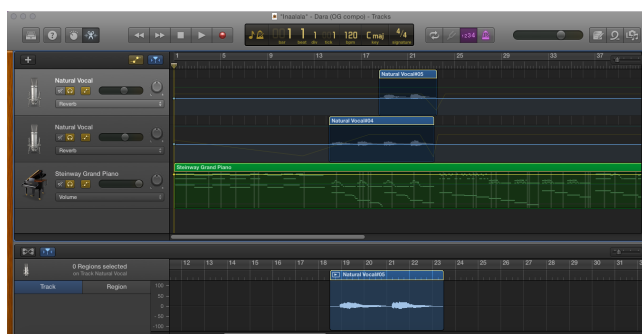
## CHAPTER IV: Senior High — The Final Stage

Since senior high school students had to decide on a track they believe best suits them, I went ahead and enrolled in the Arts and Designs — Music Production program. Although music production is quite different from the career path I want to pursue, it does not mean that I did not enjoy the track I chose because I very much did. I learned so much about music and what it means to truly be a musician from T. Elfo. What I loved about music production is that it was not all that I had expected. In fact, I was utterly surprised by its extensive coverage in the arts.

Personally, I think I grew so much as an artist ever since I officially became a music production student. It is not to say that I am disregarding all that I learned and experienced during the grades prior. Those experiences helped shape me to be the person I am today. Perhaps, it is because I had the opportunity to have more subjects related to art compared to the previous years.

To give you an idea, during grade eleven, we had two production subjects with T. Elfo per semester, which meant we would meet four to five times a week. Each meeting had a dedicated focus on a specific aspect of music production or the arts in general. For example, we would use an entire session to learn about music theory, one for solfeggio (part of ear training), while another would be for exploring and familiarizing ourselves with our chosen music production software or digital audio workstation (DAW). We also had

The image displays two pages of musical notation. The left page is titled 'DIATONIC INTERVAL DRILL' and 'CHROMATIC INTERVAL DRILL'. It features two sets of musical staves with lyrics underneath. The right page shows two musical staves with tempo markings: 'Allegretto Moderato (c. 84)' and 'Moderato (c. 76)'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines.



a specific day wherein T. Elfo would give us the whole period to practice our musical strengths. I would be vocalizing and practicing a few songs while Macy would play her violin, and Iya would be learning her pieces on the piano.

Out of all the days we met with T. Elfio, Friday meetings will always be my favorite above all. Fridays were the days when T. Elfio would allow us to practice our instruments or musical strengths individually. Macy and I would always be together in T. Elfio's studio, whereas Iya would be in the music room along with the grade twelve prod students at that time. Macy and I would take turns on who practices first because we only shared a single room. Nevertheless, I always enjoyed my time with her. After practicing for a certain amount of time, we would usually take breaks and bond together by listening to a few Broadway songs or endlessly talking about music in general. I loved those days very much because it was relaxing and an excellent way to end the week.

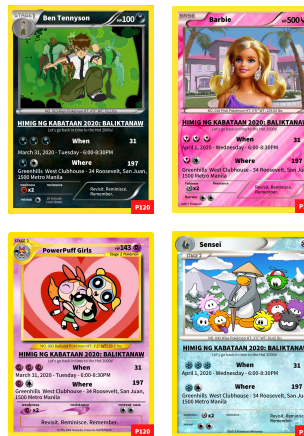
For those who are not aware, I entered this track with little to no knowledge or training about music, unlike my track mates. Both Macy and Iya had an advantage because they already knew how to read notes and were well-versed in music theory. I entered music production, barely knowing how the circle of fifths worked, and read musical notes at a slow pace. My first few weeks felt like a nightmare because I thought I would not survive this track. However, despite the difficulties I encountered, I did not want to give up or give in to the pressure. Therefore, I dedicated at least an hour to learn either music theory or practice solfege every day after arriving home. Fortunately, I saw a drastic improvement in myself, my understanding, and my application of music. I was able to keep up with my track mates' pace, including T. Elfio's. I also saw how my grades got better and higher. During our dictation and solfege quizzes, there were many times I received the highest mark. It made me realize, maybe I did choose the right track.



What made prod all the better were the people I spent the past two years with. Grade eleven's program and level served as a culture shock, not only for myself but my other classmates included. Therefore, what made that year bearable enough to endure were my track mates, Macy and Iya. There were rarely any instances when we would have overly challenging tasks to take on, simply because we knew we had each other's backs. We were there to help one another and cheer each one up whenever something was burdening them. As we used to always say, "walang iwanan."

Supposedly, it was my batch's turn to facilitate Himig 2020, so we gathered as a class to decide what theme would best suit ours. Unfortunately, due to the unexpected emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were left with no choice but to transition to an online setting. Therefore, our class could do nothing but cancel all plans we had prepared for the year-end music event. Although it may be saddening to think that we could have pushed through if it were not for the pandemic, needless to say, I still very much enjoyed the experience of knowing what it was like to be part of the Himig committee.

Since the event was to take place during a new decade, we thought it would be a fitting idea to pursue one centered on nostalgia. When we established the overall theme, that is when the work began. Luna and I handled most of the critical steps and oversaw all the activities per committee. Divide and conquer is what we did to ensure that progress was being made. I mostly handled the auditions, setlist, and order of the entire program, whereas Luna focused more on bringing out the theme of nostalgia through the set design and tickets. Everyone was so cooperative and diligent in piecing together the whole event. It is a lovely memory to look back on. It may not have happened, but somehow, one way or another, I am glad to have had the opportunity to participate in something special.



Truthfully, before we entered senior high school, our class was very much divided. I have no other words to describe the situation back then but immature. No one, including myself, wanted to fix anything. We refused to accept each other's differences. I guess, in one way or another, we all enjoyed it despite the massive damages it caused to our relationship as a class. This is why I was overjoyed by the tremendous shift in how we treated one another when we reached the eleventh grade. Perhaps, it could be the pressure everyone felt after getting a taste of the workload or how it could be because of our tracks and how we learned to work with people we initially were not close to. We learned to accept each other's indifferences, became more patient, and understanding towards everyone. Even if there are instances when we disagree with one another, we have finally reached the point of handling matters with respect and kindness.

Grade eleven may not have ended the way we had in mind. Yet despite it all, the abrupt changes, the workload, it remains the most memorable year. Everything that happened in grade eleven holds a special place in my heart.



Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, schools had no other option but to transition to an online setting to avoid further spreading the virus and risking everyone's safety. I have to be honest — the switch from physical classes to a current digital one has not been a smooth road. Many hurdles had to be faced, not only by our educators but students included. There are times when one, whether it be a teacher or student, experiences poor internet connectivity. Either this hinders them from teaching lessons or learning the lessons. There are also other technical difficulties I witnessed a few people encountering. For example, their cameras malfunction, or their mics do not work, limiting them from fully participating in class.

However, regardless of these recurring technical issues, everyone pushed through and managed to do all they can to make the most of this school year — both teachers and students. It helped motivate me to keep doing better and trying my best whenever things were not exactly going on the right track.

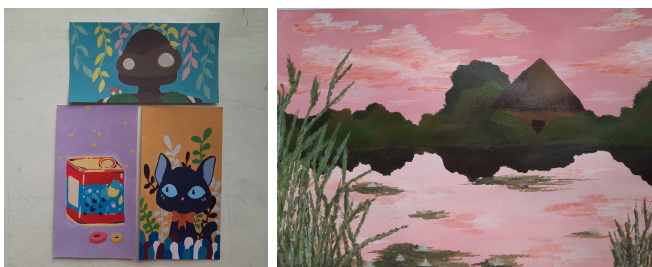
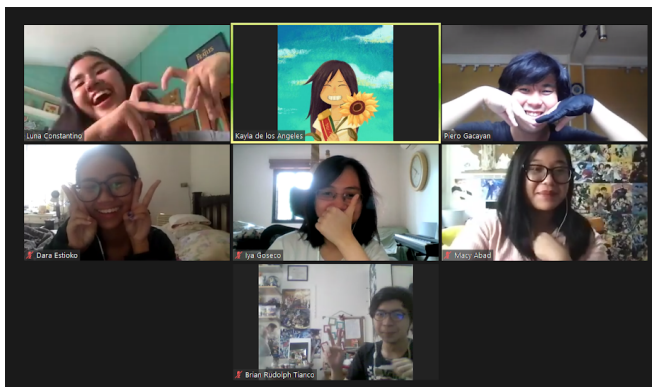
I would be lying if I said I did not experience countless burn-out because of how discouraging the whole situation is. Usually, every morning, I would read newly published articles, especially about the country's state. Therefore, every time I read something extremely disheartening, I cannot help but feel sad throughout the morning and sometimes the entire day. It makes me miss my friends all the more and going out in general — to school, the houses of friends, restaurants, malls, theatres, traveling — all of it. However, what especially kept me going through it all is that life goes on no matter how challenging your situation, and everyone's, for that matter, becomes. Life does not simply pause because you are caught at a crossroads. I am not saying that it is wrong to take breaks because it certainly is not. Taking a breather helps everyone keep going, but know that eventually, you have to get back on your feet and continue where you left off.



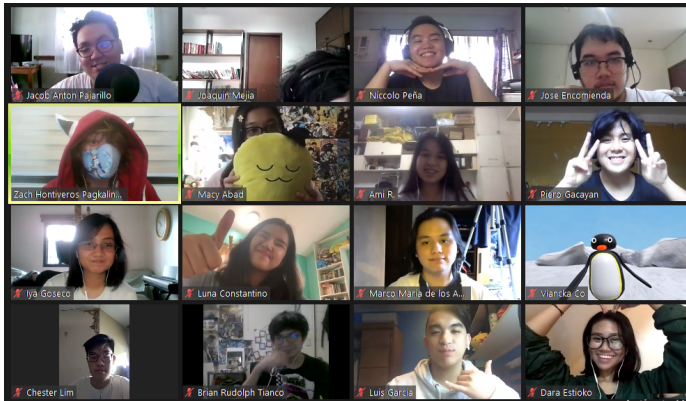
When I was finally ready to get back to making the most of what I have, I realized it was not so bad after all. Of course, it is different from how it used to be, but it is not impossible to learn or get used to. In fact, I was actually able to enjoy working on many requirements after working on my mindset. Instead of thinking that everything I do will go to nothing, I changed my thought process to appreciating every bit of it as part of the learning experience.

If there is one thing that I discovered about myself this year, it is having a knack for painting. I would not say my painting skills are immaculate, but I can paint quite decently. I would not have known if it were not for our Filipino Identity subject under T. Kayla. I grew an interest in it and realized how much I enjoyed the activity. Another track subject I especially enjoyed during my last year was our Leadership in the Arts class with T. Elfio. I have always loved learning about arts and considered a career in arts management at one point. I very much enjoy visiting art galleries and being exposed to various forms of art. Therefore, having been given a chance to study the basics of arts management and leadership is something that I will treasure.

Lastly, I want to briefly mention Research as one of the subjects that challenged me the most this year. It may be hard for some to believe me when I say this, but I sincerely



appreciated Research. As difficult as it was, I will never trade the lessons I learned from T. Feny for anything. I learned the importance of seeking more information than what is already set in front of you and understood that clarity is the key to any good research paper — big words or jargon will not matter if you lack in this aspect. Everything you will encounter in this subject is not only strictly for it. The lessons go beyond the classroom, and I will always be grateful for having had that learning experience.



Who would have thought my batch and I would spend our last year in high school in an online setting? Up to this day, it is still something I am trying to comprehend. Nevertheless, I am grateful knowing that I get to spend it with my friends and teachers who take the experience to the next level. I will always hold dear in my heart the memories we all shared during this "one heck of a year."

## CHAPTER V: A Little Thank You for the Few

Before I close this book, I want to dedicate a few "thank yous" to the people who have impacted my life, big or small. I do not often say it, but I will always be thankful to everyone who stuck by me through the good and bad times. Know that you all have been so special to me, and I cannot express enough how you made my eighteen years worthwhile. With that, let us get to it!

### ♥ Vianca Co ♥



Vi! I want to thank you for always being such a fun person to be with. I enjoy your witty jokes (only when I get them) and your overall company. I never told you this, but I always admired your bravery, especially when speaking your mind. It blows me away how intelligent you are — it really does. I also know you are not the "cheesy" type, so just bear with me a little longer. I want to thank you for the time I spent with you. Hopefully, no matter what, you will continue to stand your ground because that is something I truly admire about you. (P.S. I had to use this "iconic" picture because I do not have a single photo that is only just the two of us, so we better take one whenever we meet.)

### ✿ Keeana Ramos ✿



Kee, if ever you see this, I hope you are not surprised you are part of this list. We may not have gotten on the right start, but I am glad to know you are one of my friends. I cannot recall if I have ever thanked you for being such a good friend to everyone in the friend group, including me. Therefore, I would like to use this opportunity to do so. You may not realize this about yourself, but you are one of the kindest and most lovable people out there. You always make an effort to include everyone so that no one feels left out, and I very much appreciate that about you. Most of the memories I have with you are all usually "crackhead" ones. There is never a dull moment once you enter the room. You keep the energy going, and I admire that so much about you. I hope to see you soon!

♥️ **Marco de los Angeles** ♥️



Dear, Marco... There are quite a few things I want to say to you. First of all, I want to let you know how much I appreciate your trust in me. I would have never expected you to open up to me about topics you rarely discuss with others. Yes! As funny as it may be, it makes me feel special. Second! I love how easy it is to be around you. I am not sure how you do it, but you have a knack for making people feel like they can talk to you about anything — or at least it is just me. Lastly, as a dancer, a performer, I respect your grit and passion. I admire that about you. It is one thing to have a good performance, but being able to have an entire audience captivated by your choreography is another thing, and may I remind you that you have what it takes to do the latter. No matter what you think about your dancing, just know that you are one of the best in my eyes. So please keep it up despite how difficult times may get. Taemin is proud of you!

🐸 **Amihan Ramos** 🐸



To my forever and always science nerd and lola, I want to use this chance to let you know that you are one of my favorite people on this entire planet! Despite not talking every day, we always manage to get past the "awkward phase" whenever we do — that is what I love about our friendship. It is like the conversation just naturally flows smoothly. Every time I spend time with you, I always find myself laughing because of our terrible humor. Thank you for sharing your knowledge about science with me from time to time, even though there are moments I could no longer keep up. Thank you for having earring-related conversations with me (I promise to send you the frog earrings I made). Whenever I get to let you listen to recent song covers I have done, you tell me how proud you are of my improvement, and I thank you because you are one of the biggest supporters. For some odd reason, you always say the right words at the right time, and that helps encourage me to keep going. Ami, you are truly one of the greatest friends anyone can ask for. You are honest, humble, open, and a sincerely caring person. Once again, thank you for all that you have done.

### 🎷 Macy Abad 🎷

Unfortunately, I do not have a picture of both of us, but I do hope we get to take one soon. When we do, we must look extra charming! There are many things I want to tell you, Macy, but I will just stick to the best ones. First and foremost, I want to let you know how happy I am that we grew a lot closer to each other. I am pleased to have found another person who shares the same love and adoration towards musicals and the arts as I do. You are the first person I go to whenever I want to discuss a specific musical or song. I am relieved that you understand my Broadway jokes and laugh at almost anything I say (really, our humor is beyond anyone's ability to comprehend). I also enjoy our fashion-related conversations because we are, as we refer to ourselves, "maarte."

Overall, I just want to let you know how much I appreciate you as a person. You are always a message away when I need help with something and thank you for never leaving me on seen. Lastly, I want to mention the inner strength you possess. I have never told you this, but I look up to you. There is something about your willingness and eagerness to learn and determination to keep getting better that constantly leaves me speechless. I admire that so much about you. I want to thank you for constantly being there for me. I will always be just a message away whenever you need to vent or gush over anything.

### 🌻 Luna Constantino 🌻



To Luna, a.k.a my lip tint and earrings partner, I am grateful to have been your friend since we were only four years old. Now, look at us. Eighteen years old, ready to conquer the world! If you are wondering why I chose the sunflower emoji instead of the moon, here are five reasons why: 1) you remind me of one. 2) You look absolutely amazing when you are wearing shades of yellow. Lastly, 3) You have a smile that is so infectious, making the room visibly brighter – similar to sunflowers.

All jokes aside, I want to thank you for the lovely memories we made together. From our earlier years playing in the playground, attending our first concert together, planning our Himig dreams, all the way to talking about BTS – those are only some of the best memories, but nevertheless something I will treasure for a lifetime. I hope we keep close even after high school. Our friendship is something I value with all my heart, and I hope you are aware of that.

### III Iya Goseco III



To my passion buddy, Iya, we are finally off to college! We have dreamt about this moment for so long, and now that it is just right at the tips of our fingers, it feels almost surreal.

I cannot wait to see you put yourself out there and utterly mesmerize an entire audience with your brilliant piano skills. You deserve all the recognition because you have so much talent in you, and it frustrates me how you fail to see it yourself, sometimes. No matter how long it takes, I will be right behind, cheering you on. I will forever be the biggest Iya supporter in the history of mankind.

I hope you know that despite whatever happens, you will always be someone special to me. Every memory I have with you is a gift I adore with all my heart. You are worth so much more than you think. You have touched the lives of others, including myself, and I cannot express enough how much you mean to so many people. I may not know what the future holds for us, but I am sure of one thing. I will always cheer you on as your biggest fan. I will be there to listen if you need someone to talk to or as simple as a shoulder to lean on. As cliché as this may sound, I mean it with my very soul. Keep being an inspiration to many people. If ever you think you are not good enough, remember that my mom once said you have so much potential to become one of the best pianists out there — and I agree with her wholeheartedly! You have what it takes. Please, never forget that.

### 🎨 Piero Gacayan 🎨



Hello, Piero (a.k.a. Dara's stalker)! I hope you do not mind, but I have quite a lot to say to you as a thank you for all that you have done for me. Shall we get started?

However, before we get into my list of "thank yous," first of all, I want to congratulate you on achieving godly lighting skills. I genuinely think it makes your art all the more godsent. Your drawings have never been better. I expect to see more of your future projects, so do not be shy and shamelessly brag to me about how good you have become as an artist! Now, with that said, I want to get into the actual purpose of this.

What I genuinely love about you is how safe and comfortable you make me feel whenever I am around you. I appreciate that so much because I rarely find myself opening up to anyone, and I will always be glad knowing that you are someone I can go to any time.

I also really miss eating together in school. I lose all self-control whenever I eat with you. Do you remember going to the canteen and buying another cup of rice for us to share after eating our own lunches? Do you also remember buying the jjampong noodles whenever we felt as though our ulam was not enough? When we ate, we finished the food as if someone was plotting to steal it from us.

One of the things I enjoy talking to you about is movies and shows — mostly K-drama. Any conversation with you is never a dull moment. I also love how we could talk about a drama for days on end, similar to what happened when we watched *Extraordinary You* and when I got you into *Reply 1988*. Those are some of my favorite dramas, and I am glad I have someone to talk to about it. If ever we could, in the future, we should watch a movie or show we have not watched yet, or if there is anything you would like to rewatch, it is fine by me.

I love those memories of us. It never fails to bring out a smile on my face. It is the little things such as these that I cherish so much about our friendship. Thank you for always being so caring and never forgetting to ask how I am doing. Thank you because talking to you completes my day. Let us create more memories together in the future. Remember, I am always just a message or call away.

### ♥ Jedi Garcia ♥



Lastly, here is my message for you, Jedi — my soulmate, partner in crime, and lifelong best friend. It has been a while since I wrote something for you, so please bear with me.

In case it ever slips your mind, I want to remind you that you are my longest-running friend. To add to that, you were the first friend I ever made, ever since I entered COLF when we were only 4's/5's. So, with that said, I want to use this opportunity to thank you for simply being a part of my life.

Something I always look back on are our Jara dates to the movies. I miss those dearly. Remember when we constantly planned our dates last-minute, especially if we wanted to eat somewhere specific





or watch a movie? We would end up talking for hours about almost anything while eating our ice cream or drinking milk tea. Our conversations never had any direction. Whenever a new topic was raised, we would move to that instead, even if it had no absolute relation to the previous. I guess that is the charm of it all. I sincerely miss those. I always enjoyed our spontaneous outings together, and I hope to have more when we finally see one another.

I also miss going to your house and having your dog, Stacey, endlessly bark at me as if she does not see me almost every month. For some odd reason, I also miss going up the seemingly infinite flight of stairs just to get to your room. I always crack a smile or slight laugh every time I remember how we would be breathless even before reaching the top and tease each other for being out of shape. Throughout the day, we would watch a whole bunch of videos or watch a movie here and there while having "kwentuhan breaks." We never ran out of anything to talk about, and I love that about our relationship. More than that, I know I can trust you with anything, and you will always be there for me.

Lately, something I have been thankful for is being able to message you about anything Tomorrow by Together and BTS-related. I appreciate all our conversations from our thirty seconds one, including ones that last for two to three hours.

Above all, I want to let you know how eternally grateful I am for having you in my life. We had our ups and downs, but nevertheless, I cannot deny that it only strengthened our relationship all the more. This may be too cheesy, but I found a soulmate in you - I sincerely have. We are like Jimin and Taehyung and Soobin and Hueningkai (please laugh). You are not just a friend to me. Instead, you are someone I already consider as family. I am more than confident knowing that we will always overcome anything and stick together, always having each other's backs.

I still have so much I want to tell you, but I will end it here for simplicity's sake. I want to thank you for giving me a friendship that will surely last a lifetime. Thank you for being part of my life. (P.S. I could not decide on a single photo because we have so many. Instead, I went ahead and chose the best ones.)

I want to thank everyone who took part in my journey throughout my time at COLF. For sure, I will carry all that I have learned during the years I spent in this school in a backpack to the next chapter of my life. To the teachers who endlessly worked to teach each and every one of us, I thank you for the patience and kindness each one of you showed. My time here may have reached its end, but the memories and lessons will continue to live on. COLF helped me open my eyes to the bigger world outside of our bubble, and for that I am eternally grateful. Thank you for making my childhood truly something extraordinary. Thank you for giving me so many memories that I will treasure for a lifetime.