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Evelio Javier Was 'Swifter Than Eagles and Stronger Than Lions'

By Paul John Caña | Oct 14, 2021

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Fewer people may remember his name today than 30 years go, but Evelio Javier's place in history is secure. A politician, patriot, and freedom-fighter, Javier was a lawyer who dreamed of better things for his countrymen. He became a provincial governor before he was 30 and fought the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. It was his dream of fighting injustice and improving the lives of so many people for which he paid the ultimate price.

On what would have been his 79th birthday, we take a look back at the remarkable life of Evelio Javier.

Who was Evelio Javier?

Evelio Javier was born on October 17, 1942 in

Barangay Lanag in the small town of Hamtic in Antique. Although he finished grade school in his home province, he moved to Ateneo De Manila University where he completed high school, an undergraduate degree in History and Government and law school. In 1968, at the age of 19, Javier passed the bar. He married Precious Bello Lotilla later that same year.

In law school, Javier first displayed leadership skills that would serve him well later in life. He became president of the Student Council, joined the College of Law Athletic Club, and served as editor-in-chief of the school paper (then called Palladium).

He taught law at Ateneo for a few years before returning to his home province to run for governor in 1971. Despite running against an established name in provincial politics, Javier handily won and, at the age of 29, became the country's youngest governor at the time.

"Politics is the concern of good and decent people," he was quoted as saying.

Javier served as governor of Antique for the next eight years. [According](#) to historian Brian Mackenzie, Javier's policies focused on the environment, agriculture, and anti-poverty measures.

“His first instinct was to resign,” his [profile](#) on Bantayog.org reads, “but he was prevailed upon by his family, friends and supporters because everybody thought that martial law, being a temporary measure, was not going to last long. As it turned out, the temporary measure became a permanent way of life,” and he realized that “it was preferable for the Antiqueños to have a leader in such times than none at all.”

After succeeding terms as governor, Javier opted to pursue further studies abroad. He enrolled at the JFK School of Government at Harvard University on a scholarship, and completed a Masters in Public Administration, “with substantive areas of concentration in International Development and Political Analysis.”

Javier was also [known](#) for his Kinaray-a quote, “Ang pulitika bukot burugasan, bukot paranubli-un” which roughly means “Politics is not a livelihood and inheritance.”

Upon returning to the Philippines in 1982, Javier became director of the Pacific Bureau of The Democracy International and partner of the Zaldivar, Javier and Lumba Law Offices. A year later, he also became partner of the law firms of Edith Engel Ford and EB Javier, which had offices in Manila and

California, in the U.S.

In 1983, after the assassination of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., Javier ran for a seat in the Batasan, or what was Parliament during Martial Law, to represent Antique. He challenged a candidate named Arturo Pacificador, who ran under the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan and was a known Marcos ally. Javier lost, but claimed he was a victim of massive fraud.

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On May 14 of that year, seven of his supporters were murdered in what is now known as the Sibalom Bridge Massacre. Javier then filed an electoral protest at the Supreme Court to challenge Pacificador’s win.

In the meantime, Javier became an even more outspoken critic of the administration. He joined the campaign of Corazon Aquino and Salvador “Doy” Laurel who ran against Marcos when the dictator called for a snap election in 1986. Javier served as the provincial chair of the Unido-Laban party.





Photo by Wikimedia Commons / Milkteislife .

Evelio Javier's death

On February 11, 1986, marked gunmen arrived at the New Capitol building in San Jose, Antique, where Javier was standing on the steps talking to some people.

“Without warning, a man in a black knit ski mask leaped out and started shooting,” [Time magazine's](#) account of the incident said. “Javier jumped up and ran. Zigzagging across the building's broad concrete plaza, he tried to escape the relentless barrage of bullets. At least one hit its mark. Javier stumbled and fell into a small fishpond. Somehow, though, the fleeing man struggled to his feet and staggered across the street. By this time, other gunmen had

begun to close in. Two approached from the left. Another, brandishing a .45 pistol, appeared in front of a warehouse. Javier ducked into an alley and tried to hide behind an outhouse door. But the masked killer found his prey and finished him off with a burst of gunfire.”

In all, Javier’s body sustained at least 24 bullet wounds. He was 43 years old.

An estimated 50,000 of his colleagues, friends, and supporters paid tribute to Javier with a hero’s burial on February 20, 1986. “The Impossible Dream,” Javier’s favorite song, was played during the procession to the cemetery.

Historians say Javier’s death was the initial spark that helped ignite the revolution against the Marcos dictatorship. Just days after his death, crowds spilled onto the streets and called for the ouster of the President, who, by then, had been in power for over 20 years. The so-called People Power Revolution was a series of protests that eventually toppled the dictatorship, driving Marcos and his family away from the country and into exile in the U.S.

Five years since Javier filed his electoral protest, the Supreme Court issued a decision that proclaimed in

no uncertain terms that he, did, in fact, win.

“It is a notorious fact decried by many people and even by the foreign press that elections during the period of the Marcos dictatorship were in the main a desecration of the right of suffrage,” the decision, penned by then Justice Isagani Cruz read. “Vote-buying, intimidation and violence, illegal listing of voters, falsified returns, and other elections anomalies misrepresented and vitiated the popular will and led to the induction in office of persons who did not enjoy the confidence of the sovereign electorate.”

Javier is now considered a martyr and hero by many Filipinos, including his former constituents in Antique as well as in Aklan, Capiz, and Iloilo. Gov Evelio Javier Day is now commemorated in those provinces every year on February 11, the day of Javier’s death. The plaza in front of Antique Provincial Capitol is named Evelio Javier Freedom Park in his honor.

But we also celebrate his life, which was filled with meaning and purpose, and the desire to make things right despite insurmountable odds. Javier set an example many of us can follow: to fight for truth and uphold the ideals of fairness, decency, and justice.



Photo by Wikimedia Commons.

Justice Cruz's tribute to Javier best sums up the remarkable life of Evelio Javier:

“Let us first say these meager words in tribute to a fallen hero who was struck down in the vigor of his youth because he dared to speak against tyranny. Where many kept a meekly silence for fear of retaliation, and still others feigned and fawned in

hopes of safety and even reward, he chose to fight. He was not afraid. Money did not tempt him. Threats did not daunt him. Power did not awe him. His was a singular and all-exacting obsession: the return of freedom to his country.

"And though he fought not in the barricades of war amid the sound and smoke of shot and shell, he was a soldier nonetheless, fighting valiantly for the liberties of his people against the enemies of his race, unfortunately of his race too, who would impose upon the land a perpetual night of dark enslavement. He did not see the breaking of the dawn, sad to say, but in a very real sense Evelio B. Javier made that dawn draw nearer because he was, like Saul and Jonathan, 'swifter than eagles and stronger than lions.'"

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