

CREATIVE CLASS

She's the brains behind ZACARIAS1925, an offshoot of family heritage brand S.C. Vizcarra. Meet RITA NAZARENO, the "fun aunt" who designs bags that don't take themselves too seriously. By PATTI SUNIO. Photographs by AYA CABAUATAN



FEATURE



On the first day of school, everyone was in awe—the students, parents, teachers, and staff. “Everyone felt the new vibe, the new energy, which in a way, helped kick out the old pandemic feeling,” Soliven-De Guzman says. “Rita and Gabby’s designs truly awakened the spirit of each child to use their imagination and creativity.”

WORK, FUN, AND GAMES

While Nazareno is one to take her work seriously, she never fails to be fun about it. When she designs, she wants customers to think, *what is that?* She says of her pieces, “They can be a little strange, more interesting in shape, weave, and function... and a little more obstructive sometimes.”

One of the many design accolades she received was the prestigious Katha Award at the 2018 CITEM Manila FAME trade show for her TV set-inspired Zacarias Case Portable 9 bag, possibly a tongue-in-cheek reference to her television industry days.

“She pushes the conceptual boundaries of what a basket bag can be,” notes Pauline Suaco-Juan, former CITEM executive director. “Rita’s cheekiness—always tasteful and restrained—comes onto her work. And working with Rita doesn’t feel like work because she’s always on the verge of laughter. She’ll milk the drollest comment or meme for all its worth.”

When designing for Nazareno



RITA NAZARENO'S GRANDMOTHER. Segundina Cornejo Vizcarra, set up shop in 1925, a time when female entrepreneurs were a rarity. From humble beginnings, she and her husband, the sculptor Zacarias Allimangon, established their taller de bandados de mano (hand-embroidery studio), S.C. Vizcarra. It was patronized for Segundina's delicate hand-embroidery that transformed the pita into coverable pieces.

On the lessons she's learned from her grandmother and mother, Nazareno says, "I think kindness is a big part of it. And honesty. And it's a lot of the strength of a woman."

The third-generation heir, no doubt, takes after the strong women in her family. Nazareno, too, has had her fair share of challenges.

The Emmy Award-winning former producer didn't make it to the TV industry from the get-go despite her promising academic background. She was the valedictorian of her class at the Academy of Art University, where she pursued a master's degree in motion picture and video.

Struggling to get hired, Rita worked as an audio-visual technician and as a cashier at an Urban Outfitters, surviving on Noah's NY Bagels that she'd buy at 50 percent off before closing time. "I felt so much pride in doing honest work and getting myself out of that hole at that time," she recalls.

She faxed her resume to what seemed like a hundred companies before finally getting a call from Fox TV in Los Angeles, where she

began a productive career in television. One day, Nazareno received a call from her mother, asking her yet again to come home to the Philippines and help with the family business. This time, after nearly 10 years, she finally said yes. Knowing nothing about making bags, she decided to study design management at the London College of Fashion first.

In 2010, she made her big move back to Manila. Nazareno was set on doing "something more contemporary, something different" from S.C. Vizcarra when she launched Zacarias1925.

"The fields that interest me, like art, architecture, film and cinema, and even sports—how then do I translate that into woven, wicker form?" she explains. "The weave is my canvas, and to me, that's the interesting part. There's a playfulness to it."

That time was a significant turning point in Nazareno's career. But in December of the same year, she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 38. "When I was having my cancer treatment, I had to make sure that I was *masayubin* (good-humored), because that's the way to get better, right? You're not festering in your own sadness, depression, and sickness," she says. Her spirit unwavering, she carried on and got through it.

More than a decade since, Nazareno is still doing the work. She shares how awareness and meditation, and ultimately, "finding the joy" plays a big part in her life. "You find the joy, but you also spread it and share it," she says. "And I think that's also why I love what I'm doing," she adds of her design work with frequent co-collaborator Gabby Lichauco and their projects with FAME.

They've since established Nazareno/Lichauco, continuing their design collaborations that started in 2016. Lichauco credits Nazareno's "multidisciplinary approach" in developing her often playful ideas. "Because of this, she produces pieces that are far from the typical look," he says. "This year, we did 30 plus collections per company [with CITEM], using different techniques and different materials," Nazareno shares. "How lucky can you be?"

PLAYING IT FORWARD

In her elementary years, Nazareno was, in her own words, *baguista* (always flunking). It was only after deciding to pursue film and TV, a world that enthralled her, that she began to enjoy school and start doing well. "There was a different way of learning for me," she says.

She also recalls a professor whose love for literature sparked her own interest in the subject. "You see their passion and I'm like, I want to see what you see, make me understand

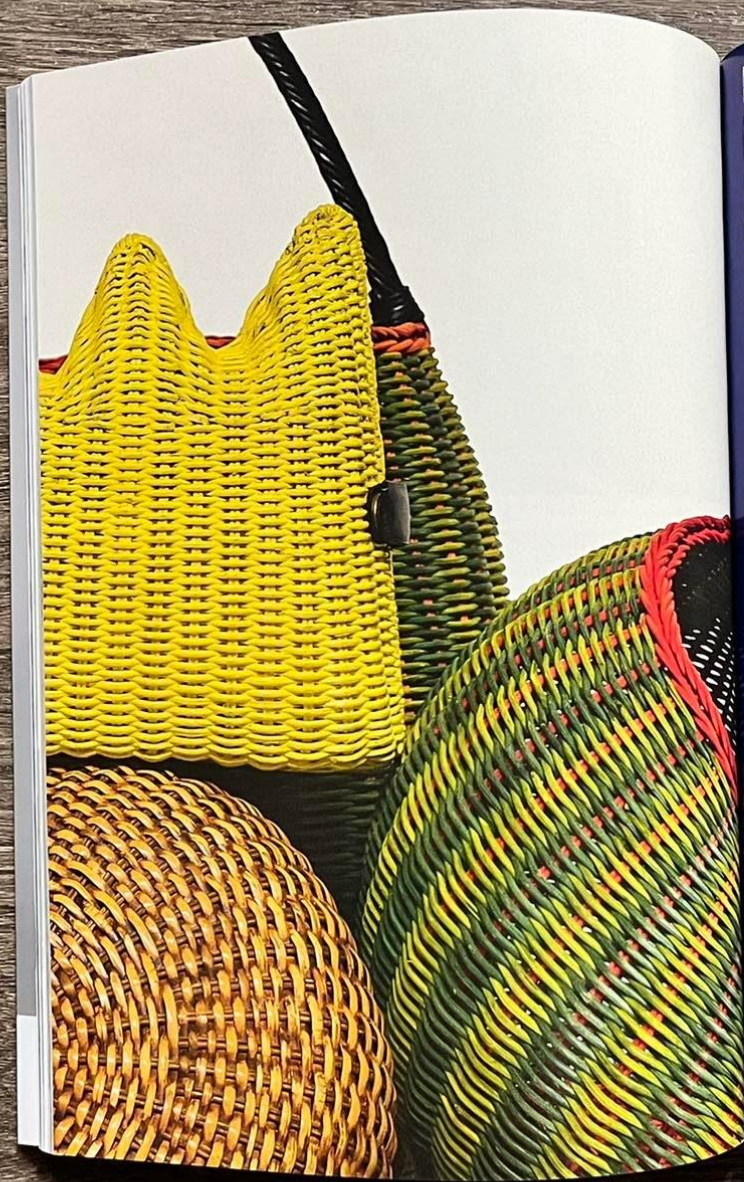
it. And then when you finally see it, you're like, *abba*, it's a whole different world!"

In recent years, Nazareno has been teaching at Philippine Women's University and SoFA Design Institute, and speaking and mentoring at several universities locally and abroad. "People learn differently, it's not just one way of learning. Diversity is so important because you learn more, you celebrate the differences, embrace it," she says.

Presently, she and Lichauco have their hands full with a school improvement project after being tapped by the COO of OB Montessori, Sara Soliven-De Guzman, to redesign the classrooms and create a vibrant, energy-filled environment for students as they returned from being cooped up for two years.



Detail of Rita's shoulder bags, which can be worn as a backpack or a handbag. Opposite: The black canvas is from a collaboration with the artist Wawa Nazareno.



CULTURE

*Celebrate your life,
your heritage, your
craft, your passions
—we focus on mindsets
for the future. Edited by
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