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I turned 65 and went to Spain

...to watch a bullfight and to go back to school

By JAIME C. GONZÁLEZ

For several years I was contemplating what I would do when I turned 65. Retirement was obviously one option, which many of my friends were talking about, but I kept thinking of the message in a book that I read when I turned 50. It talks about our “Second Adulthood.” Essentially, it says that “The old demarcation points we may still carry around—an adulthood that begins at 21 and ends

A sabbatical in Spain: The author, businessman Jaime Gonzalez, and wife Connie intently watching the corrida in Salamanca from the barrera ocho (Salamanca24horas).

Ole!: Bullfight in Salamanca in the Sept. 14 issue of La Gaceta, Regional de Salamanca
at 65 — are hopelessly out-of-date.”

How many times have we heard a friend say that “I am 60 years old but I feel like I am 45”? With the advancement of medical science, many of us will have a second adulthood lasting as long as, if not longer, than our first adulthood. And since we have had the lessons learned from our experiences, we should be wiser and more productive during our second adulthood. The trick, though, is to be physically and mentally prepared for the next 30 years so we can enjoy ourselves and be productive members of society.

Although I did feel like 45 when I turned 60, I also felt severe aches and pains whenever I played tennis or when I was seated for long periods of time. I was taking glucosamine pills for my joints but these were not working as they should have. I developed scoliosis and I was having problems walking long distances. I had frequent sessions with the chiropractor and the physical therapist, but this just gave me temporary relief. The doctors told me that, at my age, there was no cure for scoliosis. This was not what my Second Adulthood was supposed to be!

I decided to take the bull by the horns (no pun intended). I signed up for Pilates classes, taking one-on-one sessions twice a week for two hours per session. I learned that the key to alleviating the pain caused by my scoliosis was to strengthen my core and back muscles. I no longer have the severe pain in my back. I also signed up for swimming lessons. For an hour and a half twice a week, my coach has been teaching me the “total immersion” technique of swimming. This is a skill and an exercise routine that I can continue way beyond my tennis-playing days.

For the other three days of the week, I continue to play tennis with a pro for two hours each session. I am now in better shape than I have ever been before and I do feel like I am 45!

Now what does all this have to do with bullfights in Spain? Taking care of my body was not sufficient. I also needed to take care of my brain. I decided that I needed to go back to school and to learn something that would stimulate both the logical and intuitive parts of my brain. There were many choices and I decided to study a new language. Although I knew some Spanish from my mother and from the obligatory Spanish subject in school, I never really took it seriously and I certainly was not fluent. My objectives were to speak it fluently, read books (I have had El Amor en los Tiempos del Cólera by Gabriel García Márquez on my bookshelf, waiting to be read for over a year), and to listen to the noticias on TVE. So I decided to enroll in a 10-week, super-intensive course in Spanish, consisting of six hours per day, five days a week.

The preparation was not so easy but it was fun. I had to decide when to go, which school to go to, where to go to, and more importantly, how I would handle my different businesses when I was away for three months. This was a sabbatical (which was a short one since in other cases one can last for a year) but unfortunately it is a concept not so popularly known or accepted in the Philippines.

Six months before my scheduled sabbatical, I started my clase particular (one-on-one tutorials) with my profesora from the Instituto Cervantes. I set aside two lunch breaks a week for these sessions, which lasted two hours each session. This process was akin to preparing before you started your sessions in a fancy health club. You have to look good before you start your sessions. The Instituto Cervantes is a great institute; the staff members are all very friendly and helpful and the professors are excellent.

With the help of the director of the Instituto Cervantes, I narrowed down the options and selected a centro privado with classes in several cities, including our choice of venues, Salamanca and Madrid. While I was in London for my regular bimonthly board meetings a few weeks before my classes started, I took a three-day detour to both cities. I was a rarity — a 65-year-old businessman wanting to take six hours of classes every day.

Anyway, I signed up and paid for my matriculación. I also visited more than a dozen hotels and apartahoteles, fully aware that my wife had to be comfortable while I was slaving away in my class.

As it turned out, we decided to stay in Salamanca for the entire duration of my course. I enrolled for four hours of clase particular, one hour of super intensivo (an integrating session that turned out to be also one-on-one) and one hour of cultura (which I found to be very interesting). During the hora de cultura, we learned about la corrida, los toros, y las faenas; we learned about the Tuna and their songs (which we also sing in Manila like Clavelitos and Cielito Lindo but at least I now know what the lyrics mean or stand for); we spoke about the sad period in Spain’s past, the Guerra Civil, and many other themes.

My wife and I supplemented this with activities during our private time. We discovered that the founder of the oldest university in the Philippines, the University of Santo Tomás, came from the Dominicans based in Salamanca and the museum in their Iglesia de San Esteban featured some of the most exquisite crucifixes made in the early 17th century and identified as Hispanofilipino. We visited nearby cities and pueblos. We had a whole afternoon being shown how they make jamón ibérico in Guijuelo, we had a cata (wine tasting) in Peñafiel in Ribera de
Duero, we feasted on las yemas de Santa Teresa in Avila, and we went to the bullfight.

The pictures that appeared in three local dailies in Salamanca show my wife and I seated in the barrera ocho (which are the preferred seats, being on the first row). I soon discovered that these seats are normally held by families involved in the world of toros and the people sitting here normally know each other. In the next barrera siete was the Duquesa de Alba and her then novio. Indeed, learning the culture is an important aspect in learning the language.

It was a tough 10 weeks. Apart from my classes, I also had about three hours of deberes (homework) every night. Every morning before my classes started at 9 a.m., I would be on the telephone with my staff in Manila for two hours to enable me to stay on top of what was going on. Although they said they missed me, it looked like my colleagues were doing rather well without me around.

My course was tough but it was a lot of fun. I learned a lot although it is never as much as one would like to but it was certainly enough to get me along the process of learning. I am now back to my twice weekly clase particular with my profesora from the Instituto Cervantes.

This was one of the best decisions I have ever taken. I feel refreshed. I have a new skill that I continue to work on. I am getting ready for the next 30 years!

Everybody should take a sabbatical at 65!

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The author Jaime C. Gonzalez is an entrepreneur and his businesses include investment banking, real estate development, information technology, retail merchandising and others. He loves sports. He started playing tennis when he was 10 years old and he continues to play up to now. He is always thinking of learning new and interesting things. He has been married for 39 years to Connie Yuchengco and they have two children, one son-in-law and an adorable grandson. He can be contacted at jaimecgonzalez2@gmail.com.
Back to school: The author Jaime Gonzalez as a student in front of the 15th-century building where the centro privado was located.