

Where the Law found its Home: The Life, Leadership, and Legacy of Pem

A Personality Sketch of Atty. Felma Freda Leonida-Lopez and Her Journey in SPSPS School of Law

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By day, her office door is always open. By night, the lights of the law school still glow, tracing the silhouette of a woman who has learned to carry an institution on her shoulders without ever losing her softness. To the students at Saint Paul School of Professional Studies, she is more than a dean. She is their *momshie*. To the faculty, she is the quiet force who turns vision into policy and policy into lived experience. To herself, she is simply Pem, the Taclobanon girl who loved books, learned discipline from a teacher-mother, and grew into the lawyer who would one day say, with calm certainty, *“It’s like I’m finally home.”*



Atty. Felma Freda Leonida-Lopez, called Pem by her family, wears her sixty-two years with pride. *“Proud to be sixty-two because I know I have already done a lot. It’s like I have trailblazed something,”* her voice carrying the confidence of a life fully lived. Born and raised in Tacloban City, a “pure-blood Taclobanon,” she grew up in a home where letters bridged distance and discipline shaped destiny. Her father, a seafarer, was often away; her mother, a dedicated teacher, was ever present. From them she learned constancy and commitment, the twin virtues that would later define her leadership.

Unexpected Calling

Long before the law called her name, books did. As a child, Pem devoured stories, from Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, mysteries that asked the reader to think, to solve, to stand for what is right. In high school, she found herself drawn to Perry Mason, where justice unfolded in courtroom cadence. *“I just love the law,”* she would later say, without pretense, without cliché, not for the robes or the rhetoric, but for the craft itself.

She entered college through Commerce by her mother’s decision, at a time when Nursing’s promise seemed dim. She then graduated with a degree in Accountancy and Economics. Fate, however, had already begun its quiet work. Her entry into teaching was not something she originally planned. It started through a peaceful arrangement between her mother and the late founding dean of Saint Paul’s, who saw in her a potential she herself had not yet recognized. She agreed to teach out of respect for her mother and underwent a teaching demonstration. To her surprise, students responded positively, and her evaluations were excellent.

“Probably my mother and the late dean saw that possible potential in me, which I did not,” she recalls.

What began as an obligation soon became a calling—and the beginning of a lifelong devotion to the academe.

The Lawyer Who Carried Three Worlds

Pem's law school years were forged in a different age with no laptops, no e-books, and no Clinical Legal Education Program. There were libraries, long nights, shared digests, and the prayer every working student knows by heart: *"Ayaw la anay ako matawag yana."*

She worked by day and studied by night, walking from office to classroom at Divine Word University of Tacloban. At twenty-one, she was already chair of the Economics Department, juggling committees, advisorships, and the unrelenting demands of law.

She married at twenty-eight, in her third year of her fourth year, and welcomed her first child after graduation. After the oath, she taught by choice and practiced by conviction, opening her own solo law office and accepting only the cases she believed in. *"Several—about five at a time,"* she says of her limited practice. She was mindful that excellence requires focus.

Two cases remain etched in her memory to this date. A civil case that turned on a constitutional exception allowing a foreigner to acquire property by succession, which they won through research and resolution. And a murder case that ended in a conviction. They remind her that the law rewards those who read closely and argue courageously.

The School That Grew Around Her

When SPSPS opened its School of Law in June 2009, Atty Lopez was among its pioneering faculty members. She taught Statutory Construction and was appointed College Secretary, while maintaining limited private practice.

Judge Getulio Francisco, the school's first dean and her former professor, placed complete trust in her judgment. Students were often referred to her for academic and administrative concerns. *"Talk to Atty. Lopez"* From the very beginning, she played a central role in building the systems and operations of the law school. Decisions passed through her desk; systems took shape under her care.

Super Typhoon Yolanda struck in December 2013. As the city struggled to catch its breath and rebuild shattered lives, a quiet turning point arrived for Pem. One Sunday in January 2014, as she walked toward Redemptorist, her phone rang with a message that would change her journey. She was being appointed Vice-Dean for Faculty and Administration—the first to hold the title.

In November 2016, she was concurrently appointed Vice President for Academic Affairs of Saint Paul School of Professional Studies. Yet even as she assumed a university-wide leadership role, she refused to leave the law school that she had helped build. She returned to her post as Vice-Dean, continuing to serve the institution that had become her second home.

Then, on November 1, 2024, validation arrived with gratitude. She was formally appointed Dean of the School of Law.

As many of her colleagues would later observe, she had long been performing the work of a dean even before designation.

“It’s like everything was all on my shoulders,” she says with candor.

This time, the title finally matched the duty. Her reaction was neither surprise nor spectacle, only a quiet recognition of a journey fulfilled. *“It’s like I had this coming, It’s like I’m finally home.”*

Leadership with an Open Door

Ask her about leadership, and she answers with one word: hands-on. She delegates, yes, but she shows up for competitions, for classrooms, for the smallest invitations. *“One’s presence can always lend inspiration,”* she believes. Her office is never a pedestal. Students come; she listens. *“Accommodating. Approachable,”* she says of how they might describe her. And they do, calling her *momshie*, a name first coined by a graduate who felt the warmth behind the rigor.

Her vision is movement: a flourishing, vibrant law school that refuses to stand still. She pushes for Level 2 CLEP so students can draft, sign, and appear under supervision. She champions outcomes-based teaching. She guards quality through strict admission and retention. She brought the region’s first Master’s of Legal Studies to Saint Paul, after benchmarking, persuading, and preparing the documents herself, just in time before a moratorium closed the gate.

A Life Beyond the Gavel

Beyond the long corridors of the law school and the steady rhythm of meetings and memoranda, Pem returns to the simple joys that first shaped her: books, travel, and quiet reflection. She remains, at heart, the girl who fell in love with stories long before she fell in love with the law. When time allows, she reads not only legal texts but also thrillers and suspense novels, stories that demand thought, patience, and resolution. She is drawn to narratives in which mysteries unfold, and truth must be pieced together, much like the cases she once argued in court. Romance rarely captures her interest; she prefers the tension of a problem waiting to be solved.

Her advocacy is quiet but constant. She is not active in many outside organizations, not because



she lacks concern, but because her heart is fully anchored in the school. Her causes live within its walls in environmental awareness, in student formation, and in the daily work of shaping future lawyers. For Pem, advocacy is found in every policy that protects academic integrity, in every classroom she enters, and in every student she guides. When she is not in her office, she is with her family. When she is not reading, she is planning her next journey. And when she is not traveling, she is thinking of how to move the law school forward. Life beyond the gavel, for her, is not a retreat from duty, but the quiet space where strength is renewed, and vision is sharpened.

The Legacy She Is Building

Where does she see the law school in five to ten years? On the rise, more names in the Bar's top tier, stronger delivery of knowledge, and possible new programs with the Legal Education Board's blessing. "We have to improve. We have to go up," says the competitive student-leader who once danced, debated, ran councils, and refused to be left behind.

And when the time comes to lay down the mantle? She hopes to leave a fully developed law school with a reputation that precedes it, one that students choose even when closer options exist. "I want that kind of legacy," she says.

For the aspirants who line the halls she keeps lit, her counsel is steady and uncompromising: choose with your heart, commit with your will, and walk with courage. Law is not ordinary. It asks for resilience and passion, and it gives back only what you are brave enough to invest. In the end, the portrait resolves into a single, luminous truth: institutions do not become great by accident. They grow around people who arrive early, stay late, and keep the door open. In Saint Paul's, that person is Atty. Felma Freda Leonida-Lopez, Pem to her family, Dean to her faculty, momshie to her students, who carries the law with a teacher's heart and leads with a mother's care.

