Sex and the single digital Pinay

Sacha Chua was hopping mad.

The 20-something programming maven and former instructor at the Ateneo de Manila University had received an application form for the Search for the Digital Pinay 2005, a contest organized by the Philippine Computer Society and Media G8way Corporation.

"Read it all the way to the end," she urged people on a number of mailing lists after she posted the entry form on her blog. "You may start out amused… I hope you end up horrified that such a thing could have been thinkable."

I downloaded the form and saw why.

"Digital Pinay is a nationwide search - in both the professional and coed categories - for the woman who best exemplifies the qualities expected of future women leaders of the Philippine information and communications technology industry," the cover page proclaims.

The entry form asks for biographical information and adds boxes for the candidate's height, weight, bust size, and waist and hip measurements. I almost fell off my chair.

Reading further, I found that candidates would be judged by popularity - via text votes (20 percent); intelligence (40 percent); beauty and personality (20 percent); and poise and personality (20 percent).

Forget thinking women in IT; smarts count for only 40 percent.

The next page left no doubt this was a beauty contest. It talked of a "coronation night" where contestants would be made to parade in "elegant or smart casual wear," "corporate wear," and "formal wear."

"A beauty pageant does not pretend to be anything but a beauty pageant," Sacha wrote. "On the other hand, Digital Pinay 2005 pretends to define an ideal woman in ICT, and that is why it is so insulting… This contest sends a message to students, to professionals, to people inside and outside the industry…. That how a woman looks and how she walks is more important than what she learned and what she can do."

"It is a farce that I must denounce in the strongest terms… If PCS [believes] women are valuable contributors to ICT, it should not attach such values to them. For what will these women be but stereotypes and living proof of discrimination in IT? What will they be beyond a pretty face and a nice body?"

Drawing flak for sexual discrimination, PCS and Media G8way scheduled a press conference and denied they were holding a beauty contest. The event would push through, but use sanitized forms that no longer ask about breast size. Those had been "an honest mistake" and were not part of the original form.

Now that's just wrong.

I know many good people in PCS, but they dropped the ball by defending Digital Pinay and pushing through with it. The offending bust-size form wasn't the only thing wrong. The whole idea - 20 percent for beauty and 20 percent for popularity - is a throwback and trivializes women. Would Carly Fiorina, the CEO of HP, have joined such a contest? How about Admiral Grace Hopper, who revolutionized computing by creating Cobol, the first commercial high-level programming language?

If the PCS is serious about encouraging more women to pursue careers in IT, they should study an excellent program called Excite that IBM has been running in the States. Excite sends middle school girls to weeklong camps where they have fun and explore careers in math, science and technology.

Now that's a much more sensible way to get girls interested in IT, than having them put on makeup, dress up, saunter down a catwalk and answer inane questions.

Posted by Chin on 01/25/05 at 11:35 AM