

- Women politicians

Mayor Joy Belmonte: The reformist Lara Croft rebuilding QC's future

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Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte is not your typical politician. She's part archaeologist, part educator, part cultural warrior, part green visionary — and wholly unafraid to govern with both heart and backbone. At a recent two-hour, candid dialogue with 120 young Filipino Chinese entrepreneurs of Anvil Business Club led by president Chris Yae and EVP William Lim, Jr. at the grand ballroom of Solaire Resort North (the city's first and only five-star hotel, as she proudly notes), she spoke with the polish of a seasoned public servant and the curiosity of someone who still treats governance like an ongoing excavation — always searching for what lies beneath, what can be built better.



RUNNING THE REPUBLIC OF QUEZON CITY

“Kamusta ang Republika ng Quezon City?” national politicians often jokingly ask her — and for good reason. Under Belmonte's watch, the country's largest megacity, now home to over three million residents, has become a living laboratory for progressive change. From digital governance to social housing, from tourism development and gender equality to urban agriculture, the city is doing everything — and often, all at once.

Mayor Joy Belmonte remains a civic hybrid — part reformist, part educator, part environmentalist, and always deeply grounded. Her journey isn't just about the rise of a city; it's about the quiet reinvention of public leadership — where conviction matters more than applause, and ideals outlive image.

Belmonte proudly affirms her commitment to no new local taxes, despite the city's massive responsibilities. Instead, she focuses on efficiency, transparency, and digitalization to boost revenue collection and curb corruption.

Her cultural and social agenda is equally ambitious: support for the arts (QCinema is now the country's largest international film festival), plans to transform Banawe street into the Philippines' largest Chinatown rooted in trade and heritage, and major investments in public education, women's empowerment, and grassroots healthcare.

GREEN GOALS, GLOBAL BENCHMARKS

Among her most passionate — and, she admits, politically “not popular” — advocacies? Environmental sustainability. Belmonte has boldly aligned Quezon City's climate goals with the Paris Agreement, making it uniquely the first and only Philippine city officially committed to that global accord.

From a strict no-plastics ordinance in public markets to supporting renewable energy, electric transport, urban green spaces, and climate-resilient public housing, Belmonte believes ecological justice is no longer optional — it's urgent.

“My advisers warned me environmental issues don't win elections,” she smiles. “But I'm passionate about it.”

INDIANA JONES OF CITY HALL

Long before entering public service, Belmonte was literally unearthing the past. A U.K.-trained archaeologist with research experience in Thailand and Vietnam, she still recalls with regret how she heard construction workers at a mall project once unearthed ancient Chinese ceramics — possibly relics of pre-colonial maritime trade — only to take them home as souvenirs. A missed chance, she laments, to rewrite history.

She taught archaeology at the University of the Philippines when the entire department occupied a single cramped room. “Now it's thriving,” she proudly notes. Today, she advocates for stronger urban archaeology policies across Philippine cities, arguing that development must not come at the cost of memory — or identity.

FROM BUKIDNON'S MUD ROADS TO QC'S SKYBRIDGES

Belmonte's heart for public service was shaped far from city hall. After graduating from Ateneo, she volunteered as a teacher in Kadingilan, Bukidnon — a fourth-class town so remote, farmers dried corn on muddy roads and students paid P70 monthly tuition “when harvests were good.” She once appealed to her mother — the late journalist and Philippine STAR founder Betty Go-Belmonte — to use her contacts to get proper roads built. The reply from national agencies was shocking: on paper, nice roads already existed there.

Years later, when she was Vice Mayor of Quezon City, a young man in barong visited her office. “Ma'am, I was your student in Bukidnon,” he said. He was now that town's mayor.

THE RELUCTANT POLITICIAN

Joy Belmonte didn't aspire to run for office. When her father, former QC Mayor and House Speaker Sonny Belmonte, asked which of his children would enter public service, it was only daughter Joy — the academic and archaeologist — who stepped forward.

Now on her third term, she governs with the precision of a scientist, the practicality of a teacher, and the moral compass of someone who never sought power, but embraced it when the moment called. She has transformed Quezon City into something rare in Philippine politics: a city that doesn't just manage problems — it reimagines systems, pilots new solutions, and takes risks where others hedge bets.

MORE THAN A MAYOR

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At the Anvil Business Club dinner forum, she expressed a simple hope: that Quezon City might help rebuild public faith in politics itself.

Her legacy won't be written in slogans or selfies, but in plasticfree markets, climate-smart communities, and the ripple effects of a former teacher turned mayor. She's rebuilding the city with the same care and persistence she once gave to brushing dust off forgotten shards of history — proving that the most enduring leaders are not those who shout the loudest, but those who quietly build for generations still to come.

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