

Neighbors



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Scottsdale woman's book honors her Filipino actress mom

BY SUMMER AGUIRRE
Progress Staff Writer

Not many people can say that they had the privilege of penning their famous parent's biography, but Scottsdale resident Mylene Agana Jao Richardson is one of the few.

In "The Legend of Tessie Agana: Beloved Child Star of the Philippines: An Intimate Portrait of My Mother," Richardson shares the inside story of her mother Tessie Agana, a Cave Creek resident who was a Filipino child actress in the 1950s known as the "Shirley Temple of the Philippines" and "The Nation's Little Sweetheart."

Richardson's debut book hit shelves

Sept. 20 – just in time for Filipino American History Month in October.

"It's pretty exciting, it's been a long road for me to get to this point," Richardson said, adding that the book took her 15 years to write. "So I think it for me, it's very surreal to even get here. It was definitely the best journey to get to this destination. Even at this destination, I still feel like there's so much more to do and to say."

Richardson penned "The Legend of Tessie Agana" for her family — her mother in particular, now aged 81, is thrilled for its release.

"I wanted this physical thing for my mom ... she has been a part of my

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Scottsdale's Mylene Agana Jao Richardson, left, wrote a biography about her mother, Tessie Agana, a Cave Creek resident and former child star who was known as the "Shirley Temple of the Philippines." (Special to the Progress)

100+ Women of Scottsdale helps nonprofit for deaf kids

BY ANGIE SIMS
Progress Contributor

Every year, approximately 300 children in Arizona test deaf at birth and 90 percent of them are born to hearing parents.

Nearly all these parents want their child to learn to speak without the use of sign, cuing or lip reading. Learning to speak can be challenging for a person born deaf at birth or who becomes deaf at a very young age.

It can be a long process and require lots of practice, even with the use of hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Early intervention is the critical first step for these young children. The earlier a child begins speaking programs the more likely they will be successful in learning to speak.

In the early 1990s, a group of Arizona families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing traveled to a

well-known program in St. Louis to give their children the opportunity to attend a Listening and Spoken Language program.

In 1997, these parents founded Desert Voices, Arizona's only private nonprofit that teaches Listening and Spoken Language to children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The founders believed that spoken language instruction provided their children with the greatest educational and social opportunities.

They also believed that parents of children born with hearing loss deserve a choice of communication modalities.

Desert Voices' mission is to teach each child how to listen, talk, and read as they progress through their continuum of programs.

To fulfill their mission, and to provide the early intervention these children need to best succeed, Desert



Celebrating the donation made by 100+ Women Who Care of Scottsdale to nonprofit Desert Voices are, from left: **Back row:** Kristen Levi, Jacqueline Destremps, Kim Tarnopolski, Amy Coblentz, Libby Murphy, Nancy Stern, Tracie LeBlanc. **Front:** Desert Voices students and Holly Plunkett. (Special to the Progress)

Voices offers a series of programs for parents and their children. They accept any child who would be success-

ful in the program.

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journey from the very beginning. I've read every chapter to her," Richardson said. "That was my objective, is that I wanted her to hear her story, because it's a powerful story and people need to listen to these stories — to her story."

"And so she's just beside herself. Every time she looks at this book, she hugs the book."

During the Philippines' Golden Age of cinema, Agana starred in 40 films and toured the world as a professional singer alongside her mother, Consuelo Agana, whose stage name was Linda Estrella. The mother-daughter duo won the hearts of fans around the world.

One of the child star's most notable lead roles was in the record-breaking film "Roberta," which made her a household name overnight at 8 years old. The actress' successful career even led to her winning the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2022 Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences, which is equivalent to the Oscars.

As Agana was constantly in the spotlight between the ages of 7 to 14 — with another stint on the big screen when she was around 17 and 18 — the early fame and exposure to the public eye created a darkness that affected her entire life.

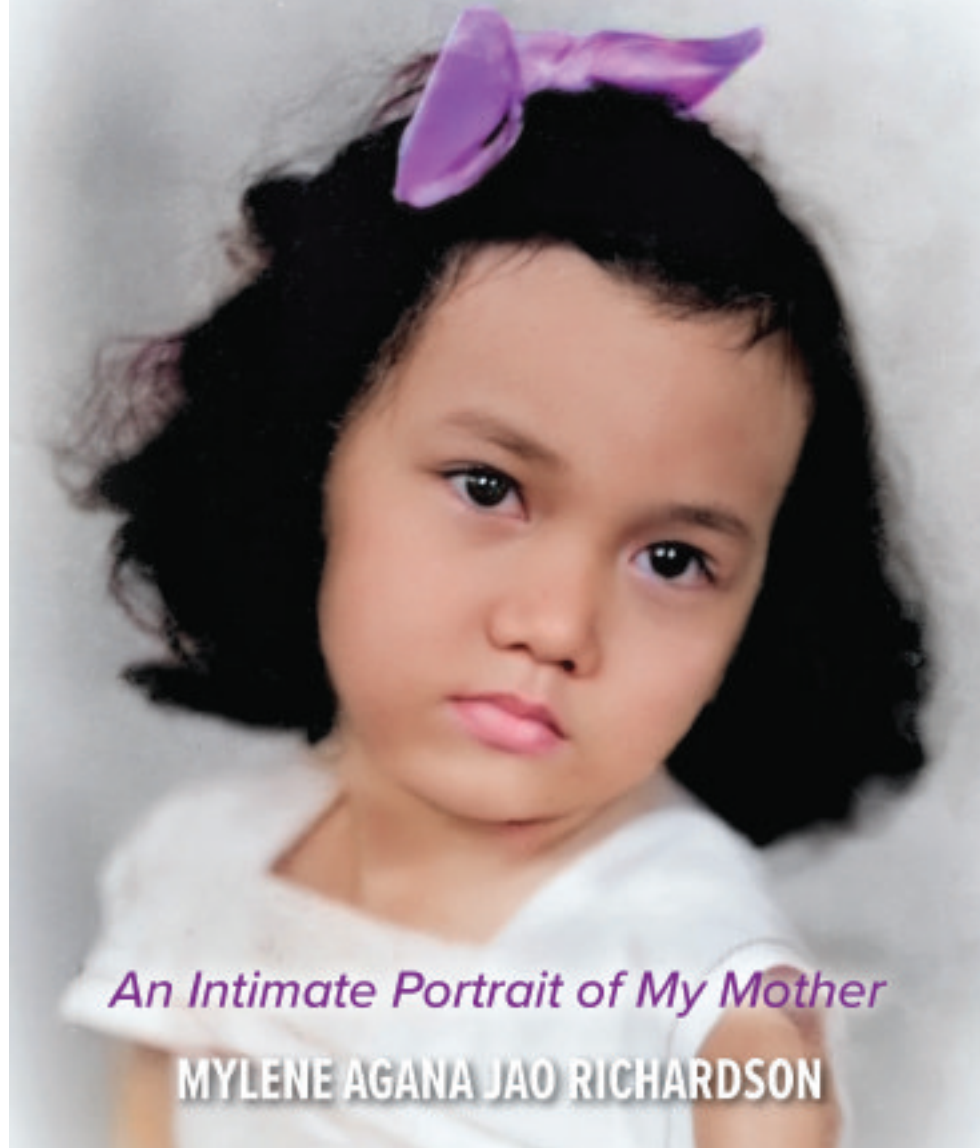
As an adult, she struggled with the complexities of family dynamics, depression and isolation, revealing a spiral of love, mental health and pain in her life.

"Back in the day ... it was supposed to look perfect on the outside. And it was definitely not," Richardson said. "I always say she lived ... almost like a charmed façade, where on the outside people think that my mom had it all — well put-together and had a husband that was a physician — but there were a lot of dark shadows that came from growing up in the spotlight."

In "The Legend of Tessie Agana," Richardson unravels the life stories of two separate, yet inextricably intertwined film careers and the personal choices behind them through behind-the-scenes anecdotes and personal narratives. She also details historical events significant to the story's back-

THE LEGEND OF TESSIE AGANA

Beloved Child Star of the Philippines



"The Legend of Tessie Agana" was released just in time for Filipino American History Month in October. (Ginny Richardson Public Relations/Submitted)

ground.

For the author, the process of writing a book about her own mother's life and learning more about her was an "eye-opening" experience. Richardson both deepened her relationship with her mother and embarked on her own journey of self-discovery — important themes that she said can be found in the book.

"What I found fascinating is when I started learning more about (my mother and grandmother's) lives

through these interviews, I started learning more about myself and unraveling a little bit more of those layers and peeling off the layers about myself," she said.

"And in doing so, my mom and I were able to have these really, very, very candid discussions about our lives, about her life, that we never had growing up. Because in our culture it was very taboo to really talk about the real things that are happening in your life."

One of nine children, Richardson said that the "The Legend of Tessie Agana" "undoubtedly" brought her and her famous mother closer.

Today, she cares for Agana, who has dementia. After her father passed away in 2018, Richardson moved from Chicago to be with her mother.

"That shows how tight these stories (have) gotten us — just this whole journey, this whole process," she said. "And it's wonderful. I wouldn't change it for the world."

Time with family, according to Richardson, is a gift that we must embrace and never take for granted — and she hopes that "The Legend of Tessie Agana" communicates that with readers.

"I want to encourage the readers to engage with their family history," she said. "So posing questions to your parents, to your grandparents. And that way, you will be able to unveil the richness of your own heritage and legacy within your own culture; whether it's Filipino culture, whether it's Italian, et cetera."

Richardson, who likes to say that "the way forward is to look back," explained that understanding one's family, and ultimately oneself, is crucial.

"Embrace the moment, whatever that is — embrace who you are at that moment, especially if it's with your family," she said.

"A lot of times, people are just on their phones, and they're not living their lives ... you got to shut down and embrace the moment with who you are with, because life is just going to pass us by. We're just on this little Earth for such a short period of time. Why not live life to its fullest?"

"The Legend of Tessie Agana: Beloved Child Star of the Philippines: An Intimate Portrait of My Mother" can be purchased at Barnes & Noble, Amazon, Target and wherever books are sold. 📖

Got News?

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