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Belen Town

Now on its second year, the "Belenistas de Ortigas," the outdoor nativity scene contest among buildings in the Ortigas Center, is a Christmas project of the University of Asia and the Pacific in partnership with the Ortigas Center Association and Barangay San Antonio.

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THE INFANT Jesus sleeping in a warm brown basket, the Virgin Mary in aquamarine and fuchsia, Joseph in light green and gold, the

three kings in red, green, and yellow garb, and a towering angel with a backdrop of twinkling lights and a bright *parol*. This grand winner of the *Belenistas* de Ortigas is visible from 20 meters away, made from *bilaos*, a *banig*, and other native materials.

For its second year, this outdoor *belen*-making contest had eight buildings feverishly working on their nativity scenes, hoping to imaginatively interpret the theme “Him whose birth the angels sing, come adore on bended knee.”

The project was initiated by the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) in partnership with the Ortigas Center Association, Inc. (OCAI) and Barangay San Antonio (BSA), Pasig City.

On Dec. 12, the top three *belens* were recognized in a ceremony at the UA&P. The first prize (70,000) went to

the OAC Realty Bldg., the second prize (50,000) was won by Ortigas & Company, LP Bldg., and the third prize (30,000) was awarded to the Philippine Stock Exchange Centre.

Judges Fr. Roberto A. Latorre (university chaplain of the University of Asia and the Pacific), architect Restituto T. Sistoso, Jr. (Barangay councilor of Barangay San Antonio, Pasig City and co-chairperson of the Infrastructure Committee), and Noel T. Rivera (executive director of the Pasig City Museum) chose the winners based on their creativity, craftsmanship, visual impact and their relevance to the theme.

THE *BELENISTAS*

Although not competing, the UA&P set up its own *belen* at the university's Sancta Maria Stella Orientis chapel, a sight that the entire school anticipates every year.

The current *belen* shows the Virgin Mary lying down with the infant Jesus at her side. “It seems like the birth had just happened,” said Maria Mercedes Robles, UA&P’s managing director for corporate communications. Two angels descending from heaven each hold a jug of water and a piece of cloth. “They are ready for the baby’s first bath,” Ms. Robles said. “It [the scene] is so human. Nakakatuwa (It makes one smile).”

The school’s president, Dr. Jose Maria Mariano, supports this tradition because he is a “*belenista*,” or a devotee of the *belen*. He was introduced to this devotion when he traveled to Spain. To this day, he still makes *belens*, and he led the committee that worked on the *belen* at the Stella Orientis.

“The university’s love for *belens*, as shown in Stella Orientis, overflowed

and infected barangay San Antonio,” Ms. Robles said.

She said the humble nativity scene reinforces good values, and this is another reason why it is so well-loved. “The act of worship is done in a kneeling position,” she explained. “This is not a stance of a proud person.” Thus she said that the *belen*’s scene, a savior being born in a manger, will remind everyone that the true spirit of Christmas lies in genuine moments of humility and grace.

The *belens* will stay up until the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, which marks the end of Christmas season, on Jan. 13.

The other competing *belens* are located at the Emerald Bldg., Jolibee Plaza, Parc Chateau Condominium, Ropali Plaza, and San Miguel Properties Centre. There are also two giant Christmas trees at the

intersection of Julia Vargas and ADB
Avenues.

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