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Chipping Away at Poverty: One Graduate at a Time

Each year, Banilad School in the Philippines sees young girls leave its halls, brimming with hope, looking forward to bringing a bright future to their families and to become valuable contributors to the food, hotel, and restaurant service sectors.

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CEBU CITY — “Cebu, the richest province with many poor people”, read an attention-grabbing title of a January 2022 article in *The Freeman*, a newspaper here.

While being a major contributor to the national economy, the province suffers from above-average poverty incidence, according to latest available data from the Philippine Statistics Authority. The problem is expected to persist as Cebu continues to reel from the double whammy of the pandemic and Typhoon Rai (locally known as Odette) that ravaged central Visayas in December 2021.

35 years ago, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, then Prelate of Opus Dei, met with businessmen and families here in Cebu and had a general audience at what was then the Cebu Plaza. Among a wide variety of topics, he expressed the need to

address the stark gap between the poor and the rich.

That challenge gave birth five years later to Banilad Center for Professional Development (BCPD), which opened with a few tables and chairs for the first batch of 13 girls to be trained in hotel and restaurant industry services.

Fast forward to these times. Banilad is now a senior high school accredited by the Department of Education (DepEd) as well as a technical school accredited by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (Tesda). Last July 15, 2022, the school added 51 young ladies to its roster of more than 2,000 graduates since its inception.

In addition, last May, 81 young ladies completed the newest BCPD program: a one-year Food Service Technology course for out-of-school

youth, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

As one who has been with the school for a decade now, I have witnessed the joyful hope of hundreds donning their togas as they marked a new chapter in their lives.

But this year's graduates are a special breed. They persevered and completed their studies almost purely online. They hurdled the material and psychological challenges posed by the typhoon last December. This batch is the most battered and tested in the school's history. I am impressed at how the girls handled themselves to complete their courses with resilience, patience, and discipline.

We ourselves in the faculty, management, and staff, along with our stakeholders, faced heavy challenges. We had to innovate a lot

to navigate the changing educational landscape of the past two years.

In the end, the individual successes of our students are the greatest reward for our efforts.

SISTER ACT

One gem of this batch was Jhesele, who graduated senior high school with honors.

She narrates that her sister Julia's success was the key to her deciding to enlist in BCPD, given other alternatives. "My sister, Julia, graduated in 2016. She did her On-the-Job-Training (OJT) in Café George and was employed there immediately after graduation," she explained.

"Right now, she lives in Gold Coast, Australia. She is studying for Certificates 3 and 4 in Cookery and for an Advance Diploma in

Hospitality Management. She works as a *sous chef* at Galaxy Steak And Seafood Mediterranean Restaurant, which is how she finances her studies,” Jhesele proudly narrated.

“I can say that BCPD molded her into what she is today. The skills, knowledge, attitudes, OJT experience, and everything that the school offered opened doors for a bright future not only for her but for our entire family,” she shared.

Jheselle’s parents lost their means of livelihood during the pandemic. Her mother worked in a leather business while her father ran a tailoring shop. Julia is the one providing for their daily needs during these times.

“Everything she has done for us, all by herself, motivates me to strive to do my best every day. I studied very hard, no matter how difficult it was to do online classes,” Jhesele recalled. “During my OJT, I was tested to the

limit. I had to stay in a boarding house close to my place of work so that I could support myself with my allowance.”

Jheselle plans to gain some work experience before joining her sister in Australia after two years. “She invited me to go and join her, which is the best, for us to achieve our goals for our family,” Jheselle said. She dreams “of having our own house — no matter how small — for our parents and siblings.”

It is a dream I share with her, as her mentor.

FOREVER GRATEFUL

Justine took BCPD’s Hotel and Restaurant Services course to develop her passion for cooking and baking.

Her mother was reluctant to enrol her in Banilad until she learned

about a friend's daughter, a BCPD graduate, who is doing well working on a cruise ship. It helped further that, aside from the scholarships offered, the students were each provided a tablet for their online classes. These came with wifi load, all donated by the UK-based Wonder Foundation.

Justine earned a bronze medal upon graduation. She dedicates her award to her “mothers.” “My deepest gratitude definitely goes to my mother, my lola, and my aunt who supported me all the way, since childhood. I know and see all your hard work. This is for you,” she said at her graduation.

“I am sincerely thankful to all the members of the BCPD family — management, the staff, our hardworking teachers, the generous sponsors, my mentor, my friends and classmates — thank you very much

for the full and sincere support through my journey,” she said. “BCPD is not just a school. BCPD feels like home.”

“I always keep in mind that character and personality are the two greatest assets one needs, not only for the industry but for life as a whole.” Justine is convinced that “without values, we will not get anywhere.”

“Besides, we represent the school,” she said. “We must live the values that our family and school have endeavored to inculcate in us.”

Justine shared that beyond intellectual development and the inculcation of virtues, spiritual formation is one of BCPD’s lasting legacies for its graduates. “I overthink; I tend to magnify problems. I entertain all the ‘negatives.’ But I learned to pray, to trust God,” she shared. “One of my most treasured moments was the

retreat that we had before graduation.”

Having learned to put aside the “negatives,” graduation for her is now just the beginning. “Papunta pa lang tayo sa mas-exciting na part! (We are just about to embark on the more exciting part of our lives!)

THE LAST CARD

This year saw another breed of promising students from the newest BCPD program: a one-year Food Service Technology course for out-of-school girls in Cebu City, which was funded by the USAID.

Trisha Jane was abandoned by her parents as a baby and grew up with relatives. She saw in the story of Cinderella her own struggles. “My aunt provided for my basic needs – shelter, food, clothes, and schooling. In return, I did the house work.”

She dreams of someday “building a small house that I can call my own. I know that, God will answer my prayer and that I will have a stable job.”

Growing up, she envied her classmates who had time to play and join school activities. On the other hand, she focused on house work and her studies. She got good grades in her elementary and high school years. She could not continue beyond senior high school though “because my aunt couldn’t provide for my tuition.”

The pandemic years brought financial distress to her aunt. Trisha sold whatever she could to help make ends meet.

She was out of school for two years. “I wanted to continue my studies and I looked for a school that offered scholarships,” Trisha narrated. She searched online and found BCPD’s

Facebook page. She applied for the BCPD scholarship, telling herself that this could very well be her last card.

“I prayed hard for the scholarship. I passed the entrance exam and the interview,” she recalled. The scholarship and her allowance from the program brought so much relief from “the daily worry of how to provide for my basic needs.”

She was determined to finish the course, hurdling the challenges brought about by online learning and the typhoon that downed infrastructure in Cebu. She had to find locations with acceptable Wi-Fi connection — on rooftops of neighbors’ shanties, near commercial establishments, the barangay hall, etc.

Trisha Jane is one of the 81 pioneer out-of-school youth scholars who completed the brand new Food Service Technology course. She now

works in Anjo World Theme Park, which is where she did her internship.

She looks forward to eventually having that dream house which she wishes to share with her parents.

“My mother never looked for me. I wish that, one day, she would come, even just for a short time.”

CHIPPING AWAY AT POVERTY ONE GRADUATE AT A TIME

Each year, BCPD sees young girls, brimming with joy, leave its halls with the knowledge, skills and virtues that turn them into the hope of their families and valuable contributors to the service sector — the biggest sectoral driver of the national economy.

The various crises in these past years have made this 2022 graduation truly remarkable. Up to the last moment, we were looking for sponsors for

some who could not afford the rental for their toga or paying for their graduation picture. Each BCPD graduation is a collection of dramatic milestones achieved in the lives of the individuals concerned.

Economists, as well as top government and business leaders have said that, after the past two years, there is nowhere else for the country to go but up.

Each and every girl who completes BCPD's programs personifies that hope.

Sarah Josefa M. Laragan

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