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City Jail Visit: “Be Joyful, Positive, and Grateful”

Girls of Linang Center gained valuable life insights from their first ever outreach work of visiting the imprisoned.

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The thought of visiting prisoners came up early last year (2022) in our conversations at Linang Center. We were eager to embark on such an outreach activity, but the pandemic

restrictions at that time did not allow it.

In November, Peggy from Macau, one of our guests at Linang, mentioned that her sister had been regularly visiting the San Juan City Jail. She suggested that we look up the place, which is relatively nearby.

We immediately paid a visit. The jail inspector was not around at that time and we left her a letter asking if our group could have an outreach activity there. The request was quickly approved and the date set was December 10. There were conditions to be met. They would allow face-to-face visits to forty-six (46) inmates, but a maximum of only 6 volunteers would be given entry. All volunteers must test negative for Covid-19. For security purposes, cellphones will not be allowed inside the facility.

We spent our evening get-togethers in Linang brainstorming what interesting activities we could organize and what goodies to bring. Each asked relatives and friends for donations. Gina contacted the Philippine Food Bank, a project initiated by Ayie. Ayie gave 100 packs of assorted bread and pastries!

We decided that we would provide each inmate a month's supply of toiletries. Anna and Diana volunteered to buy the toiletries. The personal baskets included a bar of bath soap, a bottle of shampoo, a pack of sanitary pads, a deodorant, a toothpaste and a toothbrush. Francine took care of the ribbons around the baskets to give them a Christmas touch.

December 10. Three hours before the appointed time, our ad hoc food committee started preparing the food for the prisoners. Time flew so fast

and we had to rush to reach the city jail in time. At the parking lot, we used the Covid-19 antigen testing kits. We asked God, “Please, make all our results negative,” and He granted our wish!

We unloaded the food and goodies from the car and started bringing them up to the eighth floor where the female dormitory for inmates was located. We were panting and gasping for breath upon reaching the dorm gate. The officers were quick to be of assistance, bringing up the rest of the goodies from the car. Six inmates were asked to help bring up everything. We were impressed by their endurance to carry heavy things and climb the flights of stairs.

The officer-in-charge welcomed us. We showed the results of our antigen test, surrendered our cellphones, and logged in our names.

It was the first time for us to visit a prison. We were scared and imagined that the prisoners would be unruly, unkempt and undernourished. But to our surprise, they were quite the opposite of our expectations. We met prisoners who were practicing dance steps. Each was wearing a yellow shirt, brown jogging pants, and a Santa hat. Their faces glowed with smiles. Most of them were, I would say, quite healthy. They greeted us “Good morning, and Merry Christmas”, as they continued dancing. There was a Christmas atmosphere around, as if you were in a normal party venue. We immediately felt at home and at ease. It was like a family gathering where everyone was welcome.

Anna, one of the volunteers, talked with the designated representative of the prisoners, who was delighted and touched by the kind gesture of people who wanted to visit and spend time

with them. *“Your visit gave us a lot of hope. We have been deprived of visitors for almost two years now due to the pandemic. Even then, this pandemic was time well-spent for us,”* she said. She explained that they were able to attend ALS (Alternative Learning System) classes offered by the De La Salle University every day as part of the school’s charity work. And because of those classes, many of them will soon be graduating from Grade 12.

We began our program. Anna led the prayers, thanking God for the opportunity and privilege to visit them and to share the blessings that our donors wished to give to them.

After the introductions, we asked them to form 4 groups and prepare for the first game - “Paint Me A Picture.” The game was new to most of them, but their creativity and teamwork were impressive! They

‘painted’ the caroling scene, classroom scene, jeepney scene, and Nativity scene so well! The second game was to say, “Merry Christmas” with the longest sustained breath. The third game was the tongue twister, “Pasko, Paksiw.” They had great fun.

It was their turn to present. We were moved to see their eyes sparkle as they rendered various numbers. They danced gracefully and sang beautifully. Everyone participated, including three inmates who were on the family way! When they reached the part of a Christmas song which talked about being together with their loved ones on Christmas Day, many of them shed tears of longing and hope.

For the finale, they asked us to join the dance "Gloria in Excelsis Deo". As a tribute to them, Anna recited a

poem entitled, "Ina". We again saw them cry.

There was more. Their spokesperson explained that we would not be going home without receiving gifts from them. Each one of us was asked to choose one of several colored papers that were pasted on the wall. We were to flip the paper to reveal what we and our families would receive. One by one we went to flip our chosen paper, and to our surprise, we received "Beauty, Honesty, Freedom, Love, and Peace."

What followed was an exchange of "Thank you's". On behalf of the volunteers, Anna expressed gratitude for the wonderful presentations and the well-wishes for us and our families. The inmates' representative on her part expressed heartfelt gratitude for our time and the material blessings shared with them. One who was in prison for 11 years

assured us that we would be included in her prayers. We were moved seeing the effects of our small efforts to give them comfort and cheer. In exchange, they gave us joy, love and peace a hundred times over.

The ladies waited patiently in their seats as we distributed our Christmas gift packs --- their toiletries, plus their lunch, and the assorted bread and pastries from the Food Bank. We sensed their concern for one another as we saw them share the various types of bread with different flavors. One got chicken bread and shared it with one who got pork bread, and vice-versa. Another requested for non-pork bread for one who is a Muslim. Still another asked for a lunch meal and a basket of toiletries for one who was not feeling well and unable to join the meals. We truly felt the Christmas spirit in the prison, and we learned about service, caring, and sharing.

This outreach activity was an unforgettable experience and it left a deep mark on each one of us. Even in their seclusion, with difficulties, fears, and worries, we saw how the prisoners fostered in themselves a happy heart, an optimistic outlook, and a sense of gratitude. This was my most valuable take away from them, which I would like to call their BE-attitude. They wanted to BE joyful, BE positive, and BE grateful!

We gained from them valuable life lessons: the resolve to persist through challenges, the ability to maintain serenity, and the resourcefulness to make the most of whatever one has in life.

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