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Farmers' friend

Jeff Barreiro, a member of Opus Dei, founded the Philippine agritech startup "Mayani" in 2019 to help address poverty and hunger in the agriculture sector and to possibly ignite economic progress in the countryside.

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Feature by Leah C. Salterio

This economics graduate could not understand why those who supplied food for the Philippines were often left hungry and deprived. To respond to this longstanding problem, he launched an initiative aimed at marketing farm produce more efficiently and justly.

He lost no time in realizing his advocacy. In May 2019, he launched mayani.ph. “Mayani,” is a play on words that means “may ani” or “there is harvest” or “my ani” or “my harvest.” Its goal: to remove from farmers the burden of marketing their crops, to help bring their produce to the marketplace and to allow them earn a just income.

The initiative may still be in the beginning stage, but Jeff is confident that it is headed in the right direction. “Smallholders, who have partnered with Mayani have seen

their income rise,” he says. “They are no longer constantly on the losing end with heartless or heartbreaking price negotiations. With a steady market for their harvest, there are times when Mayani has to even deal with [positive] problems like oversupply.”

Various levels of lockdowns in the country do not also seem to have stymied Mayani’s efforts, according to Jeff. At present, the toughest challenge is to maximise any gains achieved under the difficult circumstances.

In the long run, a noticeable change in the farm-to-marketing dynamics will have to take place. Says Jeff: “If we truly want to disrupt the agri-food supply chain landscape, [we need to] tilt it to be more in favor of the farmers and our countryside, and turn this into the new, post-pandemic normal of prosperity. Now is the

ideal time to scale on all fronts. This is a tough challenge, a big one, a serious one, but an exciting one, too.”

He cites what is needed: “Farmers need to reach more customers in more cities. We need swift, safe payment methods. There must be unimpeded transport of goods from the provinces into the cities. But can our technology handle the volume and the complexities of our transactions?”

“We need more physical space, additional manpower and fleet expansion. Everything is just crazy. It can be really tiring, but paradoxically, also energizing.”

The quarantine may have prevented Jeff from engaging physically with his rural constituency, but he remains upbeat. “The ability of Mayani to get more and more farmer-partners onboard remains unhampered,” he says. “More people

just need to be aware of this direct connection Mayani has with them.”

Jeff obtained his bachelor of science economics degree from the University of the Philippines Diliman. “I was unsure what to do after college, so I wouldn’t really say I set out to pursue something from the get-go,” he says. “But do I now have the job I really want? Absolutely. I’ve set out on the path of entrepreneurship and so far, it has been a wonderful and fulfilling ride.”

Before the ECQ (enhanced community quarantine), Jeff traveled regularly to Jakarta, Indonesia, overseeing some business initiatives and helping lay the groundwork for parenting and family-oriented workshops. “We would also visit Hong Kong regularly for my other business concerns,” he adds.

To center himself, he sets aside time daily for prayer and reflection.

“Nailing down these two things helps working out details of my daily life.”

Jeff has been married to Joy Magalona for 25 years now. They have five kids, three boys and two girls. He is the seventh of eight children of the late broadcast executive and Original Pilipino Music (OPM) promoter Tony Barreiro. His mom Zeny Villar Barreiro, 88, is a law school graduate, “who decided to dedicate her life raising a large family,” Jeff says.

Asked to recall a memorable mentor, Jeff immediately names his dad, who treated people, no matter what station in life, equally warmly and with the “same big smiles. He says: “It didn’t matter if you were poor or wealthy, you were a person whom he valued and vowed to treat well.”

A sentiment that Jeff, through mayani.ph, certainly applies to Filipino farmers, whom he believes

feed the nation with unstinting labor
and industry.

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