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Hope springs eternal for poor Laguna village

By Meldy Pelejo. POVERTY is an overwhelming problem. But a simple solution is proposed by economist Cielito Habito - for every "non-poor" family to adopt a poor family...

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- for every "non-poor" family to adopt a poor family.

Mian Wright Añover not only adopted a family; she adopted a whole community.

Her foray into community work at Sitio Rustan, Barrio Langgam, a strip of land at the far end of San Pedro, started when the husband of Yolita Tilad or Yaya Lita, the family's nanny, died in May 2002. When she went to the funeral, Añover saw how poor Yaya Lita and her neighbors were.

Later that year, October 2002, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei, was canonized, and Añover, a devotee, begged the saint for an answer on how to help Sitio Rustan.

She then learned that a house in the barrio was up for sale. She bought the unfinished house and converted it into a playhouse. Later, mothers who regularly brought their kids to

the playhouse convinced her to make it into a daycare center.

With help from relatives and friends, the St. Josemaria DayCare Center was constructed. Classes opened on July 3, 2003 with 35 enrollees.

Slowly, Añover got acquainted with the families of the barrio. Quite a number were common-law couples and needed to be married. Most of the 125 families there lived by scavenging. One of them, Mang Conrad, was nearly gunned down by a scavenging syndicate armed with armalites because of the competition. The families barely managed to keep body and soul together. Most professed to be impervious to religion because of pressures to earn a living.

But Añover organized a weekly Bible class for the men and catechism of the women. Not much later, the couples who were not yet married in

Church agreed to receive the sacrament. In 2003, some 20 children were baptized.

The parish priest was happy and started to celebrate Sunday Mass every weekend in the barrio.

Small businesses

Añoover also helped the people become economically viable. A friend referred her to a non-governmental organization called Development Advocacy for Women Volunteerism (DAWV). Staff from DAWV surveyed the community to see the feasibility of setting up a micro-lending scheme to help the residents in putting up small businesses.

DAWV's initiative called "Puso at Piso" ("Heart and Peso") involved saving as low as P20. After a period, members could loan twice of what they had saved. Sitio Rustan

residents who wanted to be part of the program went through an orientation seminar. Only then did Puso at Piso finally start in Sitio Rustan.

Añoover beamed with pride as she explained how their starting fund of P10,000 had grown to P26,000 in two years.

However, as she later discovered, raising capital is just one aspect of the problem. Finding alternative livelihood is another.

"We went into rag making but we could not continue," she said. "We couldn't afford the high-speed sewing machines. We have a detergent making business... (which) we're hoping someone could help us market. We help them also go into mushroom production."

Mang Conrado was one of those who tried mushroom growing together

with Yaya Lita, his next-door neighbor in Sitio Rustan. Housing the seedlings provided by the Añover couple in a small shack at the side of their house, he successfully cultivated and harvested mushrooms.

Añover said the success of the business should show that the poor want to help themselves. "The poor do not want to remain poor. Given the opportunity, they will try their best," Añover said.

Thirty-nine-year-old Dolores Barcoma, who lost her first husband, has been living in Sitio Rustan since 1994. She has six children with Jimmy, a jeepney driver, and four from her previous marriage. She had put up a small beauty parlor before, but closed it down because of lack of clientele.

So, with Añover's support, Dolores took up a three-month cosmetology

course at the Technical Educational Services Development Authority. Once she completed it, she started offering cosmetic services to Añover and her friends. Now, she has a growing base of clients-including balikbayan relatives of her clientele-in Alabang Hillsborough for foot spa, pedicure and manicure.

Añover, together with her husband, lawyer Gig Añover, knew they could not improve the lives of Sitio Rustan's residents on their own. Thankfully, the daycare center they put up has spawned other projects-unexpected and unimagined-and has attracted volunteers from as far as Australia and New Zealand.

During their visit to Sitio Rustan, DAWV found that the place was also an ideal site for an international Work Camp. But the place needed a multipurpose hall.

In January 2004, six months after setting up the daycare center, 24 women volunteers from Australia and New Zealand made up of young professionals, high school and university students arrived for DAWV's Work Camp.

With funds they raised personally and the other half provided by Gig Añover, the volunteers started building the hall.

For three weeks, the volunteers mixed cement and worked manually on the hall's construction in the morning. In the afternoon, they taught catechism and played with the children and gave livelihood and nutrition classes to the mothers.

In March 2004, 24 high school girls from the Narra Club in Las Piñas also held their rural service Project in Bo. Langgam. They finished the painting of the multipurpose hall and also

gave classes to the women and children.

In March 30, 2004, the hall was blessed and was fittingly named Philippine-Australia-New Zealand Friendship Hall or PAN-Z Hall in short.

Since then, PAN-Z Hall has been the venue of all the Masses, catechism classes, medical missions and other outreach activities organized by friends and by other groups volunteering to help the people of Sitio Rustan.

Family affair

Añoover's eldest daughter, Tipin, later organized a music appreciation activity for the kids and parents. She lectured on the violin, flute and guitar. She brought there guest artists such as my niece and her classmate from St. Scholastica. She organized a raffle whose proceeds

were used to buy a water dispenser for the daycare center as well as several storybooks and educational posters for the classroom.

Añoover's eldest son, Paul, has also brought a number of his schoolmates to the barrio to help in the activities.

"Friends who see that you are serious with your project do not hesitate to extend whatever help they can give," Añoover said. "My personal dentist from the Abesamis Dental Clinic together with her fellow dentists has visited (the community) three times already. They brought their own supplies."

Members of the Little Girls Club in Ayala Alabang organized by Milet Lorenzo and Sally Naval visited the children of Bo. Langgam last December. They held a storytelling activity and gave the kids schoolbags and toys.

Friends of her friends would pass on her plea for more support. Such was the case of Vicky Wienecke who heard about Mian's initiatives from a friend. It was Vicky who organized the first six-month full-feeding program for the barrio children to address the malnutrition problem there with the support of Asian Development Bank, Living Light Community, Kabisig ng Kalahi and Mead Johnson.

Dr. Lea Umil heard about Añover's initiative through Narra Club. With her fellow doctors, she arranged several medical missions in the community.

Dr. Umil also introduced Dr. Mila Olivarez-Bolivarey of MOB Foundation to the community in November 2004. Dr. Olivarez was so moved she decided straight away to adopt Sitio Rustan as one of MOB Foundation's beneficiary

communities. Medical-dental missions will be held every quarter. Moreover, MOB will sponsor the second feeding program for Sitio Rustan's children, which will run from February to July this year.

Now, Yaya Lita is retired and runs her own sari-sari store which she set up using the retirement gift of P3,000 she received from the Añovers.

Mang Conrado continues to ply his kariton every day looking for junk and selling them to earn money. He hopes to be able to save enough to buy seedlings to grow mushrooms again with Yaya Lita. Despite the difficulties, he remains hopeful.

Aling Dolores looks forward to her wedding day with partner Jimmy once their papers are put in order. She hopes that Jimmy would one day have a permanent job. She, too, dreams of seeing all her 10 children finish school.

The efforts of Añover, a Bacolod native of British descent, to help a family and its community show how collectively the Filipinos can pull our needy fellowmen out of the cycle of poverty. If every "non-poor" Filipino family adopts a poor family, this country may yet eradicate poverty before 2015. Like Añover, you can begin with those who live nearby or work for you. Start simply, pray a lot and help others.

By Meldy Pelejo. Published in "Philippine Daily Inquirer" (13 February 2005)

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