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Of a small school, big hearts, and their massive twitter campaign

While the heavy rains ravaged Manila and nearby provinces in early August, around 2,000 students from the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) used their twitter accounts to call for help in their relief operations for the flood victims.

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MANILA, Philippines—While the heavy rains ravaged Manila and nearby provinces throughout the week, around 2,000 students from the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) decided to vent their rage by flooding the social microblogging site Twitter.

The “dragons,” as they call themselves, rivaled the downpour as they used their twitter accounts @uapasia , @uapalumni , @CAS_SEB , and hashtag #UNITAS to call for donations, nag companies and organizations, and reach out to volunteers and rescue teams for help in their relief operations.

One tweet from the @uapalumni account on Tuesday said “UA&P volunteers are in dire need of an SUV, truck, or a boat for relief goods deployment today. Please contact 09175598862.

Thank you!” and another from @uapasia account on Wednesday said “Urgent needs: Volunteers, sando bags, juice(tetra packs), toiletries (sulit packs including sanitary napkins) bottled water. Please contact companies or donate what you can.”

It was not the fact that the feat gave the school a first-time record of making it to the top of the nationwide Twitter trending topics mid-day of August 8, even landing a spot on the worldwide list of trending topics. It was the fact that the campaign was able to mobilize more than 600 volunteers from different schools and organizations, garner hundreds of donations in kind and cash from big time companies, and send more than 10,000 relief packages in heavily affected areas.

Campaign turns school to major relief center

Antony Lumicao, Internal Vice President of the school's student council, and Irish Maligat, External Vice President, both shared how their UA&P HOPES disaster relief campaign turned their school into a major relief center.

Volunteers – students from UA&P, University of Santo Tomas, De La Salle University, University of the Philippines, alumni of UA&P, teachers, employees, – were busy starting Tuesday as different teams manned their stations. Teams were assigned to receive donations, create inventories, sort the goods and then give them to another set of teams for packing and distribution.

The school's classrooms were designated as “packing areas” where the volunteers, about 20 to 30 in each classroom, packed food, medicines,

clothes, toiletries, and other necessities. One classroom bore the sign “Rice Storage Area.”

“We were targeting 5,000 relief packages [Wednesday] and we were able to reach more than 4,700 so today we’re targeting 5,000 again,” Maligat said in an interview during the conduct of the relief operations at the school Thursday.

Donations came from big companies, as the privileged students of UA&P utilized their contacts to encourage the companies they were affiliated with to reach out.

“We had a soft start but it really went into full swing Wednesday because a lot of donations came starting in the morning. They gave us clothes, ready-to-eat foods, and water. Through twitter and the connections of UA&P students, we were able to get the things we needed,” Lumicao said in a separate interview.

“For example, we have a student here whose family owns Ligo Sardines so they donated 5,000 canned goods from Ligo. We tried our best to utilize all resources and thankfully, they came,” Maligat shared.

One of the teams’ stations was called the “Social Media Station,” where students armed with laptops tweeted non-stop on the real-time updates on the needed relief goods.

Maligat shared that they used their gym for the “Kitchen Station,” where the volunteers cooked food for volunteers who were deployed to donate the goods to the flooded areas, the rescue teams that came to help, and people in evacuation centers.

Maligat also said that because they were trending, a lot of people contacted them for help and donations. She shared how a

councilor from Paranaque and her team came Wednesday asking for whatever donations they could be given. She said the school gave them 500 relief packages.

Rescue operations, deployment to affected areas

The students also used twitter to send messages about “missing classmates” and tracked down members of the UA&P community who needed rescue. They made a separate document in Google Docs containing information on the names, statuses, addresses, and contacts of those who needed help.

“We tweeted the MMDA and Red Cross to reach them and we also contacted rescue teams,” Regina Capulong, a 4th year Humanities student of UA&P and member of the “Social Media Team,” said.

Daryll Patco, a junior student of UA&P, shared how twitter helped in spreading information about the need for him and his family to be rescued after they were trapped in their one story house in Marietta-Romeo village in Barangay (village) Sta. Lucia in Pasig City.

He shared that the heavy rains on Tuesday caused him and his family to panic and that when floods rushed into their house, they started to climb up the roof. He said his friend from UA&P contacted him asking if he needed to be evacuated.

“I was still able to contact people and was able to post tweets through text last Wednesday, so when somebody said tweet your address that’s exactly what I did. So apparently my name was trending and luckily my call was prioritized as we did not have enough supplies to last us another day,” Patco said.

Students used the hashtag #Patco to disseminate information about the need for Patco and his family's rescue.

Patco shared that rescuers from the Pasig Rescue Team, who were reached by UA&P, finally came to their aid and transported them from the roof of their house to a 10-wheeler truck through a rubber boat. The 10-wheeler truck was not able to enter the village because the floods were too high.

Patco came back at the UA&P Thursday morning to help in the relief operations. "It's my way of giving back to the University who helped me a lot through social media," Patco said.

Students with the resources also lent their trucks and vehicles to help in delivering goods to heavily affected areas. Students and rescue teams were deployed to deliver goods to

evacuation centers in Pasig, Rizal, Marikina, Quezon City, Bataan, Laguna, and Bulacan.

Mark Villaluz, a high school professor, and Alfred Santos, a businessman – both alumni of the UA&P, shared how the networks of the students were able to reach the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP).

“At around 7 p.m. Wednesday, the PNP sent one huge six wheeler truck and we used it to deliver 450 packs of goods to a community in Cainta, Rizal,” Santos said.

Santos said that representatives from the PNP stayed to help them out with relief operations in other areas throughout the night. Santos said they pushed through with the operations even though it was raining severely in some of the areas

so that they could reach the communities.

Santos said that the amount of help that came was overwhelming, considering that the school was very small with barely a population of 2,000.

“This is really overwhelming because this is a small school but then we really tried to reach out and we felt energized; it was really worth it,” he said. He added that it was really heart-warming that other bigger colleges and universities that have bigger networks recognized the school volunteers’ efforts.

“It’s not about bragging rights, there’s no distinctions anymore because what’s at stake here are the affected Filipinos,” Santos added.

He added that they were really surprised about the university trending in twitter but that it was

good that other contacts were retweeting the UA&P's tweets for help.

Dragons meet the Dragons: PH Dragon Boat team rows to the rescue

It was also through the popular social networking site Twitter that members of the Philippine Dragon Boat Team were able to reach UA&P's relief drive.

“I was actually checking the trending topics on twitter because the dragon boat paddlers seriously wanted to help the flood victims. I saw that UA&P was trending and that they needed volunteers and paddlers,” Kurt Urbanozo, a Dragon boat paddler, said in a phone interview Thursday night.

Urbanozo said that it was impossible for them to bring in their dragon boats because they did not have

enough resources, but that they assured the UA&P community that they could provide the necessary manpower that was needed.

Urbanozo and 14 other paddlers from the Philippine Dragon Boat Federation came to help Wednesday night.

Initially, the team was supposed to be utilized for the rescue of Patco but they were earlier told that Patco was already safe. They were instead deployed with Villanuza, Santos, and some UA&P students to Cainta, Rizal and delivered around 400 packages of relief goods there.

At around 11 p.m., they were also asked to help deliver about 500 packs of goods and 300 clothes to affected families in Nangka, Marikina. They finished operations at around 4 a.m. Thursday.

While the rains battered Manila, Urbanozo said he recalled how,

during exactly the same week last year, their team was able to win the country five gold medals at the 10th International World Championships held in Tampa Bay, Florida. He said that it was hard for them then because they had scarce resources but that they were able to push through with the help from the Filipino people.

“The nation cheered and helped us win last year. This time, the paddlers of the federation are so willing to give it back and pay it forward in whatever ways we can,” he said.

Nangka Elementary School in Marikina

On Thursday morning, 23 student volunteers from the university were deployed to Nangka Elementary School in Marikina, where they gave out 400 relief packages to more than 100 families.

Willy Rosales, secretary of Barangay Nangka, said that around 1,400 families or 8,000 persons were evacuated to the Nangka Elementary school because of the floods.

The families were crammed in classrooms, and were all very eager to get donations from the different organizations extending their help.

“The city government is trying to do our best but we lack resources in terms of the necessary equipment to rescue or to save people,” he said.

He said they tried their best to convince people to evacuate as early as Monday night because the water level of the Nangka river rose up to 20 meters, the level for forced evacuation.

He said some families chose to stay and not leave their homes early.

“Others had the other members evacuate while their husbands stay

at their houses and then the following morning we would get pleas from their wives asking for rescue,” he said.

Rosales said he hoped that the NOAH project of the Department of Science and Technology would be fully operational by the next year so that they could have a better warning system for Marikina residents.

Rosales lauded the student volunteers for their efforts, and helped in fixing the system for the distribution.

Though they had spent the whole day at the university packing goods, the students did not lose energy and kept firm in their desire to help with the distribution. The operations in Marikina ended at about 9 p.m.

Lessons learned

Alex Gutierrez, a second year student of UA&P and team leader for the batch who was deployed to Nangka in Marikina, said that she learned the value of unity.

“Instead of just staying at home and bum around, we chose to help because it’s our way of giving back kasi we’re lucky enough to be in a situation na safe kami at walang nangyari,” Gutierrez said.

Capulong, for her part, said that in times like these, there was really no excuse to help and that no help was too small.

“This was the first time that we engaged in a campaign like this and we’re so overwhelmed by the help we’re getting because yun nga we’re so small, our network is not very huge, but thankfully through everyone’s efforts we were able to manage,” Capulong said.

Anna Michelle Allarde, Civic Desk Head of the Center for Student Affairs of the University who was one of the primary point persons for the task, said she was shocked by the response from students and that she was glad that they were able to see their small school in a different light.

“There’s hope. Sometimes we think that the young people can be too self-absorbed already but then they do manage to rise up to the occasion and then they amaze you,” Allarde said.

Fat Reyes // Philippine Daily Inquirer