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Punlaan School: A pioneer takes stock for the future

Anne Marie Jacinto, School Director of Punlaan School, retired from her work in September 2022. In this interview, she looks back at her 30 years in the school.

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Like some great ideas worldwide that began from within a humble garage, a project that was conceptualized and started operations with just a

few pioneers in Metro Manila more than 40 years ago continues to open doors to economic opportunities for young women as a way of lifting more Filipinos out of poverty.

How were you first introduced to Punlaan, and what inspired you to continue working there all these years?

My early involvement was in the 1970s when Punlaan was a fledgling project of a group of housewives in the garage of the Mayana Center, in New Manila, Quezon City. My mother was teaching English there to a group of household helpers. When she was not available, she would ask me to substitute for her.

I knew that Punlaan was special since it was inspired by St Josemaria Escriva's vision on women empowerment and poverty alleviation. He valued the role of

women in society. He knew about the school and prayed for it.

Punlaan may have been the first school for domestic helpers in the country in the 1970s. The women were trained in the Home Arts: Cooking, Baking, Housekeeping, Dining Service Laundry, English and Values; and their employers were delighted with the skills and values training they acquired.

I never thought that I would end up working there for 30 years. It has been a privilege, an honor and a job which I grew to love!

Can you describe the journey from substitute English teacher to school directress?

My formal engagement began in 1992 when the Foundation for Professional Training Inc. (FPTI) commissioned me to write a Values Manual for their project: Punlaan

School. I had a Masters degree in Liberal Arts major in Education from the University of Navarre (Spain) and was then teaching part time at the Center for Research and Communication (CRC). I completed the Values Manual in 1994 and that year FPTI hired me as Corporate Affairs Director of Punlaan. Punlaan has been my life since then. I served as the School Director from 2009-2022.

From Quezon City, Punlaan moved to its permanent site on M. Paterno Street, San Juan City in 1975. The place was a two-storey wooden structure, which was formerly a maternity clinic.

When I joined Punlaan in 1994, it had just adopted the German model of Dual Training, which became a game changer for the school.

In partnership with a German foundation and under the helm of

then Executive Director, Mrs. Luz M. Filmer, Punlaan successfully transformed its Technical Course in Home Arts into the Dual Training Program in Food and Beverage Services for the hotel, restaurant and tourism industry, while maintaining the original program for household helpers.

In what way was the Dual Training Program a game changer?

The Dual Training Program gained for Punlaan the prestige of providing the hotel and restaurant industry with qualified workers. It opened doors for Punlaan graduates to be employed in top hotels and restaurants, cruise liners and resorts, both locally and abroad.

Dual Training is a proven technology, which integrates two venues of learning: theoretical classes, skills training and character/values

formation in school; and on-the-job training in a hotel or restaurant.

Our graduates are multi-skilled and may be assigned as assistants and staff in Kitchen, Dining, Reception, Rooms and Housekeeping and other Guest-related operations.

They may also work in areas of specialization such as Bar, Banquet, Catering, Hot and Cold Kitchen, Cake Decoration, Purchasing Office, Executive Chef Office, Sales staff, Spa, and Gym operations.

A large number of Punlaan graduates have gone up the career ladder as Food and Beverage supervisors, Managers, Sous chefs, Chefs de Partie, both locally and abroad.

What is the general social profile of students who apply to study in Punlaan?

Applicants are 18 to 23 years old, coming from all over the Philippines. Majority are from Metro Manila – daughters of seasonal workers such as drivers, carpenters, laborers, as well as unemployed parents. Those from the rural areas are daughters of farmers, fishermen and contractual workers.

I recall that there was an applicant who did not even have a decent dress to come to Punlaan for her interview. She had to borrow one from her neighbor. She is now a pastry chef in a five star hotel, owns a house, as well as a condominium where she lives with her family. Multiply this story by the 2000-plus graduates from the start of the Dual Training program.

Where do the students have their on-the-job training?

Punlaan has around 30 active industry partners where our

students do 7 months of internship, which is part of the dual training program. Exposure to actual work in restaurants, hotels, kitchens, and such operations gives the students the discipline and rigorous training as well as the soft skills needed for their future work.

Feedback from our industry partners is flattering. They say that the girls exhibit high motivation, flexibility, commitment and dedication. These are the qualities that lead to their being employed immediately after graduation.

How do you finance the operations?

Tuition of the students is financed by donations from the hotel and restaurant industry partners, corporate sponsors, foundations and individual donors,

We also get funding from the government sector in the form of TESDA scholarships. Students pay a minimal miscellaneous fee of P6,000 per year as their counterpart.

It was an honor to receive last October 2022 from the Hilton Global Foundation and the Hyatt Community Grants financial support for Punlaan students' scholarships.

What motivates donors and benefactors?

I think that benefactors and partner companies see our program as effectively addressing the precise social needs of the country, which I can identify as follows:

1) poverty alleviation through immediate employment upon graduation in a top hotel or restaurant;

2) providing industry with world-class skilled manpower;

3) upgrading the moral fiber of society through workers with moral values;

4) women development.

Benefactors are proud to see their Punlaan scholars - in less than two years - transformed into job-ready professionals, employed and enjoying a better life. They get to witness firsthand the breaking of a cycle of poverty.

One of our graduates, based in London with her family, is now the HR Manager of a deluxe chain of hotels in Europe. One can imagine her hard work, drive and motivation to reach this far. What is beautiful is that after almost 20 years, she is still good friends and in touch with her mentor at Punlaan.

You recently completed the construction of a 7-storey Punlaan building. What were the challenges in putting it up?

First was the design, which took around 5 years to finalize with the architects and engineers, after consolidating all the ideas to maximize space utilization for school operations.

Financing was the biggest challenge. The building was put up entirely from donations. The Punlaan Development Board had been fundraising for the last 10 years.

For me, this is a miracle of St Josemaria. I am inspired by the deep faith, creativity, courage and perseverance of the Development Board and the generosity of many volunteer ladies who were bent on completing the construction, against all odds and through the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

I admire their dedication for the Punlaan mission - to support young women who have less in life.

How do you see Punlaan in the next 30 years?

Punlaan will continue to be at the forefront of technological advancements in terms of providing theoretical knowledge and practical skills training for family and household services, the food and beverage industry, the hotel, restaurant and tourism industry, and other social sectors.

A new field of expansion, set to start in 2024, is skills training for the health care services sector.

There is a growing demand for short courses in culinary arts and skills, bread and pastry production, and other such competencies considered useful for starting and leveling up one's entrepreneurial projects. The

new facilities will serve to see a rapid expansion in this field.

As a technical institute, Punlaan will align itself with the ASEAN standards toward becoming a leading Dual Training System Technical Institute in Asia.

With the collaboration of our industry partners, government agencies, a growing network of socially-conscious groups and individuals, and our graduates themselves, I can see all these becoming reality in the near future.

Punlaan School is a project of the Foundation for Professional Training, Inc. (FPTI)

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