

Scholars with a heart: Paying it a little forward

Students of Banilad Center for Professional Development (BCPD) in Cebu, Philippines discover new horizons following a visit to the Home for the Aged to mark the start of Lent 2025.

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In order to begin Lent on the right note, the class of Grade 12 students of Banilad Center for Professional

Development (BCPD) made a trip on March 5, Ash Wednesday, to the Home for the Aged called “Gasa sa Gugma” (Gift of Love) in Cebu City (central Philippines), which is run by the Daughters of Charity.

The students are all scholars at Banilad, coming from families with limited financial means. In Banilad, they are trained to become competent professionals in the food service industry and acquire equally important soft skills, making them highly employable. Additionally, they are exposed to events that make them internalize the true meaning of service, e.g. outreach projects, feeding programs, medical missions.

Armed with cookery skills, talents and their desire to share the little that they have with the abandoned, lonely and vulnerable elderlies, they prepared dinner for the 80 residents of the Home for the Aged — showing

that one's own poverty is no excuse not to be generous. What they lacked in material possessions, they more than made up for with the richness of their kindness.

Making a difference

"I was inspired to help because I saw how some elderly people have no family to care for them. I wanted to share kindness by giving them food," said Debe Joyce, one of the students.

She felt both happy and sad during the visit — happy to see the elderly smile, but saddened by their loneliness. The experience reinforced in her an important lesson: "Giving time and love is just as important as giving food."

The students' initiative operationalized the words of St. Josemaría Escrivá: "Don't let your life be sterile. Be useful. Blaze a trail." These students did not wait for a

better time, more money, or perfect circumstances — they acted, making a huge difference despite limited resources.

Sacrifices made, lessons learned

For many of these students, sparing even a small amount was not easy.

"The challenge I faced while organizing was that I didn't have money to give for their food, vitamins, and necessities," Lyka admitted.

But instead of giving up, she worked extra hours during her on-the-job training to be able to contribute to her class's outreach activity.

"It was hard to raise enough money at first, but I overcame it by asking for help from my relatives and friends," said Shane, another student.

Amid the trials, they carried on because in their hearts they knew that it was going to be worth it.

Franz Cheska, who had always dreamed of helping others, saved every peso to be able to donate. “Seeing their smiles and hearing their laughs made my heart warm,” she recalled.

The students prepared songs that would resonate with the elderly. They also invited the “lolos and lolas” (grandfathers and grandmothers) to dance with them. It was a moment too happy to be forgotten not only because of the evident joy on everyone’s face but also the realization of the value of hidden sacrifice. Each one set aside personal comfort in order to provide for someone else’s needs, which in the end brought her a deep sense of joy.

The beauty of presence

More precious than the food, vitamins and toiletries they gave, the students discovered that their presence was what was most meaningful to the “lolas and lolas”.

“I felt happy but also sad,” shared Precious Grace. “Happy because I saw their smiles, but sad because some of them felt lonely. I wished I could visit them every day.”

Jennylyn was deeply moved by how much the elderly appreciated their visit: “I felt pure happiness because we were able to put smiles on their faces. But at the same time, I felt sorry for some of them because their families have neglected them.”

For these students, the visit was not just about giving — it was about being truly human. “Even tiny acts of kindness can be life-changing. Lending a hand to someone in need sparks a joy that is equally felt by the

person giving help and the person receiving it,” Grace said.

One of the lolas even begged the students not to leave, which was heartbreaking.

A promise

What was intended to be just a one-time-big-time effort turned into a commitment. Many of the students intend to continue visiting their “lolos and lolas” even after leaving BCPD. “I’ll visit and help the elderly every month. I’ll bring food and clothes, and I’ll also spend time with them,” Novie said.

Princess Honey said she hopes to encourage others: “I want to organize more visits and collect donations. Together, we can bring more love and joy to their lives.”

Through this act of Lenten sacrifice, the students discovered a profound

truth: generosity is not about how big you give but what you are willing to give. Their story is a testament to the power of empathy, proving that no matter what one's circumstances are, there is always something to share, be it food, talent, time, or simply love.

BCPD is a stand-alone senior high school that offers a technical-vocational track, as well as a Technical Education and Skills Development Authority-accredited institution that offers a Hotel and Restaurant Services course to young women. Located at the heart of Cebu City, the school responds to the clarion call from Blessed Alvaro del Portillo for his sons and daughters in the Philippines to provide livelihood training programs to address the widespread poverty, which he witnessed during his 1987 trip to the country.

BCPD in Cebu is one of the major fruits of that challenge accepted.

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