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Simplicity through the Lens of Aetas

“Being simple” is what a university professor learned in the last 4 years, as she continues to help aetas (indigenous people) in her province in Castillejos, Zambales (Philippines).

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“Chaos” was the word that described the world’s situation back in 2020. The economy was down. People lost their jobs. Businesses went bankrupt. All were affected. It was during this

time, locked down in her town in Zambales, that Veronica ‘Bett’ Esposito Ramirez noticed the plight of the *aetas* (indigenous people).

As she was walking past the public market one day, Bett noticed *aetas* trying to sell their meager produce. Selling goods in the public market was tough as there were many competitors. This got her thinking, “If I have difficulty securing food, how much more these people?” All of a sudden, a spark lit inside her.

Integral human development

She recalled a recent conference on the social doctrine of the Church at the University of Asia and the Pacific, where she is an associate professor. She was struck then by St. Pope Paul VI’s concept of “integral human development.”

“Inspired by this teaching on the dignity of each and every person and

the need to help each one live a meaningful and productive life, we set forth to serve the minority,” Bett shared.

She is currently helping *aeta* communities located in the lowlands, who are victims of flooding during the rainy season. She also aids communities located upland where, during heavy rains, the unpaved roads get muddy and slippery. Several times, their family home served as evacuation center for the temporarily displaced *aetas*.

The majority of her initiatives address the *aetas*’ basic and sustenance needs. Further, with the collaboration of the Castillejos community, benefactors, and the *aetas* themselves, they have built a small study center with educational materials, health hubs, and toilet and bath facilities.

Collaboration to address real needs

In 2021, with the help of the Philippine Nurses Association of America - Metropolitan DC Chapter (PNAMDC), they installed 22 jetmatic hand pumps for water and distributed hygiene kits, rice, and groceries to 100 families. Later that year another sponsor, Arcadis Design and Consulting, added 23 water pumps.

In 2022, with the help of the same sponsors, they installed solar lamp posts in the communities. They distributed portable solar lights and water containers to 260 families.

Her husband and other family members set up three training centers where basic and livelihood skills are taught. Courses include: hair and nail care, sewing, adult literacy, health emergencies, ube production, and values formation.

The teachers and trainers are local residents.

“While millions of people all over the globe are already living in the period of the 4th Industrial Revolution, the *aetas* of Zambales are still wanting in basic needs,” Bett explained. “Their sources of livelihood have not changed throughout many generations. Their education level is, on the average, Grade 3. Many cannot read or write.”

In 2023, with the help of PNAMDC, she mobilized to build 10 toilet and bath structures and a health hub in one community. The health hub is now being used for pre-natal consultation, vaccination, and medical missions.

Spiritual dimension

Bett observed that most of the outreach projects were providing the *aetas* with material goods and

facilities for their physical needs. She wanted to add the spiritual dimension.

December 15, 2022 was a memorable date. 33 *aeta* children were baptized Catholic. Another 17 were baptized on January 27, 2023. More are scheduled for March 16, 2024. Each child receives a religious book and a rosary to accompany him/her along the spiritual journey.

Generous support for the initiative

Bett's project did not encounter much problem gathering resources because her intention of helping was pure. Seeing the goodness and beauty of her initiative, friends and acquaintances openly volunteered their time and generous help. When friends contact her to donate funds, they would say "*Bahala ka na, Bett*" in Tagalog, which means "We leave it up to you, Bett," showing the depth of their trust in her.

Organizations like PNAMDC, ARCADIS and others reach out to her to offer support in different ways. Likewise, families, colleagues, friends, people from the community message her directly offering to help. In July 2023, a group of 16 young women from Opus Dei Centers in Manila went to distribute goods, play with the children, and teach Basic English.

Social impact

After four years being with the *aeta* communities, Bett is happy to observe positive changes in the areas of hygiene, health, education, safety, and socialization. Back in 2020, they had no proper facilities to wash their clothes or take a bath.

An elder from one of the communities wrote Bett a letter seeking help:

“Kami po na mga residente ng Sitio Mambugan, San Pablo, Castillejos, Zambales ay lumalapit sa inyong mabuting tanggapan upang humingi ng tulong na mabigyan kami ng palikuran at paliguan... Kami po ay nag-aalalasa kalinisan ng aming kapaligiran at kalusugan ng mga tao sa amingkomuninad... Ang mga matatanda, bata, at mga buntis ay kinakailangang samalayo pa pumunta upang dumumi.”

In English, it translates as:

“We are residents at Sitio Mambugan, San Pablo, Castillejos Zambales and we are humbly asking for your help in building toilets and baths... We are worried about the cleanliness of our surroundings and the health of the people who live in our community... The elderly, children and pregnant women have to go far to do their necessities.”

Now they have toilets and baths. They have clean water for drinking and washing easily accessible from their homes.

In March 2024, more male and female *aetas* will be trained in carpentry, masonry, sewing, cookery, and basic motorbike maintenance. These are the skills that can help them earn a living. After completing the training, each receives not only a Certificate but his/her own set of tools, courtesy of donors.

As for education, the solar lights help the children do their studies at home. The portable lights also serve well when they have to go up the mountains for a few days to harvest fruits and vegetables.

Solar lamp posts were installed within compounds of several families, which provide lighting for the community at night. The residents feel more secure and those

walking at night can now see where they are passing. Adults and children gather outside at night under the solar lamp posts to converse and socialize.

Bett reflected that “it is good for a human being to be in touch with people.”

She and her family were living and working in Manila. “Manila is a place where everything is accessible and comfortable; whereas, the place where Aetas live is the complete opposite. In Manila, there is water in the homes, stable electricity and internet connection; grocery stores are accessible; there are vehicles everywhere; and so on. On the other hand, for Aetas, internet connection can be accessed only where it is available; they have to walk for many minutes or hours or ride a kulong kulong (three-wheel motor sidecar) to reach town; and only a

few people have access to transportation.”

Simple living

Being with *aetas* taught her that having the basic things in life such as food, a simple job, and a house to live in are enough. *Aetas* live simply. “For instance,” Bett said, “for *aetas* two slices of *gabi*, banana, or *kamote* are enough for a meal. In the Philippine context, especially in the urban areas, these kinds of food are mere ingredients in a dish... and *aetas* are physically sturdy. At 75, males can still carry blocks of wood.”

She attested that her main learning these past years has been: “Be simple.”

Bett spent her younger years mostly in Manila. She would go home to Castillejos occasionally but was blind to the plight of the *aetas*. “Yet, as we gain experience, knowledge, and

wisdom, we recognize that life has greater things to offer,” she shared. “We reach a point in our lives when what is important is to discover something that goes beyond oneself.”

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