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The BCPD Challenge: Does It Still Pay to Believe in Others?

Michelle Salon reflects on her job of mentoring Banilad students (Cebu). This feature was first published in getaway.ph on 27 May 2021.

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It is frequent nowadays to be receiving messages with a Zoom link — invitations for a webinar on COVID-19 home care protocols, on getting vaccinated, mental wellness

during the pandemic, building your business online, etc. Or if you happen to be a member of several communities on Facebook, having grown your network of business connections even before this health crisis, your smartphone or your tablet must be so full of saved posts by now, with funny memes and inspiring messages from Facebook or Viber that could help you get through this unique period in human history which Providence found interesting to position in our lifetime.

I received an invite on a webinar on Mentoring quite recently, since I took on an extra job as a mentor to two students from the Banilad Center for Professional Development (BCPD), a school helping less-privileged girls get senior high school scholarships for the technical-vocational track, specifically training its scholars to work in the tourism industry. It lives by the principle surrounding the idea

of *poverty alleviation through education*.

Inspired by the visit made in January 1987 by Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, the successor of St. Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei, who challenged the Cebuanos to lessen what he saw to be a *huge gap* between the rich and the poor in the island, BCPD continues to thrive in the field of education as a sought-after asset for real, palpable development. I only started as a BCPD mentor in June 2019, and barely six months after, the pandemic struck.

As a student-mentor, my job is something I consider easy. I just make sure I talk to my mentees at least twice a month, get to know their family background, monitor how they are faring academically, see how they are managing their relationships, and help prepare them

for the future. With more than twenty years of work experience behind me, I told myself I could hack this job. I have some things to share, and time to spare. I can strike new friendships with my mentees, and hopefully make them last. I am equipped. Or so I thought. Of course, we all want to have a positive mindset in all these. After all the webinars I attended on mental health, the motto I wish to follow now is, “There is no other way to go but up.”

I attended the Mentoring webinar organized by BCPD looking forward to learn and hone some soft skills which I can adopt, to guide me in my mentoring work this pandemic. We were so lucky with Mrs. Mayette Gorres as speaker, a seasoned life coach and mentor, who gave us all the techniques to make our work effective and fruitful. I actually regretted not being able to

participate actively towards the end of the webinar when she asked what our key takeaways are. I blamed it on the ‘unholiness’ of the webinar hour — 2:00 pm. So, to make up for that lost opportunity, I decided to just write this piece. I would like to zero-in on three points which I believe are helpful for all mentors like me. I hope this can give justice to what she was hoping we could say.

Key Takeaway #1. Mentoring is all about building trust

And for that to happen, you need to invest on time to learn how to be a friend to your mentees. Mentoring is, in fact, turning initial meetings into lifetime friendships. I am happy to recall now that I had the chance to work on getting to know my mentees, Rhea and Rosebel, outside school. We visited a museum, had merienda together and explored the city on some weekends before the

coronavirus reached our shores. These may not be enough activities yet for trust to be built, but at least we have started somewhere on our journey towards friendship. And while I cannot fully say that we are 'friends,' I must say I have grown to have affection for them, considering them to be my very own 'daughters.' Truth to tell, I am as old as the father of one of them! Here, acceptance has to come in. I must really be growing ... wiser.

When the pandemic happened, Rhea was quarantined in her dorm here in the city, while Rosebel moved back to her family home in San Remigio. It was challenging to keep up with the online mentoring chats when this health crisis pushed us to move towards Messenger or Zoom. But with the effort we all put in making sure we talk over the phone or do video calls every other week, or when we agreed for them to send

digital updates in Messenger every Saturday, I am glad to realize that we achieved more than 50% of our target frequency to interact. What's more, I managed to visit Rosebel in San Remigio before Christmas 2020 and Rhea came to visit in January this year, thanks to BCPD for facilitating everything — from providing the mode of transport to visit a far-flung area like San Remigio, to sponsoring the gadgets they use to study and connect not just with me, but with their families and friends as well. That's why I always tell them they are more than just fortunate. They are blessed! God loves them. They must be deeply grateful to BCPD for they won't find any other school like it.

Key Takeaway #2: Mentoring is not about me as a mentor.

It is not about what I can share from my work background or from what I

suppose to be my ‘wealth of experience,’ or what I can advise they do with their life, even if these could be part of it somehow. Rather, mentoring is about my mentees wanting themselves to be guided freely, willingly developing into the best person they can be. The mentee must learn how to establish his or her own goals with the guidance of the mentor, not what the mentor establishes as goals for the mentee to have. The mentee is the protagonist in this project. Our job is to listen, to ask questions, to help them think and rethink matters, to encourage virtue, to focus on positive outcomes and to grow in empathy.

My mentees are not from the city. Rhea is from far away Davao while Rosebel, as I mentioned, is from the almost northern tip of Cebu, San Remigio. Issues related to family can preoccupy them sometimes — homesickness or lack of financial

resources. But thank God for generous people around who help them cope with what life has to offer, especially during these ‘trying times,’ as we pray in the *Oratio Imperata*. My mentees know how to bounce back and are street-smart! I am really proud of them. Aside from teaching me how to speak in Bisaya, they are in fact my teachers on learning the basics of resilience. Young as they are, when they disclosed what they had been busy with while on lockdown, I was amazed. Rhea learned calligraphy while Rosebel worked and earned making baskets made of what the locals in her town call ‘buli.’

These may look like simple, unremarkable activities, but they are achievements for them. They know how to make good use of their time this way, and in the process, become productive individuals. It made me think, what creative thing can I do as

well while I wait for vaccination to happen? The world seemed to turn upside-down. It is now the mentor being mentored by the mentees.

Key Takeaway #3: Mentoring denotes the movement of looking forward to something.

Written backwards, it is forward-looking. While we put premium on history and what it can teach us, mentoring takes on the task of dreaming of the future with our eyes wide open. It wishes to see a 'bright tomorrow' beyond what a 'bleak today' can project. It seeks to inject hope in your mentees. It allows them to correct what they may have done wrong. It creates the need to visualize what the future holds for them.

As a mentor, I continue to work on being optimistic myself. There are times when I still allow myself to get bogged down by events that are not

to my liking, especially if it concerns my mentees. They did not listen or follow my advice, or they are so hard-headed, we could sometimes think. But, in reality, the decisions our mentees may make in life are all part of the learning process they need to go through — we need to go through, with them.

Ultimately, we must see that the accompaniment that mentoring offers involves tears, disappointments, and perhaps, regrets. What we could not and must not allow is that these turn into bitterness and hopelessness. If we do, we won't be doing our job as mentors in the best way possible. The whole thing would be rendered useless and ineffective. So, what do we do? What is our job then? ***We are here to simply be their ally in catching them when they fall, walking beside them, and cheering them on to the finish line.*** I say this

because my two mentees are both looking forward to their graduation this July. We are all doing a countdown of sorts. It's just two full months to go before I see them go.

I have started making my recommendations for their life's path after they finish — to work right away or to do further studies. I am glad they are taking charge of their life in a wonderful way. One would really begin working while the other one is planning to continue studying.

It might still be a long way to go before we see the pandemic ending, but who says that is an obstacle to charting the course your life would take? Mentoring is forward-looking. There is no other way to go but up, right? So, chin up and look forward!

With the question I posed to pre-title this piece — Does it still pay to believe in others? My answer would be, “Yes.” As I see a chapter ending in

my job as a mentor for these two girls, I see another one starting.

I believe in them. And that is enough.

Postscript

Banilad Center for Professional Development (BCPD), a project of the Foundation for Professional Training, Inc. (FPTI), offers scholarships for their senior high school program's technical-vocational track. It is accredited by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and the DepEd. It has more than eighty-five (85) industry partners from the tourism industry of hotels and restaurants.

BCPD has started to accept scholarship applications for the incoming academic year.

Michelle C. Salon

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