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Turning pages of hope

Beth Kagaoan, a children's book author, remembers how the stories she read aloud to children bravely battling cancer were transformed into whispered prayers.

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“In the year 2020, my sister returned from her grueling chemotherapy session with a heartwarming story,” Beth began her narration on how she was inspired to write picture books for children undergoing treatment

for cancer. “My sister described a scene at the hospital that defied the somber reality of cancer: a group of children awaiting treatment were clad in vibrant, colorful hospital gowns. The young warriors transformed the ward into their playground, playing tag and peeking into each other’s cubicles, which were separated by curtains.”

"Despite their looming bouts with upcoming treatments, they laughed and ran around with pure, innocent joy. In those moments, the pain and uncertainty of their cancer treatments seemed to fade, replaced by the simple pleasures of play and the comforting presence of their families," Beth recalled her sister recounting.

Beth’s sister eventually lost her battle with cancer. Her stories though remained etched in Beth’s mind. Was

there something she could do for these children?

Reflecting on life and the fleetingness of time, she grew convinced that one must use every available opportunity to use one's talents and direct one's passions for the good.

Turning her grief into purpose, Beth set out to write manuscripts for children's picture books. Through her creative stories, she envisioned opening treasure chests brimming with vital life lessons for her young readers. She knew that, through her narratives, she could convey images that would capture simple yet profound ideas: values, culture, and traditions. In weaving those stories, she hoped to touch the lives of many, even those she may never encounter.

Embarking on this journey, though, was far from easy.

She discovered that a great deal of thought, preparation, and execution goes into both the writing and marketing of a children's book: from carving out time to pen her thoughts to finally publishing and successfully marketing the book. She turned to Opus Dei founder St. Josemaria Escriva for encouragement to persevere and grow in this creative process. *“Pray’, you said, ‘that I may be generous, that I may progress, and come to change in such a way that one day I may be useful in something.’”* (Furrow no. 3)

Searching for inner drive in her writing journey, she found inspiration in her late sister's story. As she became aware of the difficult circumstances faced by children battling cancer—especially those lacking sufficient social and psychological support—she began to conceptualize ways to make a difference. Her passion led her to

consider how she could provide comfort, distraction, and emotional connection to these young and fragile cancer patients during their most challenging moments.

In May of 2024, she organized some of her friends to visit four institutions: *Philippine General Hospital, Bahay Aruga, Child Haus Ermita, and Child Haus U.P. Village Quezon City* -- sanctuaries where cancer warriors fought silent battles that were no less real. Armed with a book and several stories that she had written, she and her friends gave the children the experience of diving into stories of bravery and resilience whose pages whisper: "You're not alone."

She prepared for this task with care -- from deciding what color of dress to wear to attract the children, to practicing voice acting to share

stories in an animated way, to learning about palliative care.

“The shyness I had clung to dissolved,” she said, the moment she sat surrounded by kids on tiny chairs and even tinier smiles, as she flipped through her book. The children’s eyes, wide with anticipation, were glued to the pages of the books she was reading. Those children were so disarmingly open and receptive.

She recalled how one patient who had a learning disability was excluded from the group by one of the patient’s guardians. Beth requested that he be invited, nonetheless. To her surprise, he turned out to be the most participative in the reading session among all others.

Some scenes were heart-wrenching: a child, barely seven, she guessed, with a tracheostomy tube, listening attentively and laughing; a girl

coming straight from chemotherapy, foregoing sleep just to join in, with her supportive parents accompanying her, showing no trace of weariness on their faces.

The experience made a lasting impact on Jona, Beth's friend and a male nursing student. "The children received us with sincere smiles. Their positivity was inspiring," Jona said. "It was an eye-opener: despite my personal struggles, I realize I am lucky in life." As a future health professional, he understood that good health is a gift for which one must be grateful. His dealing with the sick children reminded him to practice kindness and empathy toward others.

Beth knew that these children from impoverished families knew well the meaning of hardship, pain, and suffering. Despite their difficulties, their joy found expression in a lively

chorus of laughter that reverberated through the ward whenever she acted out stories for them. She also noticed that the reading sessions not only brought joy to the children but also served as a distraction from their pain. Their laughter and happiness were comforting for the families present and a source of delight for her and her friends. Each time they returned home, they felt more energized than exhausted.

The words of St. Josemaria echoed in her heart: *"These days, 'you were saying, 'have been the happiest in my life.' And I answered you without hesitation: 'that is because you have lived with a little more self-giving than usual.'"* (Furrow no. 13)

The joy of Beth's experiences with the children compelled her to share them with others. Last August, she had the opportunity to represent the Philippines at an international

gathering of children's book authors in Trieste, Italy. There, she shared her insights and stories with fellow writers and young readers.

Reflecting on the trip, she said, "I carried with me the voices of those fragile individuals who inspired me more than I inspired them." She realized that "when one gives joy to the others, it bounces back to you a hundredfold."

"Volunteering", she told her audience, "takes us beyond our comfort zones, connecting us with others and allowing us to bring hope, joy, and comfort to those who need them most. Simple acts of service can create powerful ripples of positive change."

Cocoy Caparas

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