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Driving for a Change

Lauan University Center volunteers collected and distributed food and care packages to jeepney drivers and their families whose incomes were drastically cut by the pandemic restrictions.

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It has been a year since the COVID-19 pandemic struck the Philippines and Filipino families continue to reel from its effects, most especially those who depended on daily earnings for

their livelihood before the Covid-19 restrictions were implemented.

Such is the case of jeepney drivers at the University of the Philippines. (Jeepneys are small buses known for their crowded seating and colorful decorations.) The drivers have resorted to begging to support their families. “Dumating ang punto na nanlilimos na kami (it came to a point when we had to go begging),” said Mang Ernie, president of the UP Balara-Katipunan Jeepney Operators’ & Drivers’ Association (UPBKJODA). Due to the quarantine restrictions, many opted to stay home, and jeepney drivers were left without passengers and their daily source of income.

With great need...

Before the pandemic, a jeepney driver of UPBKJODA would gross around 2000 Philippine pesos daily, roughly 40 US\$. Now, on a “good

day,” they would take home 200 pesos. Despite the assistance provided by the local government, church, and civic organizations, meeting the family’s basic needs and providing for their children’s education continues to be challenging for these jeepney drivers. The transition from physical classes to online classes require devices and internet connection for their children, which are beyond their means.

A torrent of generosity

To mark the first year of the pandemic in the Philippines, Lauan University Center -- a hub for young men (students & professionals) -- conceived an outreach dubbed “Tsuperheroes” (A Tagalog wordplay on “tsuper,” which means “driver” and the English word “superhero”). Its objective was to provide care

packages to the families of 70 drivers and 10 barkers of the UPBKJODA.

From day one, we asked the intercession of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo for the fruits of this outreach. The response of companies and friends to the Tsuperheroes donation drive was hearteningly quick and generous. An email we sent out to the Philippine Food Bank Foundation, Inc. got a positive response in less than 20 minutes. A businessman who experienced the negative impact of the quarantine sent his donation just the same. “We’re all in the same boat,” he said. “Thank you for the opportunity to help.”

Donations in kind, such as rice, cooking oil, margarine, noodles, milk, pasta, soya drink, crackers, cookies, etc., arrived. Another generous donor promptly supplied the funds for the mobile phone load,

which the children of the drivers needed for their online classes. Cash donations were used to purchase assorted canned goods.

On February 20, student volunteers spent their afternoon preparing 85 sacks with 10 kgs of rice and 85 ecobags with assorted food items. The care packages also included Tagalog prayer cards of St Josemaría Escrivá and Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, and a Tagalog novena to St Josemaria for the family, the sick and for work.

A week later, following the usual health protocols, the student volunteers assisted in hosting a simple program with light-hearted games and prizes to turn over the care packages. Held under the Katipunan-Aurora Blvd. flyover, it brought back smiles and laughter to the COVID-weary Tsuperheroes.

We are all in the same boat

Surplus donations of rice and other food items were delivered to the Parish of Our Lady of Pentecost nearby Lauan University Center. When the family of the fastest-growing bread brand in the country heard of Tsuperheroes, the daughter offered their company's help for the next outreach of Lauan.

Mang Rolan (driver) summed up what many wanted to express. "Thanks po. Sama-sama po tayong magdasal para matapos ang lahat nang pagsubok at mabalik na po and lahat sa normal." (Thank you. Let us all join in prayer asking for the end of these challenges so that we may return to our normal lives.)

"We will gladly help."

"Thank you for a good day."

"Thank you for the experience."

These quips from the volunteers show how Tsuperheroes benefitted them as much as it did the drivers and their families. Indeed, being in the same boat could bring out the best in each of us.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made us reflect on what truly matters most — the celebration of human life. We were never born to live for ourselves alone, but for and with others.

Seve Perez (edited by Justin Tembresa)

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