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THE STORY OF A MOBILE TEACHER: The road less traveled

Almost daily, alternative learning system (ALS) mobile teacher Jenelyn Marasigan Baylon of Lalud, Calapan City jumps onto her battered motorbike and zooms off toward the foothills of Mindoro to bring education to cultural minorities.

Enduring a harsh three-hour motorcycle drive across rivers, unpaved roads and rough terrains, she reaches out to those who have no access to education. She teaches at barangays Aurora, Barcenaga, del Pilar, Estrella, Kalinisan, Masagana, Paitan, Panikian, Poblacion 1 and 2, and the sitios of Aryawed and Magtibay in Naujan, Oriental Mindoro.

Schools for her are: makeshift classrooms in the forest, run-down buildings, barangay halls, church yards and even abandoned houses. Initially, only a few showed up in her classes. But words of small successes spread from barangay to barangay until she won the support of almost everybody.

The mother of one was the first mobile teacher who integrated such technical skills as electric arc welding and cellular phone repair in her ALS lessons. She not only provides literacy but also helped the Mangyan and Tadjao people protect their vast track of ancestral lands.

"I am a daughter of a teacher and a farmer who once dreamt of becoming a lawyer. Tight finances, however, led me to take up teaching. No regrets. Today, I am one among the 1,681 mobile teachers serving out-of-school youths and adult learners across the country," she said.

"Noong una, tinatanong ko ang aking sarili, nag-aral ako ng apat na taon upang maging isang guro, tama bang magsilbi ako sa kabundukan?" (I asked myself then, "Having spent four years to earn a degree to become a teacher, is it right that I serve in the mountains?") But the more she looked at the poor barangays, the more she was convinced: "What's the use of my teaching profession if it cannot help the people not reached by formal education?"

Holding back tears, she continued, *"Sa pag drive ko ng motor, nakunan ako noong 2009, napagkamalan na rin akong spy ng government forces at muntik nang mapagtripan ang aking asawa sa bundok pero nandoon pa rin ako sa piling ng aking mga learners."* (I had miscarriage in 2009 because I had to drive a motorcycle just to reach my learners. I was also accused of spying for the

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government forces and my husband almost became a target of the rebels each time he came to visit me but I'm still here with my learners.)

"Masarap ang feeling na instrument ako sa pagbabagong-buhay ng learners ko at ng pamilya nila. Natuto silang bumasa, sumulat at makapag-isip ng tama dahil sa aking tulong," she said. (It feels good to be an instrument in transforming the lives of the learners and their families. They learned how to read, write, and think logically because of my help.)

Baylon believes there is joy in taking the road less traveled. Take the case of 29-year-old Julius "Kokoy" Senojaen, a troubled and adventurous guy who became an ALS learner. Kokoy underwent lessons on core life skills like communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, expanding one's world vision, productivity, development of self-sense and sense of community.

Along the way, though, he had petty mischief like rumble, drunkenness and others. The barangay captain would require him to plant narra and mahogany trees in the barangay every time he misbehaved. Then in 2006, he vowed to repay the kindness of Baylon by dedicating himself to his studies. He passed the accreditation and equivalency (A&E) examination. Then in 2007, he acquired his ALS diploma and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) certificate. That same year, he left for Saudi Arabia as a welder in a power supply firm.

In 2009, he came home for a vacation. *"Astig na si Kokoy... naisaayos na niya ang kanyang pamilya,"* Baylon said beaming with pride. (Kokoy is now doing better...He helped change the lives of his family.) Meanwhile, the narra and mahogany trees are now big and strong -- mute witnesses to Kokoy's struggles to become a better person. (Baylon coordinates with the TESDA for trainings, accreditation, etc.).

Another case is "Selay," a 19-year-old learner who engages in a small rice husking business. He religiously attends to his business but makes sure that he does not miss his lessons at the Learning Center. He promised himself to finish his studies at all costs. Baylon is hopeful.

There are other encouraging stories of hope. Three young mothers from Barangay Malinaw, Oriental Mindoro, Ana Villanueva, Marilou Migaro and Marilou Coling lead difficult lives, yet each one is eager to make something of themselves by learning through ALS. Thus, the three determined learners bring their five to eight-months-old babies to class so as not to miss any lesson. *"Ang aking mga anak ang nagtutulak sa akin na makatapos at mabigyan sila ng*

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magandang kinabukasan,” one learner said. (My children are the ones pushing me to finish my studies so I could give them a good future.)

“If my learners finish school, they can get real jobs and properly support their families. That, to me, is my most important accomplishment,” Baylon said.

(Baylon was awarded 2008 Most Outstanding Mobile Teacher and 2008 *BatoBalani* Foundation's Outstanding Teacher. She is also regularly invited as a speaker to various programs and events by the Bureau of Alternative Learning System.)

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