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Kolehiyala si Lola: The story of Lola Ched and her strong desire to learn

Year 1966, 16-year old Mercedes “Ched” Gonzales of Calamba, Laguna dropped out of high school and married handsome Ventura “Ben” Pingad. Seven beautiful kids gave witness to the happy union.

“Laba, luto. plantsa, linis, alaga ng bata at asawa... lahat ‘yan... hands-on ako noon,” she says. (Doing the laundry, cooking, cleaning the house, and taking care of my family... all of that... I’m hands-on with all the household chores) When all their children became professionals – three teachers, a medical doctor, an accountant, a radio technician and a Canada-based caregiver, Lola Ched began playing a more active role in her local church projects.

Kaysa mag tong-its (Instead of playing cards)

“Napag isip-isip ko na kaysa naman mag ‘tong-its’ ako buong araw, nagsilbi ako sa simbahan ng Cabuyao.” (I realized that instead of me playing cards all day, I’d rather serve the church of Cabuyao.) Then her life took a new direction. One of her co-workers in church, Sister Eden, introduced her to the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) examination under the Department of Education’s Alternative Learning System (ALS). The A&E program is a certification of learning for out-of-school children, youth and adults, 11 years old and above, who are unable to avail of the formal school system or who have dropped out of school. Passing the exam is comparable to the completion of elementary and secondary education of the formal school system.

“Just to while away my time, I went with Sister Eden and joined the program,” Lola Ched recalls. She passed the A&E exam and obtained her high school diploma in 2007, or 41 years after leaving school. She was 64 years-old. From then on, there was no stopping her.

Now, at 66, Lola Ched is a sophomore student at the Laguna State Polytechnic University (LSPU), taking up Bachelor of Science in Fisheries Education.

In an ALS Forum at the Development Academy of the Philippines, Lola Ched was invited to talk about her favorite topic: her A&E experience and student life. Wearing her school uniform, a white blouse over a blue checkered skirt and black shoes, Lola Ched narrated her story.

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“Sabi nila noon, titigil din daw ako sa pag-aaral dahil sa inis kasi magugulo daw ang mga kaklase kong kabataan, but I proved them wrong.” (Others said then that I will again quit school because I will be unable to bear the stubbornness of my younger classmates.) She pursued her dream with unbending consistency. “Umabsent na ang teacher ko... na-late na ang teacher ko... nagkasakit na ang teacher ko... pero hindi ang Lola Ched nyo,” she said. (My teachers would take leaves of absence, be late, or be sick but not your Lola Ched) The crowd gave her a thunderous applause.

Speaking with much humor and easy confidence, she looks back at her enrolment day in college: “Akala ng school, ini-enroll ko noon ang apo ko pero noong sabihin kong ako ang mag-e-enroll sa college, tiningnan ba naman ako mula ulo hanggang paa. Bakit, kahit matanda na ang lola mo, pwede pa rin namang mag-aral ‘di ba? (School personnel thought that I am enrolling my grandchild, but when I said that I was the one enrolling, they stared at me from head to foot. Why, even if I’m already old, I can still study, can’t I?)

‘Sikat ang lola n’yo’ (Your Lola is famous)

Drawing attention from almost everybody inside and outside the campus has become natural. “Tuwing Martes pagpunta ko sa school, suot ko ang aking PE uniform, jogging pants at rubber shoes. Naku! Bali lahat ang leeg ng mga drayber ng dyipni at traysikel sa katitingin sa akin. Sikat kasi ang lola n’yo,” she said laughing. (Every Tuesday, when I go to school wearing my PE uniform – jogging pants and rubber shoes. Tricycle and jeepney drivers could not help but turn their heads at me. That’s because I’m famous.)

Yes, she lugs around textbooks, takes quizzes and exams, and goes home with a list of assignments. But if she is weighed down by school responsibilities, she does not complain. And certainly, she knows what to do. “Pagdating ko sa bahay, assignments agad ang aking inaatupag. Pag nakita kong hindi ko na kaya, ginagamit ko na ang aking Text Brigade – tinetext ko ang mga anak ko para ako’y tulungan. Ayoko kayang mabokya,” she said. (When I get home, I attend to my assignments first. But when I see that I am unable to answer everything, I start texting my children to ask for help. I don’t want to flunk.)

“Kapag exam time naman two rows apart ako sa mga classmates ko. Malayo ako sa kanila kasi madali akong maistorbo. Pag nawala ako sa konsentrasyon, nakakalimutan ko lahat ang napag-aralan ko,” she added chuckling. (When it’s exam time, I sit two rows away from my classmates. I stay far from them because I get easily distracted. Once I lose concentration, I forget all that I have reviewed.)

‘Wala kayong K na tanggihan ako’ (You don’t have the right to reject me)

Many times, after a goal is reached, people ease up. But not Lola Ched. She believes that every success deserves another. So after she graduates in college, she is set to pursue the next level – become a mobile teacher.

“When I finish college, I will work as a mobile teacher. It is my way of paying forward my teachers. I will then be speaking before you not as a student, but as a mobile teacher,” she said. Everyone clapped in admiration.

Lola Ched is frequently invited by DepEd-ALS as speaker during A&E gatherings. She is also tapped as a resource person in adult literacy classes by other groups and organizations.

Lola Ched commends her teachers at Cabuyao Central School - Emmy Balisan, Charito Pandialan and Ronnie Villanueva for giving her a second chance to education. She is also grateful to Supervisor Orlando Valcerde of Laguna and ALS Dir. Carolina Guerrero.

She continued: “At pag nag-apply ako sa inyo, I will definitely not take ‘no’ for an answer. Wala kayong karapatang tumanggi sa isang capable senior citizen who is willing to serve,” she said in mock seriousness. (And when I apply for a job as a mobile teacher with your office, I will definitely not take “no” for an answer. You don’t have the right to reject a capable senior citizen who is willing to serve.)

Saludo kami sa iyo, Lola Ched! (We salute you, Lola Ched!)

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