

Unfolding the Veil of Poverty in the Mountains: Experiences Drawn from Community Outreach Projects

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Abstract - *Innovation is a key element in reshaping the landscape of education in the countryside; but teachers assigned in the mountains know that the hurdles of mountain life demand something more than innovating if their pupils have to learn. Pupils have aspirations, but life in the mountains is hard. Thus, teachers must walk the extra mile to put pupils back to the classroom.*

This paper attempted to narrate the experiences of a group of graduate students at the Visayas State University (VSU) actively involved in the conduct of community outreach projects in the elementary schools in the remote/mountain barangays of Baybay City, Leyte, Philippines. During ocular visits, essential information were gathered through in-depth interviews with teachers, parents, pupils and barangay captains. Interviews focused on socio-economic status of parents, school needs, nutritional condition and health habits of pupils, school population, etc. Profiling was important in deciding whether or not the school became the recipient of the outreach, since funding was completely dependent on the benevolence of private individuals, friends, graduate and college students who shared the advocacy of community service. For a while, the Rotary Club of Ormoc and the Phil. Carabao Center housed in VSU likewise extended their support.

These humble undertakings started in 2015. Since then, the group had accomplished eight (8) outreach projects, demonstrating that charity, service and genuine concern for the needy are deeply rooted in the Filipino vein.

Undeniably, poverty is anywhere in this country and children in remote or upland communities are very vulnerable victims. The lack of nutritious food, and, worse, the absence of it at times as well as other basic school needs has affected their health conditions and attendance in schools. Worst of all, poverty has depleted some children with the much needed parental love and nurturing that must have been accorded them on account of their tender age.

Keywords: *community, mountains, outreach, pupils*

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported that the incidence of poverty in Eastern Visayas has worsened between 2012 and 2015, making it the second poorest region in the country (*BICOL TODAY*, 2016) [1]. About 500 kilometers west is the thriving City of Baybay, bustling with economic activities, yet many are still poor, especially those who live in the mountains. Ironically, many people do not see this reality. Apparently, the lushness covering the slopes has become like a mask concealing the hardships that the residents must wrestle with every day. This façade, however, cannot deny this fact: most people living there are poor. Food and water are scarce, and the ones adversely affected the most are the children. They have to eat what is on the table or they go hungry.

So, what do parents place on the table? The best that they can have: cooked bananas and sweet potato (*kamote*). These are the staple food that have nourished the children's grumbling stomachs, and, in a way, have supported their physical growth. Based on interviews, most families already consider themselves lucky, if they have one meal in a day with rice and fish or with sardines or dry, salted fish, thrice or four times a week.

But the children are uncomplaining. They have developed a certain toughness towards their need for better, nutritious and delicious foods. In one ocular visit, the interviewer had requested the teacher to gather the children outside the classrooms to have their pictures taken. The team had coaxed the children to smile, but they did not smile. Amused, the teacher-in-charge immediately explained:

Ma'am, the children are not smiling because they do not understand what your companion meant by "say cheese".

Here in the mountains, we say "kamote" and the pupils will smile during picture-takings.

Perhaps, this is called resiliency. With the guidance of their teachers, the pupils have learned to value whatever food their parents are capable of providing them. Understandably, their mouths still water when they hear about fried chicken and hot dogs because they are children. It is unfortunate that many of them have not had their first bite of any of these fancy foods.

This similar account of school children with ages five to fifteen years old, eating banana, *kamote* and other root crops almost every day of their growing up years has always been heard during interviews. Teachers disclosed that the children are used to it. At their very young age, they have been taught that they are still better off compared other children who have nothing to eat at all. This is true. In other mountain barangays visited, poverty had sometimes sent children to sleep on empty stomachs. This physical hunger, however, is not the worst sacrifice that the children have experienced.



Figure 1. Pupils' winsome stance manifested their childlike resilience towards harsh realities of life in the mountain.

Forced by the harsh circumstances of life in the mountains, parents are sometimes compelled to leave their children in order to save them. In one of the remotest mountain barangays visited, the outreach organizer noticed a rather pale and weak little girl slumped on a chair, just watching the other children enjoying the games. She approached the little girl to goad her to join the games so that she could win a prize. As soon as she touched her, she realized that the child

had a fever. She immediately called the teacher to tell her about the condition of the little girl. Alarmed, the teacher had wanted her to go home, but the little girl would not budge. She would wait until all the activities were over so that she could bring home a kilo of rice, school supplies and the thing that she had wanted the most: a pair of red slippers. Jolted by what she heard, the organizer immediately gave the child what she had wanted and patiently waited for. Then the little girl jumped from her chair despite her fever, ran toward the corner where the slippers were displayed, and eagerly tried on the pair that she had been eyeing for. She looked up and gave the organizer a smile, weak as it was, but it was the purest smile the latter had ever seen. For a moment, the little girl forgot that she was sick, and she was happy. The organizer asked her where her parents were, and this was her reply, spoken in a weak and faint voice:

Sa Manila... trabaho. Si papa, nangisda para makapalit og bugas og tambal pod. (My mother works in Manila; my father is fishing so that he can buy rice and medicine too.)

Poverty has robbed some children in the mountains of the physical presence of their parents. The teacher narrated that there, many children are left by their mothers and sometimes fathers to work as house helpers (*kasambahay*) or factory workers in big cities like Manila. This is the family's strategy in order to survive. As small-time farmers, they cannot actually rely on their produce for the family's subsistence. When one of the parents has income on weekly/monthly basis, the family will have money for the other needs of the children. Although this income is barely enough for their needs, but, at least, there is money that comes every month/every week.

Distance is very difficult for all members of the family, especially if it is the mother that goes away since the children are the ones who will have to do most of the household chores, while the father continues to work in the farm. Distance is also very painful for them, especially that the children are still at their tender age, and they still need badly the care, guidance and love of their parents. However, they have to endure everything. According to the parents, it is more painful to watch their children suffer from hunger and crave for other kinds of food. They claimed that in the long run, the children get used to the absence of either the mother or father. Of course, there are other challenges of being

far from each other, but it seems that families are left with no other options. They have to survive.

Life may be difficult, but most parents send their children to school. Parents tell their children that they must go to school so that they will have a brighter future and will have lives not bereft from wants. No parent interviewed had ever wanted their children to become farmers like them, because, according to them, life in the farm is hard. All have envisioned their children to be working in an office, or to become teachers. Unfortunately, some parents claimed that because they have no money, they are not sure if they could send their children to college:

Ang amo nga makahuman og elementarya aron maka antigo mobasa og mosuwat, bastante na. Nindot makapadayon silag high school og college, pero sa kalisod karon, tan-awon lang.

(On our part, we try to have them finish the elementary grade so that they will know how to read and write. It will be nice if they can also pursue high school and college, but because life is difficult, we are not sure if we can afford it.)

On the other hand, the children are very optimistic when asked about what they wanted to become in the future. They have high hopes and big dreams. In fact, one could not help but smile upon hearing them say in chorus that they want to be rich; they want to become teachers, policemen, lawyers, actors (*artista*), nurses and even doctors! Their innocence and naivete are so touching.

On the whole, these are the harsh realities that have propelled the group to action, thus the birth of the community outreach projects in the mountains. The group targets schools situated in the mountains or in remote barangays for some reasons. The distance of these schools from the city proper and the difficult roads as well has often posed a problem of accessibility, thus preventing other organizations from delivering what could have been beneficial to the pupils.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this paper was to narrate the experiences of graduate students based on the community outreach conducted in the elementary schools located in the remote/upland barangays of Baybay City, Leyte. More specifically, it attempted to document narratives of some teachers, parents and pupils interviewed from which can be gleaned the

marginal condition of pupils in terms of food and other basic needs as a result of poverty. The information gathered would elucidate the team in its preparation for the outreach.

METHODS

This is a qualitative study that relied heavily on in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in order to obtain essential information from the subjects. The interviewer made use of unstructured interview method because of its flexibility. The method was time-consuming, but the advantages outweighed the said disadvantage. First, it allowed the researcher to ask as many questions possible in order to gather sufficient information. Second, McLeod (2014) [2] averred that in the unstructured interview, questions can be adapted and changed based on the subjects' responses. He claimed that the use of open questions allows the respondents to talk in some depth, especially that they choose their own words when they answer. He further said that this helps the researcher develop a real sense of a person's understanding of a situation and provides increased validity because the interviewer has the opportunity to probe.

Included in this study were eight (8) elementary schools of Baybay City, Leyte where the community outreach projects were conducted from October 2015 to June 2018. These schools were located either in remote or mountain barangays of the city, and passable either by four-wheel vehicles, motorbikes, or travelled by foot. Most of the teachers assigned in the mountains drove their own motorbikes or would hire *habal-habal* (rickshaw) drivers, while majority of the pupils would travel by foot to reach their respective schools daily. Each school had a school head or teacher-in-charge, sometimes also called as caretaker. The principals who usually had two to three schools to manage had their stations in the lowland and would visit the upland at least once a month.

Of the eight elementary schools, the researcher was able to interview six (6) principals, eight (8) school heads/teachers-in-charge, 19 teachers, 80 parents, 110 pupils and four (4) barangay captains. All these respondents provided substantial information prior the conduct of the community outreach in their respective schools/barangays. Further, ocular visits were also conducted in order to check the schools' location and other concerns such as availability of potable water and electricity and safety of the team. Other ethical requirements were also observed like courtesy calls to the barangay captains or their representatives, and

letters of permission to conduct the community outreach were also secured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What do the children need?

Overall, the needs assessment interviews revealed that the pupils in schools visited have common needs, namely: food, school supplies (pad papers, pencils/pens, notebooks, crayons, rulers, etc.), clothes, necessities for their hygiene (toothbrush/ toothpaste/ bath soap/ shampoo), even medicines and vitamins.



Figure 2. Pupils were taught the proper way of brushing their teeth.

In fact, one outspoken teacher frankly added that the pupils need school shoes, school bags and uniforms so that the pupils will look decent and presentable in school. She said that, presently, the pupils are allowed to wear anything for school since most parents cannot afford to buy uniforms for their children. When asked about the occupation of the parents, she said bluntly that parents need jobs where they can have better and stable incomes to support the needs of their families. After the interview, the organizer went home with a very heavy heart. As with all other interviews conducted, the needs assessment phase usually creates the greatest pain and challenge. The thought of how much less the pupils have in life causes painful realizations; the challenge is – with all the needs identified, what could a small group do?

What about the parents?

Most parents where the projects were conducted are farmers and charcoal-makers (*nangunguling*), while others are laborers, fishermen, *cargador* (porters), *pot-pot* (rickshaw) drivers, domestic helpers (*kasambahay*), and factory workers. Obviously, they are very poor. This scenario is confirmed by the report issued by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA,

2017), revealing that among the 14 basic sectors identified in Republic Act 8425, the farmers, fishermen and children belonging to families with income below the official poverty threshold posted the highest poverty incidences in 2015. [3] Parents work so hard every day, their hardships visible on their faces, calloused hands and burned skin. Yet life continues to be harsh. Reflectively, one cannot help thinking that in life, perhaps it is not enough to be just industrious and hardworking. Something is amiss somewhere. So, with the meager income they earn either on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, they have to sacrifice many things in order to make both ends meet. Unfortunately, with the inflation plaguing the country now, it is incomprehensible how these families keep themselves afloat.

How do pupils react to their situation?

Despite this depressing scenario, the children are undeterred. They walk toward the school every day, some with slippers on while others walk barefoot. Some children are also dressed in oversized shirts/jersey and shorts. During outreach, however, some students put on their best garb because they have been instructed to do so since visitors are coming. Then, in their tiny, high-pitched voices, they greet visitors in unison, “Good morning, teachers! Good morning, visitors!” They are a sight to behold against the greens of the wondrous mountains.

What about the teachers?

“If we teach today’s students, as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.”

John Dewey

This interesting line from a great educator who believed that nothing is changeless should be every teacher’s reminder of how learners should be dealt with. It may be correct to say that during his time, terms like “*tekkie*” and “*computer savvy*” were not in use yet. So, what must he mean by this line then? He wanted to tell teachers to adapt to the changing times and to vary their strategies in teaching based on the needs and interests of the learners. That is, if they want to find their meaning and relevance in the educational journey of learners.

It is common knowledge that every teacher’s ultimate goal is to be able to impart learning, and to prepare learners for the real “battle” in life. If remiss of this function, teachers lose their essence and do not have the right to be in the classroom. In this sense,

teachers in the mountains do more than just *innovating*. To effect learning, they have to put the learners back to the classroom, in the first place. To achieve this, they play multi-faceted roles: from being an ardent crusader of education for all to end ignorance, to being a level-headed mediator/guidance counsellor to help both parents and children understand the value of education, to being a prefect - for children need a light “bending” sometimes, to being a friend “with benefits”. One major reason why some children are not in schools is they do not have anything: paper, pencil, and more importantly - food. In this case, teachers become providers of benefits.

Most teachers in the mountains are young. Probably, their ages range from 25 to 40 years old. There are also few teachers since they are usually handling multi-grades or combined classes. In most cases, they hold classes simultaneously, say one classroom but two grade levels, sometimes even more, especially when some grade levels have less than ten (10) pupils. Teachers are very flexible too. Their skills at multi-tasking are so impressive. To hold classes effectively, they divide the classroom into two: grade one pupils on the left side, and grade two on the right, or as the case may be. Then, they discuss lessons for one class first and give the pupils activities to do. While these pupils are busy, the teachers go to the other grade level to discuss lessons. After that, they give pupils activities to perform, and the process goes on. Remarkable. This is not to mention the efforts exerted in managing the classroom, considering that the pupils have to be taught proper hygiene habits for their personal necessities! Asked on how she goes about all these multi-tasking, one teacher simply said:

Sa sugod, nah lisod kayo ma'am oy, labina mga bata magdagan-dagan unya usahay, naa say mag-away, mangihi but maka-adjust raman eventually. Dapat magpasensya lang jud ma'am. Louy man sad ng mga bata. (At the start, it is very difficult to handle, especially that the children being young are restless and they like to run around. Sometimes they also pick up fights, others urinate anywhere. Eventually, I learn how to manage and adjust myself to the situation. Teachers just have to be patient, Ma'am, for the sake of the pupils.)

Listening to a teacher talk that way inspires and provokes a challenge as well. The challenge calls for others to reflect on their dedication and commitment as educators. Similarly, a question has to be asked: Has

government noticed the great contribution of teachers in the mountains in building a stronger country by ensuring that its people are literate?

But the foregoing is not the only challenge faced by teachers in the mountains. In fact, it is only the tip of the iceberg. Considered as the pupils' second parents, teachers have to make sure that every child under their care will learn because education is the poor child's only sure ticket to a better future. But how can the poor teacher make that possible when the learners attending class have nothing at all, but themselves? Meaning, no pencils, no paper, no nothing. Would the teacher drive these pupils away? Asked by one member of the team what she does amidst this deprivation, the teacher narrated:

Duna juy mga bata, Ma'am, oy nga walay lapis og papel. Wa man gani tarong kaon usahay, Ma'am. So, mopalit ko og lapis og papel ako ihatag nila aron maka-eskuyla sila. Pero lisod man pod lagi, Ma'am, kay duna sad koy pamilya. So, ako putlon ang usa ka lapis intothree parts aron tulo ka bata ang makasuwat. Nah, ana nalang jud, Ma'am, aron makat-on sila lasbi adto sila sa uma or sa gawas mag-duladula. (There are children who have no pencil and paper. Sometimes, some even come without having eaten well. So, I buy pencils and pads for them so that they can attend school. But I cannot do it always because I also have my family who depends on me. I have to strategize. I cut one pencil into three parts. That way, three pupils will be able to write. I have to do it so that they will learn. If I won't, they will work in the farm or just play outside.)

This is a vivid example of what it means to “walk the extra mile”. Her deed has given substance to this famous line that others speak so frequently behind podiums. She may just be an ordinary teacher in the mountain, like many other teachers whose dedication toward their profession is unheard of. But she, together with all other nameless educators, climb mountains and cross rivers every day so that the children whose dreams are bigger than their lives will have better foods on the table to fill their hunger; better clothes to protect their thin bodies from the cold and heat of the mountain sun.

So, what does the team do?

The team begins to act. Something has to be done and must be done now. As soon as the school recipient

is identified, the team divides into groups or committees. Each committee has different tasks to accomplish; for instance: the committee on school supplies will coordinate with the team leader as to the number of pupils there are for every grade level (from Kinder to Grade 6). This is done to ensure that each and every pupil will receive a school supply kit which usually includes two pads of paper, pencils/pens, ruler, eraser, crayons, sharpener, art papers, bond papers, a small bottle of glue, a pair of scissors and sometimes one notebook.

The team leader forms other committees in order to chunk a rather big task and ensure that members are not overburdened with too many assignments as all are working and studying at the same time. Hence, there are committees for food, slippers, transportation/fuel, program/certificates, gifts for parents/teachers, etc. Since the outreach team is composed of graduate students, other activities like storytelling, parlor games, quiz bowl (current events), mini-lectures about the environment (and role playing on how to save it), news writing, health habits, speech choir presentations constitute parts of the activities.

Funding the project? The committees are created months before the actual conduct of the outreach to give members ample time to prepare. Sometimes, members solicit from friends (former classmates/students, colleagues, *kababayans*) family members, and relatives who never fail to show their enthusiasm to help either in cash or in kind. Most of the time though the members themselves contribute certain amounts to defray expenses incurred.

Once the preliminaries have been done, (school recipient identified; date of outreach set, etc.), it has been observed that the desire to take part becomes so contagious. People from all walks of life (graduate/college students, some colleagues, *kababayans*, friends) signify their support. Those who live nearby share anything (clothes, shoes, bags, rice, choco-milk drink, canned goods, sardines, eggs, biscuits, chocolates/candies, noodles, umbrellas, pens, sandwiches, sachets of toothpaste and toothbrushes, etc.). Graduate students, who once were active members, and, therefore, are aware of the “hows” and “whys” and the challenges involved continue to support the outreach generously. There is an outpouring of blessings, so to say.

All activities in the outreach are well-participated by everyone, but pupils demonstrate a very defined motivation to take part in the quiz bowl. As observed, many children are shy and reticent, especially in the

role-playing, but they forget their inhibitions during the quiz bowl. They may struggle with their answers at first, but always the effort to win a prize is demonstrated. Often, the team earns a good laugh from their answers. In one outreach, the graduate student had asked the question: “What is the capital of the Philippines?”; and with all the courage he could gather, the pupil seriously answered:

Letter “P”, Ma’am!

The questions vary from current events to common knowledge of Filipino values, taking care of the environment, health habits, etc. The committee-in-charge has instructions to prepare questions in varying degree of difficulty. Thus, there are questions for Kindergartens, grade 1 and so on. Each pupil wins P20.00 as cash prize - even if sometimes their answers had not really hit the nail on its head. What is important for the group is that the pupils have moved out from their shells and tried. With this little confidence gained, the pupils will learn that if they want something, they have to work for it. Asked what they would do with their money, the pupils gave several answers, as if they had won a big amount. There were answers like saving the money for Christmas, to buy clothes, slippers, toys, and, sadly, even *checheria* (junk foods). But one answer lingers up to now:

Ako ihatag sa akong mama aron mopalit og lami nga pagkaon. (I will give it to my mother so that she will buy delicious foods.)

Unfortunately, the team cannot always include the quiz bowl in every outreach conducted, given the amount needed to put up this activity. One time, a graduate student had volunteered to shoulder the amount. When told that it might be a little too high for her, she said nonchalantly:

Don’t worry, Ma’am. I will tell my batch mates and close friends about our outreach. I know they will support us, especially that we plan to do charity for our reunion this year. And don’t you forget my beautiful sisters!

Indeed, the group was a blessing to the team. There were cash prizes for all pupils, ball pens from a certain company, three reams of bond paper, school supplies and, for the first time, umbrellas, and an additional amount for the team’s lunch!

With regards to cash donations, receipts are secured and posted online to assure the donor/sponsor that the

contribution was used properly. Sometimes, the sponsors live nearby, so the committee gives them the receipts and shows the items bought from the donation. The social media are also very useful platforms for transparency. This is how the group builds and maintains its trustworthiness.

People's generosity and sense of charity are so alive even in this time and age. People care, and people share. These are the hard-core facts spawned by these projects in the mountains. Wonderful stories why people, ordinary people at that, continue to give have emerged and motivated the group to continue its advocacy. Thus, from 2015 up to the present, it has already accomplished eight (8) community outreach projects. Thanks to all who supported and will continue to support. Trekking the mountains is not all fun, as what others envision it to be, but the thought of children, eagerly and patiently waiting, drives the sometimes-dampened spirits of the group. A father who works as a driver for one affluent family in the city disclosed:

Nah, sayo kaayo nimata ang mga bata, Ma'am. Alas 4:00 sa kadlawon nangaligo na kay moabot na lagi ang mga taga-Visca. Bisan usaog badlong, dili motuo nga alas 8:00 pa mo moabot, ma'am, kay nagsabot lagi kuno sila ila mga classmates. Excited na kaayo sa ilang bag-ong tsinelas og mokaon na spaghetti og hot dog. (The children woke up very early and took a bath even if it was still 4:00 in the morning. They were very excited because the teachers from Visca are coming. They were told that your group will arrive at 8 A.M., and that it was still very early for them to take a bath, but they would not listen because they were excited about their new slippers and to eat spaghetti and hot dog.)



Figure 3. Pupils patiently lined up for their share of the delicious meal.

There is something about the children that is very moving. During ocular visits, the team leader already collects the foot sizes of the children as well as other important data. This is done since the schools are far, and coming back is not feasible. So children trace the outline of their feet on a piece of paper and cut it. As others busy themselves in labelling their drawings, a little boy about nine (9) years old came up to the leader, and, with all the courage he could muster, asked timidly:

Ma'am, pwede apil pod ako manghud? Wa man siyay tsinelas. (Ma'am can my younger sister also have a pair of slippers?)



Figure 4. Seeing their foot sizes drawn on paper resonated excitement among pupils.

His eyes twinkled when he was assured that his sister would also have a pair of slippers. He went to his teacher and asked permission to leave the classroom. Then he left hurriedly and was seen running away from the school. About ten or 15 minutes later, he came back, breathing heavily, holding in his hand the paper which had the drawing of his sister's feet. It turned out after some questions that his sister had been sick for days and was absent from class. The little boy had to run home, about a kilometer downhill. It was a very touching moment!

The kindness of people always drives the team, and the team's concern for the children empowers them. Amazingly, there is a certain unseen force that energizes the group, and this is especially felt when there are setbacks encountered. One time, everything was set except for the transportation. The committee was informed that the university would not dispatch any of its buses. All kinds of vehicles were on standby because the university was host to a national athletic

meet. The problem was a big one. The school site was remote and the road was rough. No vehicle for hire showed interest of taking the group to the mountain barangay, except for a price that the group could certainly not afford.



Figure 5. Team members posed with the children before distributing pairs of slippers.

The date of the outreach was nearing, and there was no vehicle still. Discussion about this problem lingered on the group's page until out of the blue, a woman unknown to the group emerged and offered to help. She left a message online saying that she would shoulder the rent for the transportation. This wonderful person is a Filipina married to a foreign national, and a member of the team, aware of her penchant for charity, added her to the group. According to her:

I know how it feels to have nothing in life and to have no one to help you because I was once like them. Helping the children through your outreach is my way of doing a good turn. I have been blessed. Helping others makes me happy.

Because of this extraordinary woman, the team did not only have a ride to the mountain, but, for the first time, they were on an air-conditioned vehicle, their most comfortable ride ever. This kindhearted woman continues to support the group up to now. In the last outreach conducted, she shared grocery packs to the joy of parents and teachers in the barangay.

Often, the kindness of supporters stems from their personal experiences. The team has a member who is named the ice cream man. It is certainly obvious how he ends up being called one, but the story behind his choice to bring one big tube of ice-cream to share every outreach project is not. In the past, he was quick to say

that the ice-cream idea was based on his observation of how children of his officemates had always enjoyed ice-cream during parties. Thus, he thought of sharing this with the pupils in the mountains as well. Just recently, though, while he was encouraging the pupils to do good in their studies so that they could get out from poverty, he captured their attention with his story:

Sa bata pa ko, ganahan kaayo ko mokuyog sa ako mama sa merkado para mangumpura. Unya, ako makit-an ubang bata magkaon og ice cream kay palitan man sila sa ila mama. Maibog kaayo ko nila, mga kids, kay lami kaayo sila tan-awon magtilap-tilap sa ice cream. Unya wa man mi kuarta. Igo ra man sa among pagkaon. Bisan mohilak pa ko, di gihapon ko mapalitan. From that time on, ingon jud ko sa ako kaugalingon nga mag-study jud kog maayo aron makatrabaho kay kun duna na koy daghang kuarta, makapalit na ko og daghang ice cream. That was many years ago. Now, I have my work, and modesty aside, I can buy as much ice cream that I like, not only for myself but also for my family. For every outreach that I join, I always volunteer to share ice cream with all of you, kids, so that you will remember the story of my life and the lesson that I learned: no matter how difficult life is, if you study well and work hard, you can achieve your dreams. Okay ba, mga kids? (When I was a child, I liked to accompany my mother to the market. There I would see other children my age eating ice cream. As a child, I asked my mother to buy me ice cream, but she would always tell me that our money was just enough for our food. I would watch the children licking their ice cream with envy and tears in my eyes. From that time on, I told myself that I would study hard, find a good job so that I would have lots of money to buy ice-cream.)



Figure 6. Children savored the delightful taste of ice cream served by ice-cream man himself.

Kindness is like a spark that stimulates members to extend their support. A former member always contacts the team leader whenever she learns that another outreach is in the offing. Having served as leader for the food committee, she is aware that most pupils do not have enough nutrition for their age. She sends a private message that says what she wants for the pupils:



Ma'am, please give children something heavy and delicious to eat. How about burgers this time?

Fortunately, this licensed nurse-turned-teacher also insists that there must be enough for everyone. She knows well enough that the team also needs nourishment in order to serve others. What is admirable about her as well as all others who have pledged their support is they always look forward to the next project and promise to be there again.

CONCLUSION

Undeniably, poverty is anywhere in this country and the children in the mountains appear to be the most vulnerable victims. Being so, there is no panacea to eradicate this social problem at once. To address it calls for the concerted effort of all Filipinos. For its part, the team has found its own little way to fulfill its social responsibility. It cannot say that it has done enough, but it has promised to continue to harness the goodness of people whose commitment to help, regardless of their status or positions in life, is just waiting to be tapped. Moreover, other than social responsibility, the team goes home experiencing a

sense of fulfillment that is beyond words to explain. The sight of children waiving their hands, shouting their goodbyes at the top of their voices, and asking the team to come back soon gives it immense joy and a subtle punch in the heart. Perhaps it has done something for children who are deprived from a lot of things, and for their parents, too, who toil so hard yet still have less in life. Upon reaching home, members alight, apparently tired, but they never forget to say:

Until the next outreach, Ma'am!

And so, this advocacy continues so long as the team can. It will.

RECOMMENDATION

The team's stories of kindness gained from organizing community outreach projects cannot all be converted into printed words, given certain limitations. But based on experiences encountered, there is so much that even ordinary people can do to alleviate the misery of others. All it takes is for someone in the community to stand up and roll up his/her sleeves so that others will follow. Serving others does not require laurels on one's resume. All it needs is commitment, dedication and the resolve to serve others even if these deeds often go unnoticed. After all, the greatest reward comes from Above.

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