

Polio victim leads '08 TOYM awardees

by EDSON C. TANDOC JR.
Inquirer.net

FOR almost 20 years, his parents kept Rex Bernardo inside their house in Camarines Norte province and even built a cage where he could crawl back to hide whenever visitors came after he suffered from polio when he was five years old.

The family portrait in the living room did not include him. "I understood why. They were ashamed of me," said Bernardo, who never got the chance to go through basic education.

His hopes could not be caged, however. He managed to go to college, earn three master's degrees, teach in a university and win citations to make his parents proud.

This year, Bernardo, 38, is among The Outstanding Young Men (TOYM) awardees, joining Tourism Secretary Joseph Ace Durano, broadcaster Karen Davila and agriculture science researchers Antonio Alfonso and Christian Joseph Camagun.

The awarding ceremony will be held in Malacañang on Dec. 19. "I wanted to prove that disabled persons like me can also contribute to the development of our country," Bernardo said during a simple presentation of awardees yesterday morning.

This year's awardees comprise the 50th batch since the TOYM was launched in 1959 by the Junior Chamber International Philippines to honor "young men and women whose selfless dedication to their field resulted in significant contributions to the country and our countrymen."

Bernardo said that the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* opened opportunities for him. The newspaper featured his story in July 2007.

Triumph over disability

"There was a write up about my life and I got a very positive response," he said.

He was invited to deliver speeches and in August, he was awarded the Apolinario Mabini Presidential Award in Malacañang, which recognized services to the disabled sector.

Bernardo was cited not only for his personal triumph over his disability, but also for serving his community.

Today, he is not only an active volunteer to the Gawad Kalinga projects in the Bicol region. He also teaches in a small university in his home province, hoping to inspire more people.

"This is my expression of gratitude to the Lord," Bernardo said, explaining why he and his wife Marissa are active in volunteer work.

"There was a time when I questioned the Lord what really is the purpose of my existence," Bernardo recalled. He is delighted by the answer he got.

Though he did not go to school, he learned how to read, write and count from his mother, who was a teacher.

His hunger for knowledge was insatiable. He started reading the newspapers his father would bring home from the office when he was 8. He would read the school books of his siblings.

He spent his solitary childhood by writing stories, which he sent to magazines. It was both a source of hope and frustration.

'They love me after all'

"I could create a world for my characters when I could not even change my life," Bernardo said. "But after all my frustrations and disappointments, I still had a dream."

He wanted to go out of the house and study. So when he turned 20, he wrote a 12-page single-spaced letter to convince his parents to allow him to study in Metro Manila. His parents broke into tears after reading his letter, touched by his determination.

"It was then that I realized

that they love me after all," Bernardo said.

He was accelerated to college level and got into Trinity College, where he studied BS Psychology and made up for the lost years when he was caged.

"My life has just begun," he said. He made a lot of school friends, led many organizations, until he decided to run as vice chairman of the student council.

Some classmates joked: "How could you run as vice chairman when you cannot even walk?"

Bernardo won.

He later worked for the college as coordinator of the Disabled Enablement and Empowerment Program, which he helped establish in 1994, earning the school recognition as the first disabled friendly school in the country.

He was also granted scholarships by Trinity College, Asian Institute of Management and University of Sydney.

Though he has gone to several places, Bernardo chose to return to Camarines Norte, where he is now teaching at Mabini Colleges and lives with his wife Marissa and son Rexmar.

"I have experienced how to be somehow famous," Bernardo said, referring to how the *Inquirer* feature about him last year brought him recognition from various groups.

"But my contentment is in the simplicity of life," he added.

Though his story inspires disabled persons, he still dreams that "someday, disabled persons will not need many degrees just to be recognized by society."

He knows there is more to be done. "Every day, I still have to prove that I can be a teacher, that I can be a management consultant, that I can be a good father," he said.

But what matters is the recognition he gets from the Lord, from the people he inspires, and from his parents.

This year, his father prepared a family calendar with names of family members to be given out to some friends. The fourth in the family of six children, Bernardo's name is first in the list. ■

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