

Books as candy: The power of imagining a new reality!

"Each Step, no matter how difficult, is one more step closer to the top of the hill. To keep hope alive for one more heartbeat at a time leads to the light of the next sunrise, and the promise of a new day."

—Joseph Marshall III

CONFRONTED by iron bars on storefront windows, run-down, shabby-looking manufacturing establishments, boarded up doors, potholes to pass by, a forlorn school is what one expects. Perhaps blighted, underperforming, and another statistic of failure and bureaucratic neglect. Only to be delighted by a surprise to have an academically rigorous and excellent charter school!

Synergy Charter Academy or Synergy is located at the center of urban manufacturing in South Los Angeles, where majority residents are Latinos, African-Americans and a few Filipinos. The school is barely four years old, but its upward trend is exceptional, maybe unprecedented, as academic scores are from students in low-income communities who prove with their performance that they are as capable as students in wealthy zip code areas. They come from "unlikely to succeed" groups, if stereotypes are to be believed. Yet, this charter school defies illusions and has an inspiring story to share.

And imagining a new reality, they create a new one, through hard work and discipline, where academic excellence becomes part of this low-income community's heritage as well.

"The API score, which ranges from 200 to 1,000, is a measure of student achievement. Castelar, a neighbor school in downtown Los Angeles, has an API at 819 on the 2008 Academic Performance Index." (*Los Angeles Times*, January 2009). A nearby elementary school, Van Ness Elementary School is at 800. Synergy has much to be proud of, their 2008 API score is 899, previously at 846 in 2007, 811 in 2006 and 709 in 2005, Synergy's API scores are an upward incline towards excellence.

I was invited by Synergy Founder's Meg Palisoc and Randy Palisoc to join them at their annual Science Fair Contest. I was one of the 12 judges who had pizza lunch for that day's volunteer work. A goodwill gesture that was unexpected—but most appreciated!

Equally unexpected was to find excited first grade students explaining the habitat and life cycles of animals: avian, reptiles, humans, etc. Or a fifth grade student inviting me to join him as he explained what a solar-powered house is like. He showed how the solar energy worked as their group concocted melted ice-cubes into water during recess. Imagine, he said, that in the future, "we can use what is ambient to serve our earth's needs." He is not quite in middle school not even high school, yet his vocabulary is advanced, he did not hesitate to use words like ambient temperatures, or solar panels, and how they collect energy from the sun and then, into power.

He stood tall wearing his clean uniform, with a tie, exuding self-confidence, and he extended his hand for a handshake, inviting me to listen. He described first their team process, candidly sharing they were unsure in the beginning, faulty as they did not quite get along, but they remembered, "It is not about me, it is about the team, it is about Synergy." I could not contain my enthusiasm about them, who learned to contribute to make each other succeed, and by so doing, they actually helped themselves succeed as well. Their group won the coveted Science Fair team prize of medals and ribbons. No special trips or cash prizes, but the satisfaction of simply being acknowledged in front of the student body. A good value concept to teach the children, to be satisfied with team col-

laboration and completing a finished project!

Who could have anticipated I was meeting the fair's winner? Well, they did as they had a positive team attitude, which conveyed they are winners discovering the power of teamwork! It was not about the prize, it was about team synergy!

How did Synergy Charter Academy become one of the California's distinguished schools, and even surpass a counterpart, Westside-located Brentwood Science Magnet? How did it rank to be at the top 7 percent of all public schools in the State of California in just four years?

"Synergy Charter is an amazing school. I like to call it the 'mini college.' One day I walked onto the campus and observed that many of the children were sitting around reading chapter books, rather than running around wild on the campus, as I had just observed earlier when driving pass another nearby public school. No one was forcing these children to read they were doing it because they enjoyed it."

—Cecilia Hernandez

Books as candy

Prior to the school assembly, I watched the students devour books as if they were candy. They chose to stay in the central room to read, instead of playing. They chose to check out pocketbooks and treated them as precious objects. They started reading as if that was the most important task.

Older students with computer privileges were busy logging their answers into the computers, answers describing their understanding of what they just read, critically checking for theme and sub-themes.

"This school uses the Reading Counts program by Scholastic and they are having great success with it. The students want to read and use their free time to read, instead of goofing off. They receive extra recess time if in the top 25 for the whole school. The teachers are also very enthusiastic and supportive of one another. Parent involvement is a must at this school and helps keep things running smoothly."

—Synergy Charter staff member

And their parents? They were assembling green and black recyclable grocery bags, putting their own signatures of artistry in each of the bags while in the schoolyard. They too were productive.

Synergy's success is planned, it is intentional, and it is in their hiring of empowering and empowered teachers. During students' assembly, teachers are sharing a banquet table, with a series of laptops, to get their materials and then, to their classrooms. Well, not quite yet.

Teachers have to set up their classrooms. Their school materials are packed each Friday, the carpet rolled, and every Monday, they unpack to reveal their classrooms to be used for the week. On weekends, their classrooms are used for catechism classes conducted by the church. The building is leased by Synergy from the church.

Imagine if Synergy had their very own school building? Something like 22,000 square feet, not too big, not too limited either, but one that is first rate with music rooms, with a reading library, with enough classrooms for K-12, with a gymnasium, with basketball courts, with community rooms for the neighborhood to use.

Imagine if Synergy got even part of the bailout monies instead of Bank of America, imagine how

many jobs they can create in this industrial zone of Los Angeles? Imagine if they got the bailout monies instead of Wells Fargo who is now planning a junket for their 1,000 employees to Las Vegas, spending millions of taxpayers' monies? Imagine if they got donations from wealthy shareholders of East West Bank who managed to get some quarterly earnings in the millions? And imagine if one of those wealthy donors actually donated a building to Synergy for their use? Farfetched, I hope not, for philanthropic souls are out there.

Convergence gives Birth to Synergy. But, before we talk about structures, allow me to share how we have this blessing of a school right in the heart of South Los Angeles, where parents acknowledge what is right.

"Synergy Charter is an award-winning school in the inner city where all traditional public schools are struggling to meet state standards. Children attending this school are very goal-oriented. Administration, teachers, staff and parents all work together as a team to achieve great results, the learning process continues at home. Having experienced our neighborhood public school I appreciate and respect Synergy for their continuous

to one program, got technology and got good teachers?

And the convergence of Meg and Randy's actual experiences, one that reveals a system's problematic disparity, and another, that uses technology and complex math skills to challenge young minds became a converged dream of putting up their own school.

As Randy was transitioning out of the classroom, Meg immersed herself in teaching the students and inherited a library of teaching tools from Randy. Meg generously shares that her teaching mentor is Randy, who taught her the basic skills in teaching: attendance, how to convey concepts, how to build on these concepts so the students apply what they learned using their own vocabulary, or their own experiences, expanding on how they see their world. Randy generously acknowledges Meg's sacrifices, of taking a pay cut and not drawing an administrator's salary, even if she actually runs the school, in charge of administrative details, to assure the school has a balanced budget. To this day, she draws less salary than other schools' comparable administrators in favor of buying more books for children to read and giving them more field trips to get exposed to.

Actualized dreams towards Synergy

They set out to actualize their dream together. Mortgaging what they own, they took the risks and built Synergy school from scratch, distributing flyers and talking to skeptical parents, convincing them to enroll their children. Their dream was infectious: growing students as scholars, as readers, emphasizing they can write poems and multiple sentences, essays, even as first and second graders. They chose to invest in libraries, in books, in hiring good teachers.

From an "Open Court Reading" technique, students are taught phonics and phonemic awareness and these elementary school children are acquiring skills of fluency, vocabulary development and reading comprehension.

And now the biggest challenge is to find a building, a worthy structure to match the high caliber of content-rich learning they are creating for their students. Synergy will not stop, for even without a building to call their own, the Palisocs and Dr. Barbara Shannon opened another school, Synergy-Kinetic, a middle school with a well-rounded program this fall. "Their three-week summer school before the beginning of the school year saw these students creating slideshows using iMovie, they put on a play of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and they visited the campus of USC for a tour that included a visit to the football team's practice and a meal at a college dining hall." (Synergy's Spotlight Fall/Winter 2008).

All students at Synergy are programmed for higher education, towards attending a university to their liking, all they have to do for the moment is read, write, learn their math and computers and devour books as if they were candy.

And for us, citizens and readers, what we have to do for our shared responsibility to see this school succeed is to help them help our children, contact them at www.wearesynergy.org and help them find the school building they need. Would you help them achieve another milestone? I can be reached at prosyad@hotmail.com, let us continue our dialogue about schools. ■



RHIZOMES
Prosy Dela Cruz J.D.



Meg and Randy Palisoc, Synergy Charter Academy and Synergy - Kinetic Middle School Founders.
Photo by Prosy Delacruz.

hard work and effort. My oldest daughter was struggling academically prior to Synergy, now she meets and exceeds state standards in both English and Math."

—A parent

"How do you make up 13 years of poor schooling?" asked Meg Palisoc a few years ago. Working at USC, she was tasked to interview incoming freshmen for merit scholarships. What she found was while most were strong candidates; some emerged ill prepared by the school system in certain zip code areas, while others were strongly prepared, yet all received public funding.

Imagine if all were administered well towards excellence?

On the other hand, her husband, Randy Palisoc was having a transformational experience, teaching pre-Algebra to fourth graders at an inner city school. Imagine fourth graders dealing with complex concepts and Randy teaching to them using computers and the latest technology. Their math scores went up. After four years as a classroom teacher, he was selected by his principal to become a Title VII director (now Title III) to use technology for English language learners (a euphemism used for students who have yet to master English, or for whom English is a second language).

Imagine if the entire school, no longer limited

Senate apes House, clears bid colluders

THE immoderately greedy admin has had it with journalist Ramon Tulfo. It can no longer stand his thrice-weekly exposés of sleaze in highest places. He knows too much, having been chummy once upon a time with the First Couple. So it wants him silenced once and for all—the criminal way.

A compadre of Mon's with connections to the top warned him about the issuance of a death warrant. Mon in turn has told relatives and friends whom to blame in case anything happens to him. Let it be put on record: it would be best for Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to secure Mon.

GOTCHA
Jarius Bondoc

The farce is on, admin critic Leah Navarro said about yesterday's Senate hearing on bid rigging in a World Bank roadwork. Like the earlier coverup at the House of Reps, senators cleared the contractors whom the WB has banned from future biddings. Admin and opposition members chorused in blaming instead the WB for not releasing its report to them. Also virtually absolved was First Gentleman Mike Arroyo, who snubbed a Senate summons although named in excerpts leaked to the press. Inquiry head Miriam Santiago, whose husband is an admin appointee, was very nice to

Sec. Gary Teves and Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez. Only last week during the first hearing, she was demanding their sacking, along with Sec. Hermodenes Ebdane.

All this, despite Gutierrez's admission towards hearing's end that she received a stack of papers from the WB only two days ago. She has yet to study the documents, she said. The senators appeared uninterested and quickly adjourned. Filipinos lost the chance to know about the WB bidding mess.

Let's pray that the senators, if truly transparent, next disclose recent and forthcoming Malacañang releases of pork barrels.

Fisheries chief Malcolm Sarmiento theorized that seaquakes, among others, caused the beaching of 300 dolphins at Bataan. STAR reader David Williams, a retired American ship captain, extensively has researched the effects of undersea tremors on marine mammals. A whale conservationist since age 15, he published in the '80s a 106-page report entitled *Auditory Trauma as the Major Factor in Whales and Dolphin Stranding*. He writes:

"The dolphins traveled with the flow of Manila Bay surface currents, influenced by tidal flow and wind speed and direction. If the current carries them out to sea on a falling tide, they may return on the next rise. If winds remain steady, the pod will slowly leave the coast and head out to sea to-

wards China and the Gulf of Tonkin. If they survive for another week, they will strand somewhere near the Chinese island of Hainan.

"The US government was not ready in the '80s to talk about deaf dolphins and whales. Most scientists back then could not comprehend the intensity of pressure changes in the water above the epicenter of a potent seaquake. The climate has changed over the years. Still the US Navy and most governments don't want to talk about baro-trauma and auditory injury in whales and dolphins caused by sonar and oil industry air cannons. Air guns blasting away on the surface produce identical pressure disturbance as undersea quakes. Blasts used to explore for oil are nothing more than manmade earthquakes.

"Having polished my seaquake theory, I can predict with earthquake data whale stranding 30 days hence within 300 km of the beach. I could have easily predicted that dolphins would show up somewhere in the Philippines due to a massive quake near the equator. But I had no way to know there would be 300 animals or that they would head to Manila Bay. The problem with predicting in Asia is that there are so many islands and sandbars that can entrap an injured pod.

"The 300 dolphins were injured by a rather nasty group of over 120 seaquakes. The swarm started with a small tremor on Dec. 21, 2008. Things got hot Jan. 3 when a magnitude 7.6 temblor ripped

loose near the water's edge on Indonesia's Papua Island, 700 miles southeast of Davao. That quake hit at noon and was followed by over 120 aftershocks each one capable of injuring dolphins. Check out <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/view.php?id=36507>.

"It's like Navy Seals being exposed to rapid pressure change if depth charges are set off nearby. Feeding dolphins can be caught off-guard by sudden huge changes in the surrounding water pressure during a series of thrusting seaquakes. A dolphin suffers baro-traumatic injury in the head and middle ear sinuses if the rapid pressure change exceeds its ability to adjust.

"The volume of air in each sinus cavity is in direct proportion to the surrounding water pressure. As pressure increases, volume decreases; as pressure decreases, volume increases. Dolphins can normally deal with pressure change. But sometimes a major disturbance in the seafloor sends waves of changing pressures over the mass of an entire pod of dolphins. The pressure changes are too fast and excessive, causing the sinuses to expand and contract to the point of injury, disabling the entire pod at the same time.

"Often it is not only one seaquake that causes the stranding. Of thousands of beaching incidents we have studied, more than 80 percent were caused by swarms of ten or more tremors." (Philstar.com)

Pledging virginity in vain

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a year), they are also more likely to get pregnant (or infected) when they do decide to do the nasty. In a blog written for *RH Reality Check*, Chelsea Ricker observes: "The whole virginity pledge movement seems to be a means to reassure parents and other 'concerned'

adults rather than actually influencing the choices teens make for themselves. As part of the larger abstinence movement they fail, and in ways that seem to demonstrate the problems inherent in abstinence-only programs—that at best they don't inform teens of necessary public health

information and, more commonly, deliberately distort and falsify facts to undermine teens' sexual and reproductive health knowledge and ability to protect themselves. These programs are ineffective, unethical, and quickly becoming a national embarrassment."

Like playboy fathers repenting late in the day and

wishing their sons would not take them for role models, adults who coerce, frighten, threaten and lie to teens about sex are deluding themselves not just about young people but about life itself.

Ricker says that sexuality education should be taught to young people "not because it reduces teen pregnancy or STI rates, but because all people, especially young people,

have a right to accurate, complete and unbiased information about their bodies, their health and their sexuality. You teach kids about sexuality for the same reason you teach them history, math, and logic—they deserve the tools that help them understand and function in the world around them. It's education, and they have a right to that education." (*Inquirer.net*)