

The life lessons of Sarah Balabagan

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payment of blood money.

On July 31, 1996, Sarah was on her way home. She had survived her ordeal at the age of 16.

Upon her homecoming, Sarah's life changed dramatically. She received a hero's welcome and international media attention.

"It was like a fantasy world, and it helped me forget my bad experiences," she said. She ended up staying in Manila and continuing her studies, taking an examination that allowed her to get a high school diploma and move on to study mass communication at a computer college.

Unfortunately, her studies were put on hold when she got pregnant in 1998 with her first daughter, Arrah, now 11 years old. Arrah's father was a broadcast journalist and one of Sarah's close friends in Manila.

"I was vulnerable because I was still very emotionally sensitive," she said. "He was the first man who ever treated me like I was special." However, the relationship did not last.

In 1999, Sarah's life story came out as a movie starring her favorite Filipino actress Vina Morales, and she received 4 million pesos for the film, as well as more media attention. She appeared on TV talk shows, ended up co-hosting one, took voice lessons and began her career as a recording artist, composing songs meant to inspire other overseas workers.

"I got caught up in all these events," she said. "Things were easy."

In 2003, she married Russell Vergara and they had two children, Russell Jr. and Saira Lyn.

But it was at this point in her life when the trauma of her past began to catch up with her.

"I had no idea how to handle the responsibilities of family," she said. "I thought I was okay, but deep inside I had not yet healed emotionally. I was tired of my life. Success didn't mean anything. I thought it would have been better if I had died in the UAE."

After struggling with suicidal tendencies and seeing her marriage fall apart and end in divorce, she began seeking psychiatric help. Fellow recording artist Dulce Amor referred her to a therapist who was rooted in the Christian faith, and from there she also started seeking counsel from a pastor.

"I would tell the pastor that I still felt the pain of the hundred lashes on my back," she said. "He told me, 'your hundred lashes don't compare to the punishment Jesus received on the cross, but he took it out of His love for you.' It struck me and I decided to give my life to God."

Things started going uphill from there, she recalled. As she continued to seek counseling and attend Bible studies and church services, her depression lifted. "The emptiness started filling up,"



Sarah Balabagan

Photo by Alex Cabansagan

she said.

However, her family was not thrilled with her change of faith. Sarah's mom was furious and tried to change her mind by telling her that Christians go to hell and by sharing stories of Muslims getting killed for renouncing their faith. When this failed to convince Sarah, her mother did not speak to her for months.

Both family and friends were worried that she would be harmed for turning her back on Islam,

especially since in many cases, converts to Christianity are killed even by their own family members, based on their principle of "honor killing."

"In Islam, the penalty for renouncing the faith is death," she said. "But I knew that God wouldn't allow anything to happen to me. And I thought of that verse that says, 'to live is Christ, to die is gain.'"

These days, Sarah's faith propels her to do pretty much everything. With a Christian album out called *Salamat Sa'Yo (Thanks To You)*, a full schedule of church visitations and plans well under way to establish a nonprofit organization called Angat, Bagong Bayani, Angat (Rise, New Hero, Rise) or ABBA, Sarah is excited about her life, her children and her ministry, drawing from her own experiences to help others.

"ABBA is a foundation that will focus on overseas workers who are victims of rape, maltreatment and abuse," she said. "We want to give hope and new dreams to these people."

She said that many overseas workers who come home after experiencing abuse from the employers receive no financial, medical or emotional support from the Philippine government. She wants to change this through her foundation, which will be funded by her album sales.

She is also praying for a lifetime partner. "It's still different if you have a companion in life," she said, smiling thoughtfully. "I'm not in a hurry [to get married again], but it would be nice."

In the meantime, she keeps herself busy with plans to continue recording her songs—most of which are inspired by her personal experiences—raising her three children and gathering support for ABBA. She says she is amazed by the joy and the peace she feels even when looking back on her past.

"It doesn't matter where you are in life," she said. "No matter who you are, everyone needs the Lord in their life."

*Sarah Balabagan will be at the Heights Worship Center International Ministries, 2531 Vallecito Drive, Hacienda Heights, CA 91745 on Sunday, April 26 at 10:45am. For more information, call Rev. Jaren Lapasaran at (909) 709-1725 or log on to www.hwcim.org.

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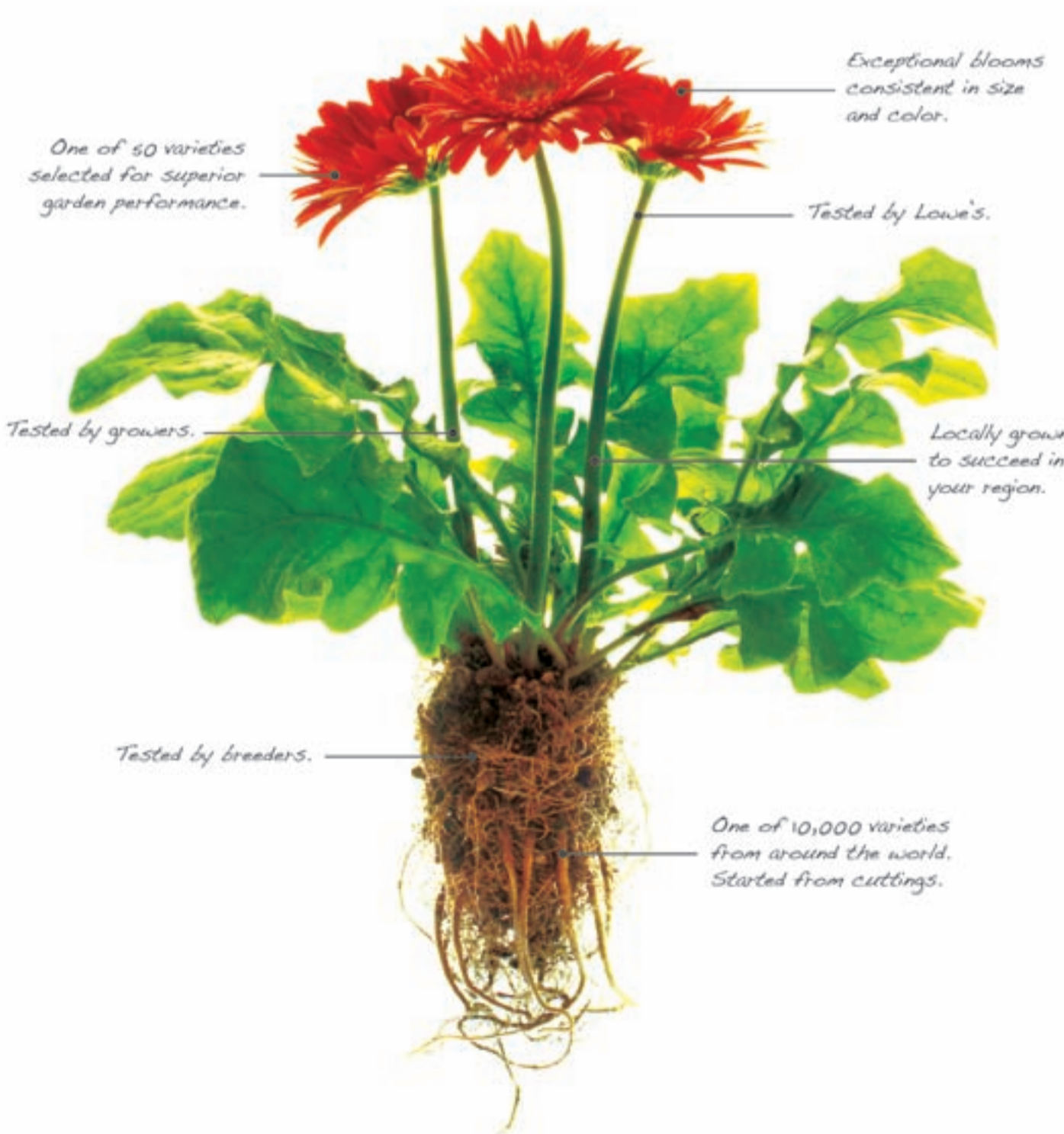
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