

Only for the Brave

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WIFE, MOM, MISSIONARY

Light rain from the window touched my face tonight as I put my daughter Calliya to sleep. I don't know why, but it truly felt like God's hand brushing my face and gently reminding me of a promise that I had made on a rainy evening, many nights ago, in Panglima Estino, Sulu.

Together with 200 others, I had made a commitment to tell others about my Sulu story and yet after almost a month, I have not done that. At first, I kept saying it was because there are some things in life that simply cannot be captured by words, and to even try would be a terrible injustice to the experience.

Now, I acknowledge that I just lacked the courage to put into words one of the most life changing, defining moments of my life. But tonight, allow me to live out the lesson of Sulu.

ONLY FOR THE BRAVE.

This is my first step.

When the rain started to pour, Mari (Oquinea) and I decided to take shelter in one of the small huts just beside the stage area – we could not have made a better decision. The young GK leaders also went there to discuss the talking points for the evening session, and about an hour later, Mayor Munib Estino arrived.

It was a Divine Appointment, that came complete with their fantastic coffee planted and harvested from their very own land. Mayor Munib sat down, and we mistakenly thought we were there to give him some talking points. Boy, were we wrong.

He began to narrate how, at 17 years old, he was compelled to fight for his faith, for his family, his people and their land. He told us how they fought for eighteen months, how he had lived in a fox hole for days with only rain to sustain his tired body, and only the deep conviction that he was doing this for Allah and his people to nourish his weary soul.

He told us how his father had sent him off to battle with this blessing. "Inshallah, dito ka mamatay na pinaglalan ang Islam sa Estino, sana maghalo muli ang dugo mo sa lupa natin."

"God willing, may you die fighting for Islam in Estino. May your blood be joined with our land."

I had never, in all my life, heard anyone speak of his love for God and his love for his land and his people in that way. I too am a parent, and I can honestly say that it would take a lot for me to be able to say something like that to my son. And even after all these years of serving in GK, I knew my conviction paled in comparison to his.

In this simple prayer and blessing of a father to his son, there were no fancy words; no distinction between holiness and heroism, no dichotomy between love for God and country, and no confusion about his mission to serve Allah and fight for his people.

This Muslim challenged me to live out my faith in its fullest expression. And it was only our first night.

Everyday that we were there, it kept raining. But the rain allowed us to enjoy precious time with each other, "wasting time" doing nothing but exchanging stories, pouring our hearts out and simply basking in the convergence of courage and conviction that we all shared.

There was no pressure from partners, no deadlines to be finished. We all lived together, prayed together, ate together, slept together, exercised together, built together. There was no CFC or GK, no Muslim or Christian, no Manileno or Bisaya, no Pinoy or Australian, no Marine or civilian. We were one team, one army. There were no experts – everyone there was eager to listen, to learn, to lend a hand, and to share with one another. We would wake up to the sound of people chatting, offering a cup of coffee, announcing that breakfast was served.

It brought to life a beautiful Bible verse that guided our work in the early days...

"The community of believers was of one heart and one mind, and they shared with one another everything that they had."

The rain brought us closer to the heart of the mission : to give care.

And on our last day, as we boarded the trucks and passed by every home on our way to the pier, a beautiful sight greeted us :

Young Tausug children ran out of their homes and bid us farewell with only two words chanted over and over again. **WALANG IWANAN! WALANG IWANAN!** I can still remember the faces, the heavy accent when they said the words, and I can still feel my heart swell and the tears start to form in my eyes again.

These Tausug children from the Islamic municipality of Panglima Estino hardly knew any Tagalog words. They also hardly knew anything about Christians. But because we simply decided to build in Sulu, these Muslims at a young age will know two things. First, that Christians came to share their lives and build homes with them, and second, that Christians taught them two powerful Tagalog words : Walang Iwanan. This is the seed of peace that will grow and bear fruit in generations to come.

It was our collective action that became the best witness of each other's faith.

The symbol of the cross right beside the crescent, and the handprint of every builder in the GK Rahmat Village in Panglima Estino is but a reminder of this Sacred Gift.

Last week, I brought my son Aaron to the first-ever Bayani Challenge Kids Edition in Laguna. Rain must be an important part of the Bayani Challenge experience this year, because it was also raining cats and dogs on the day of their build. Instead of letting this dampen their spirits, the KFC Coordinators and kids decided they would continue as planned.

They marched joyfully in the rain, carrying signs that said "God's little builders." They played in the mud puddles on the way to the build site, and sang songs while passing hollow blocks that they could hardly carry. They cried out in joy and danced in wild abandon as the whole experience was capped off with the fire hose bath. I watched in amazement as my own son joined these very young children, who got their feet wet and hands dirty, and took their place in history as builders, for God and country.

I stood with admiration and pride, as they proudly sang their song, *Batang bayani, ang galing ng batang Pilipino, Batang bayani, alay sa Diyos, bayan at mundo, Batang bayani, kayang kaya natin ito, Batang bayani, isigaw mo sa buong mundo, Batang bayani ako!*

In them I saw no confusion -- only clarity of purpose, passion and purity -- all the qualities that we look for in our leaders. And I realized very quickly that the conviction that I knew I lacked in my heart when I heard Mayor Munib speak was already present and palpable in these young hearts -- in my son's heart!

Last March 28, Luis and I brought our eldest boys, Aaron (my son) and Manu (his son) to the Planting Day in GK Yolanda Village. They were able to plant a few kangkong seedlings in one family's plot and today, Cherrie Atilano, our young fulltimer, sent me this text.

"Hi Kuya Luis and Ate Issa. Just wanted to let you know that the residents of GK Yolanda were able to do their second harvest, and a family of four now has food on the table because of the seedlings that Aaron and Manu helped to plant."

And so I face the future with courage and hope, because this next generation will build a world that is better than the one they were born into. I have hope because our children will not fail us, because the seed was planted in the best and most fertile soil -- in the very hearts of our children! And all that we need to do is nurture it and take care of it.

One day, very soon, they will be ready to take their place as OUR leaders, the new Davids.

Let us not fail them. God, grant us the grace to be faithful.

"There's a new generation that is taking their place. Lord we surrender to Your will, let it be done. Come this day, have Your way, let Your kingdom come." ■



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