

Sibol

Agricultural Training Institute's Treasury of Inspiring Stories





Sibol: ATI's Treasury of Inspiring Stories

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Sibol

Growing with the people, the land, and the self



The idea that something good can be found between the haystack of challenges is a hallmark trait of the Filipinos, especially the farmers. By birth, they have this ability to look past problems and see the good in everything. Believing that things would go better in the agriculture sector, Filipino farmers look forward with beaming smile.

Sibol chronicles not just the success stories of the featured farmers, but also the challenges they encountered and conquered along the way. It also accounts their attitude and their ineptness as they journey towards progress. This book also documents their wisdom, their motivations, and their hope and dreams not just for their future but also for the agriculture industry as a whole.

Sibol is a package bitter-sweet narratives sealed with farmers' smiles.



In the current socioeconomic state of the country, it may seem that Filipinos are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty and hunger; that progress remains a distant dream. However, stories of struggle and triumph are evidence of significant developments.

This book is a compilation of success stories in the agriculture sector that have created a massive impact in rural communities. Every story tells us how people are committed to go the extra mile for the development of the agriculture and fisheries sector. Their narratives are a manifestation of the promising opportunities in agriculture. Each provides proof of accomplishment despite several challenges in our journey to rural progress and sustainable development.

In this book, we aim to motivate and inspire the farmers and fishers in pursuing their agricultural endeavors and in capacitating themselves to attain progress. We highlight series of transformations in the lives of the people in the countryside with extension interventions carried out by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI). Aside from sharing best practices in agriculture, these stories are intended to contextualize development as a process of improving the knowledge, skills, and attitude of people.

The collection of success stories is likewise made to encourage institutional partners, stakeholders, the youth and other individuals to support and invest in various agricultural programs and agenda. Investment in agriculture is needed to improve productivity and sustainability.

Moreover, these success stories offer a qualitative measure of the ATI's extension interventions. The ATI has remained steadfast in helping the underprivileged experience the life they deserve through our various extension programs and interventions. As a developing country, we are still coping with the new realities of the contemporary world. This book serves as an evaluative tool reinforcing the role of the Institute in empowering and building capacities of farmers, fishers, agricultural extension workers, women, and the youth.

Success is what drives people forward. *Sibol* is a documentation of real stories demonstrating real success. May this book ignite inspiration to every individual seeking success in the field of agriculture and fisheries.


Alfredo S. Aton, MPS-DM
Officer-in-Charge, Director

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4H

Tilling the Land is by Chance but Nurturing It is a Choice

BY JONABELLE C. TAGGUEG

For many youths, farming is not a choice. For Christian Valdez, becoming a farmer was by chance but staying in the farm was his choice.

In 2010, Christian took care of on their three-hectare farm when his father became an active village leader. At that time, Christian had no choice but to help his parents in farming because they couldn't afford his education.

The Valdez family grew banana, corn, and rice. At a young age, Christian observed that the farm was not productive because of meager harvests. He blamed natural calamities and his lack of knowledge in farming. The first cause of his problem was unavoidable, but the second one had plenty of solutions. Persistent in finding solutions to these problems, Christian joined the local chapter of the 4-H Club.

The Beginning

As an active young farmer, Christian joined his fellow 4-H Club members from the different parts of Region II in the Adopt-a-Farm Youth Program of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) in 2014.

The 4-H Club (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) is an organization of out-of-school youth and in-school youth who are involved in livelihood projects and agricultural programs. The organization aims to provide opportunities to the youth, enhance their productivity and reliance, promote virtues, and develop their potentials through learning by doing.

During the four-month training program, Christian was exposed to various farming technologies, especially in organic and integrated farming. It was during one of those nights, while resting from day-long farm work in Kayapa, Nueva Vizcaya, when he realized that with proper knowledge, capital, and determination, farming can be a profitable endeavor. He then started to dream about what he would do once he gets back to his farm after the training program. "I am excited to apply the knowledge and skills I have learned from my farmer-teacher," Christian proudly said.

He went home after the training program full of hope, knowledge, and with a vision to transform his farm into a more productive endeavor. He



started planting various kinds of fruit trees and vegetables and integrated it with rice, fishpond, and piggery and poultry projects, making his farm highly diversified. He diverted spring water into his farm by establishing a concrete water collecting dam and equipped it with a hose and pipes into his farm.

Now, his dream has become a reality. Christian has turned their three-hectare unproductive land into an integrated farm.

The Valdezes' farm is now ready to be awarded with a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certificate—all the requirements are ready. He has built a nursery and a storage house for his farm equipment, farm implements, and other supplies. He has likewise constructed a farmhouse equipped with complete amenities for homestay participants and visitors.

Continuous Development

Simultaneously, Christian developed his farm and encouraged himself to become more productive. He does his best to be a model to his fellow youth and lead them in all barangay development activities.

The youth in his community trust his leadership, so he was elected

as president of the 4-H Club in their local chapter and their club's municipal federation.

Christian Valdez's farm was chosen as one of the Learning Sites for Practical Agriculture of the Agricultural Training Institute – Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) II. He was provided with funding in establishing his training hut. The learning site is a venue for all the trainings conducted by the local government unit of Angadanan in the forest region. Moreover, the Department of Agriculture-Cagayan Valley Research Center also provided assistance through the provision of coffee and fruit tree seedlings.

Reaping his Success

In just three years, Christian has reaped success in farming. He now enjoys harvesting better yield from his rice and vegetable farm.

Most importantly, he won the 2016 regional search for Gawad Saka award in the most outstanding young farmer category. "It is a blessing. I did not expect it. I just did my best to improve the farm and it is a success. I have a good yield and I even won the Gawad Saka [award]," Christian humbly exclaimed. He now represents his region on the national level.

Aiming for higher education after he received his diploma in high school through the Alternative Learning Skills in 2016, Christian plans to take up Bachelor of Science in Agriculture this coming school year. He views this as another success because he never thought he would reach this far. He has also applied for a scholarship in the Young Filipino Farmers Training Program in Japan (now Young Filipino Farm Leaders' Training Program in Japan) and is quite confident that he will be accepted to the program.

Sharing the Blessings

Christian and his family never forget to share their blessings with their neighbors. It is the tradition of the family to hold a feeding program and gift-giving activity for poor children once a year.

In 2015 and 2016, the outreach program was conducted at Barangay Bannawag, Angadanan and Barangay Udungan, San Mariano, Isabela. He distributed free lunch and snacks and pairs of slippers to indigenous children.

In July 2016, he hosted 10 out-of-school youths from the provinces of Region II who were undergoing the same Adopt-A-Farm Youth Program he once attended.

For a month and a half, he shared his knowledge on integrated farming and was

the youth's farmer-teacher during their training. His most fervent wish is for his fellow young farmers to follow his path and work on their dreams.

Truly, Christian was destined to be a farmer; a farmer-leader. Tilling the land was by chance but nurturing it was his choice.

From a shy high school dropout five years ago, he has now developed into a smart and confident young farmer leader who is ready to share his success to fellow young farmers. He is a young farmer worthy of emulation by the youth.



Corn



SANNY BUNCHA

Man of Innovation

BY JAMILA MONETTE B. BALMEO

“Ito na yung retirement ko. At this age gusto ko makita na into farming na talaga ako,” Sanny Buncha, a 44-year-old corn farmer from Lucena City, Quezon, pointed out. His interest in farming was influenced by his parents. “Nakita ko sa mother and father ko na mahilig sila mag-farming, magtanim-tanim. Sa aming siyam na magkakapatid, ako lang yung napahilig sa farming. Ito yung field na nakahiligan ko,” Sanny shared.

The Beginning

For more than a decade, Sanny worked as an engineer at Ginebra San Miguel. Though a significant amount of his time was spent on work, this didn't stop him from pursuing his passion for farming. He started learning on his own. “Every time after work—eight hours of work—*pupunta na ako sa farm kasi may inuupahan ako dating lupa sa Pagbilao, kasi gusto ko lang mag-farm. Yung knowledge ko in farming nakukuha ko lang sa libro. Basa-basa lang. Noong 2005, nag-focus na ako on farming talaga. Um-attend ako ng mga trainings lalo na yung sa mga corn, saka yung high value [crops],*” Sanny explained.



Corn as commodity

Corn, which is widely grown and produced in the Philippines, is considered one of the most important staple crops for Filipinos. For some, it is even a major source of income. According to Sanny, “*Naka-focus ako sa corn dahil yan ang nakikita ko na high value [crops]. Pangalawa is yung tinatawag natin na short term crop. Gusto ko ma-explore pa at maipakita sa iba, yung iba pang value added product o value chain dito sa corn. Maraming produktong makukuha sa corn.*”

Aside from corn, Sanny has also ventured into other commodities, specifically soya. Soya is considered as companion plant for corn. It performs various beneficial roles in corn production. As Sanny enumerated its importance, “*Yung soya siya yung nakaka-attract nung mga beneficial na insekto na kumakain ng insekto ng corn. Pangalawa yung soya is nitrogen fixer ng lupa. Pangatlo, dahil pina-practice natin yung sustainable farming on corn, yung katawan nung soya, paghinarvest natin ito, pwede nating gamitin as nitrogen. Ang challenge sakin dito is to produce an organic soya and organic corn para mabuo na yung produkto na organic livestock.*”

Trainings

Sanny proudly shared, “*Every time ako na lumalabas ng bahay may certificate ako kasi galing ako sa training. Ito na yung pinaggugulan ko sa lahat is panay training.*” He started attending trainings conducted by the ATI like Farmers’ Field School (FFS) on Corn, Training of Trainers (ToT) on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), ToT on HACCP, Integrated and Diversified Organic Farming System (IDOFS), and Value Chain Analysis. “*Yung mga trainings na binigay ng ATI, ito opened up many doors and windows for me. Nung una kasi isang window lang nakikita, which is business. Una kong nakita, nagustuhan at ginaya is*

“*Nung na-expose ako sa learning ng ATI, in-expose ako sa tamang pamamaraan ng pagsasaka, maging climate-smart tayo. Dapat pala pangalagaan din natin ang ating kalikasan.*”

SANNY BUNCHA

yung learning, I do now engage in teaching. Gusto ko talaga makapagturo. And through that, nakakapagturo na tayo simula nung pina-attend ako ng ToT trainings kagaya nung GAP ToT,” he emphasized. More than that, the ATI has played a significant part in Sanny’s career as a farmer. “*Kung susumahin natin lahat ng tinuro ng ATI, lahat ay may pakinabang para sa farmers. Ako, I do thank ATI. Laki talaga ako ng tunay na magsasaka through learnings,*” Sanny added.

Awards

As proof of his accomplishments, Sanny has received awards from provincial and regional levels. He was chosen as the Outstanding High Value Commercial Crop for 2008 by the Local Government of Lucena City. From 2013 to 2014, he was hailed as the Regional Gawad Saka Awardee. In 2015, he was awarded as the Natatanging Lucenahin Award sa Pagsasaka from PEZO and Natatanging Magsasaka Provincial Level. That same year, Sanny also received the appointment as Magsasaka Siyentista of Farmers’ Information and Technology Services Office of the Provincial Agriculturist in Quezon.

Advocacies

Currently, Sanny is the Founding President of Lucena Corn Growers Federation, which already has 60 existing members. The association was the first corn growers federation formed in Lucena City through the efforts of Sanny. *“Binuo ko yung samahan ng mga magmamais para mayroong kumatawan sa corn sa Lucena City,”* he shared.

Another advocacy planted in Sanny’s mind is natural farming. *“Ang advocacy ko ngayon is natural farming. Nung na-expose ako sa learning ng ATI, in-expose ako sa tamang pamamaraan ng pagsasaka, maging climate smart tayo. Dapat pala pangalagaan din natin ang ating kalikasan. Doon pumasok yung GAP Certification on Corn para mapasok ko yung organic.”* As a result, his farm received the certification on GAP. *“Noong June 2016, na-certify yung farm as GAP producer ng corn,”* he revealed.

With his many ideas, Sanny plans to develop IDOFS farming. *“Magiging corn, soya, livestock integration. Lahat sustainable siya sa pamamagitan ng corn soya. Maipakita dun pa sa iba nating mga farmer na yung system ng integration ng corn, soya, at livestock is sustainable,”* Sanny stated.

Trials

Despite his many achievements, Sanny is not exempted from disasters caused by calamities. *“Noong bagyong Glenda pinakamalakas na sa atin yun. Tinamaan ng bagyo itong [cornfield] that is four hectares punong-puno ng corn. Na para siyang sinuklay, nakababa lahat. And then ako nakangiti lang ako, nakatawa lang. Sabi nga nila bakit nakangiti ako, eh nagtumbahan lahat ng mais ko? Sabi ko babangon din yan paglipas ng tatlong araw. So, after three days nagbangon nga. Yun ang kagandahan ng corn,”* he said. It did

not stop him. He just continued what he started.

Innovations

Fortified organic fertilizer, shredded corn stalk, and weed management tool are just some of the on-going innovations Sanny has lined up. *“Maraming produktong makukuha sa corn. Ang isa sa tinututukan ko ngayon is yung katawan ng corn is gagawing fertilizer. Yung fertilizer na yun is specific for corn to produce ng maganda. Nag-innovate ako ng tools na ikakabit sa mower or grass cutter para di tamaan yung mga corn ko. Nalinisan ng weeds pero hindi nadamay yung mga corn.”*

The latest in his list of innovations is a one-stop shop for organic inputs. *“Kung mayroon tayong one-stop shop, sa palagay ko malaki ang maitutulong ko sa larangan ng organic farming. Kasi once na magkaroon na tayo ng one-stop shop for organic fertilizer/compost, makakapag-produce na sila ng organic corn, organic soya. Once na ma-develop ko that is a major breakthrough to me na pwedeng makatulong sa organic production.”*

When asked what is his key goal in life, Sanny simply replied, *“Ang pinaka-end goal ko dito as a farmer is yung nakaupo ka sa kubo tas nagkakape-kape ka na lang. Lahat sila andyan na. Every morning paggising mo nandyan na: itlog ng manok, chicken, gulay. Kukunin mo na lang sa farm mo hanggang hapon nandyan yung pagkain mo. That is sustainability.”*

His advice to other farmers is this: *“Kailangan may passion ka when you engage in farming.”*



An A-Maize-ing Tale of a Mangyan Farmer

BY JEZELL DT. DELA CRUZ

Far from modern technologies and developed societies, among the first to feel the mountainous landscape beneath their feet are the Mangyans. They are the tribal people who have been living in the forests of Mindoro for so long now. After generations of solitude and having experienced hostility among lowlanders, the Mangyans have embedded inferiority in themselves. Many lowlanders seem to have that image of Mangyans as aloof and dirty inhabitants of the mountains and such discrimination has caused the Mangyans to be uncomfortable and afraid to mingle with lowlanders.

Twenty-two-year-old Tadeo Saragno of the Tao-Buhid tribe stands out from the rest of the Mangyans. After training under the Pantribong Sanayang Pang-Agrikultura (PSP) and the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) MiMaRoPa, he now teaches fellow Mangyans and even some lowlanders about crop production technologies. He does this with his head up high; even when there are doubts about him, he remains undeterred.

Tadeo's Take-off

Just like other Mangyans, Tadeo first

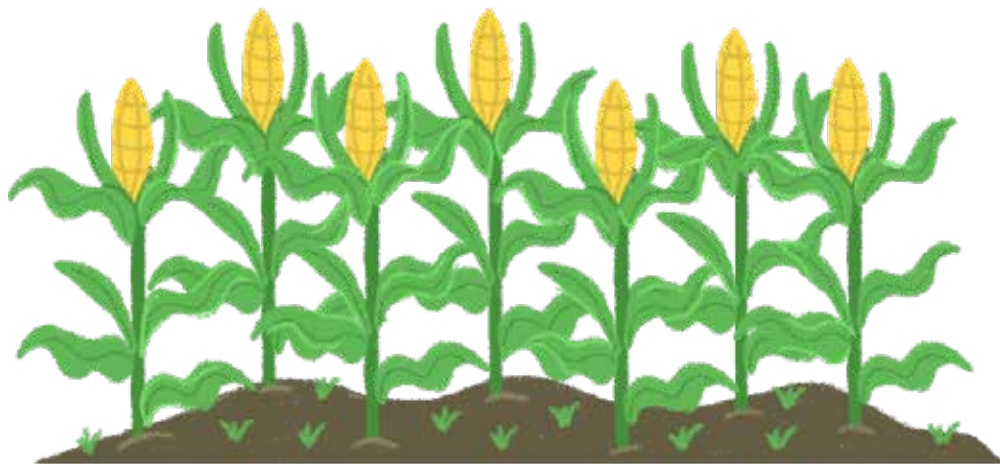
learned his ancestors' way of farming—the slash-and-burn or *kaingin* system. “Mangyan families mostly depend on farming. We usually practice the *kaingin* system because that's what we grew up with. We would cultivate one area and then move to another to plant again. However, we did not burn forests with permanent trees, only those areas with weeds and small and replaceable trees, because we also want the forest to regrow,” Tadeo clarified.

However, his “*kaingin*” practice gradually changed when he studied at PSP in Baco for two years. PSP is a school administered by nuns that provides academic and holistic education for young Mangyans.

Tadeo was already content with learning among his tribal group. But things changed after their tribal leader asked him and a friend to attend the Season-Long Training of Trainers (TOT) on Corn Production of the ATI MiMaRoPa.

Tadeo the Eager Beaver

Shy and nervous, Tadeo attended the Season-Long TOT on Corn Production of the ATI in 2013. He said that he was afraid to interact with



the “*damoongs*” (Mangyan term for “strangers” or “lowlanders”) because he believed that they were different and they would judge him. He also found himself under-equipped to face the new millennium.

“There were four of us indigenous peoples (IPs) who attended the TOT. At first, I was nervous about mingling with the lowlanders because I am an indigenous person while they were very advanced in terms of knowledge on technologies,” Tadeo shared.

Full of doubt, Tadeo almost did not participate in the training. “I told myself that we will learn nothing because I thought that all the topics will be discussed in English. However, we had no choice but to attend because we were sent by our nuns and tribal leaders,” he confessed.

With the eagerness to fully understand the topics, Tadeo requested the training management to translate all the lessons to Tagalog, “I told them that we cannot understand the topics if they were written or spoken in English. We were glad that they accommodated our request.”

During the training, all materials and presentations were in Tagalog. Because they were comfortable with

the language used, Tadeo said that they did not feel left out. He learned to deal with and bridge the cultural differences with his co-participants. He said that he was even invited to sleep over at his co-participant’s house. He made a lot of friends and they even started calling each other “*tropa*.”

“I feel really happy because I gained friends who do not look at us as low-class people. Sometimes, when we had assignments or presentation, they volunteered to help me,” he recounted. He also narrated that the field school helped him to thoroughly understand the technology used in corn production. “We were tasked to manage a corn site. There, I learned a lot about land preparation, cultural management, and pest and diseases management—to harvesting. They likewise taught us about micro-teaching and how to deal with other people,” he added.

“I learned from the ToT that we can still make the soil productive even though we are focused on cultivating in just one area. You just have to have the right timing and apply appropriate technologies,” Tadeo proudly stated.

Because of the training, he also

realized the adverse effects of their traditional *kaingin* farming practice, “I hadn’t thought about how our way of farming affects bio-diversity and the climate until I attended the ToT. Before the ToT, we just planted corn and other crops with no specific distance. Then, after harvest, we would look for another area to slash and burn. But now, I learned that even in one area, we can plant it over and over and apply different technologies to make it productive.”

Tadeo the Explorer

After the ToT, the Samahan ng Pangtribong Iglesiang Evangelika ng mga Mangyan (SPEIM) tapped him to be a resource person on corn and other commodities for his fellow Mangyan youth. SPEIM is an organization of Mangyans in Mindoro that manages the tribes in the province—with programs on education, religion, livelihood, and others.

After two years with SPEIM, Tadeo moved to Sitio Tamisan, Poypoy, Calintaan, Occidental Mindoro to cultivate his own farm, applying the technologies he learned from the ToT. “I applied the system of intercropping vegetables and crop rotation of corn, beans, and rice in my farm. To further maximize the potential of my farm, I also raised native pigs, goat, and chicken,” he cheerfully said.

Tadeo also confessed that since he has no money to buy equipment and fertilizer, he used manual methods in farming. He even joins “*saknong*” or “*bayanihan*,” where Mangyan farmers help fellow farmers plant their crops.

Tadeo uses compost as fertilizer,

which he learned from the PSP and the ToT. “Due to financial constraint, I make my own fertilizer. I mix banana stalk, madre de cacao, and manure. I decompose it for about one month, and I would just add raw materials to my compost,” he confessed.

He also said that he practices the detasseling technique to control corn borers as part of integrated pest management for corn.

“One of the techniques I learned from the ToT is the detasseling technique, which is done by removing the tassel of a corn plant, one row in every three rows. Since I am familiar with insect pests and beneficial insects, I use it as control measure for pest and diseases,” he shared. “Although I wanted to apply other techniques like the trichogramma, I have no known sources of it in our area.”

Using the available resources he has, he was able to harvest more than what he used to. He also earns from other cash crops that he planted simultaneously with the corn or palay. According to Tadeo, the most important realization he got from the training is how to use the land continuously and more productively.

Tadeo the Expert

Tadeo proudly shared that the knowledge he gained is not kept to himself and for his farm only. He was also tapped by their Mangyan leaders to teach other Mangyans the technologies he learned from his school and the ATI. Using the lectures and reading materials given by the ATI, Tadeo taught them various farming technologies in Occidental Mindoro during training activities in agriculture.



However, things were not easy for Tadeo. The resolve of their fellow Mangyans to hold on to their traditions made him the target of discrimination. Yet, Tadeo vowed not to give up. "It is difficult to teach most IPs because they are very cultural. They do not easily accept technologies because they still do what our ancestors taught or what our traditions dictate," he confessed.

His driving force to continue sharing his knowledge grew as, eventually, some of his fellow Mangyan farmers accepted and gradually adopted the new ways of farming he imparted. In fact, a number of them visited his farm to see and learn more about his technologies. Tadeo would also come by and help those who needed assistance, especially in managing pests and diseases of corn and other crops.

"They are really interested in what I impart to them because, aside from lectures, I also demonstrate the technologies to them so they can understand it better," Tadeo said.

Esrum Macapagal, chairman of Brgy. Ligaya, Popyoy, Calintaan and member of the Tao-Buhid Tribe, is among those whom Tadeo has trained.

"I remember the days when we had to buy our food such as vegetables, palay, and other crops. But when Tadeo trained us how to plant crops and the technologies he uses, most of the food we eat now come from our own farms. With his guidance, we are now managing our farms smoothly. He is such a big help to our tribal community," Macapagal testified.

When asked if he is being compensated for what he does, Tadeo smilingly answered, "Sometimes, I pay

for my expenses, but there are times that they shoulder my transportation fees. We, Mangyans, are prohibited to accept payment for our deeds, but donations are allowed," he shared.

"Also, I don't mind it, as long as I help them. I have nothing to lose because in the end I know I will gain something. In the Bible, Luke 6:34-35 says, 'And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked,'" Tadeo added.

Tadeo the Dreamer

Tadeo's goals go beyond making farming more productive. He wants to introduce to his fellow Mangyans the modern way of farming without sacrificing their culture and traditions. He also aspires that every Mangyan farmer can join the ATI's training programs to learn new technologies and experience what he experienced. Likewise, he wants other Mangyans to see that lowland people are not as bad and discriminating as they think.

"Perhaps, what we Mangyans really need is the courage to face other people and the openness to limitless possibilities and technologies. Because I think even the IPs can also strive in farming just as lowland people do," Tadeo firmly said.

Finding Wings to SOAr

THE VENUS LOMBOY STORY

BY CHARITY GAY H. GUBA

Self-motivation is her primary investment in achieving better living. She believes that age is not a barrier to technology and learning. She is a living testament that age is not an impediment to success.

It was in 2013 when Venus Lomboy, a 68-year-old resident of Balloy, Sta. Maria, Pangasinan, retired from her 45-year teaching profession and focused on agriculture. Before Mrs. Lomboy's retirement, it was her husband, Dionisio Lomboy, who managed their 1.75-hectare agricultural land since 2000. She had limited hands-on practice in farming then.

After her retirement, Mrs. Lomboy decided to help in their rice and corn farming business. However, she lacked skills to develop their farm and increase their harvest. Along with this challenge, Mrs. Lomboy's husband began having serious health issues. She took over the management of the farm while taking care of her sick husband, whose condition was barely improving.

Highly self-motivated, Mrs. Lomboy sought for answers and guidance from the experts. Her impulse to learn more about farming led her to true fulfillment and glorious blessing.

Rescue me

It was in 2014 when Mrs. Lomboy learned about the School On-the-Air (SOA) program of the Agricultural Training Institute-Regional Training Center I. She said it was perfect timing when she went to the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Sta. Maria, Pangasinan to inquire on how to increase her farm's yield, as registration for the SOA on Sustainable Rice Production was in progress then. She was recruited to sign up for the program by SOA Coordinator Irma Baltero, who has been a consistent frontrunner in producing the highest number of SOA graduates. Joining SOA was a major breakthrough in Mrs. Lomboy's journey toward success in agriculture.

Due to her eagerness to learn, Mrs. Lomboy became fully engrossed with SOA. She even invited and involved her relatives and neighbors in the program.

Mrs. Lomboy describes how the program helped her. "I've learned so many things from SOA, like the importance of land leveling and the correct way of seeding. Before SOA, I never considered the right broadcasting of seeds." She adds, "I've learned the advantages of using organic fertilizer and pest



management. I've also learned that frequent visitations to the farm are vital to check and examine our crops, especially the appearance of their leaves. I used the learnings I gained and applied them to our farm. We applied this knowledge and our crop yield definitely increased. Before SOA, our normal harvest in one-half hectare was less than 30 cavans of rice. This time, we harvested 42 to 43 cavans."

The SOA program brought positive change to Mrs. Lomboy's well-being. She proudly speaks of how it improved her family's day-to-day life. "Unlike before, we now have enough supply of rice. Our supply at the moment may even last for three months."

SOA on Sustainable Rice Production likewise boosted Mrs. Lomboy's understanding on vermiculture. It was the SOA program that inspired Mrs. Lomboy to go into vermiculture. While SOA was ongoing, she visited a vermiculture site in Barangay Capandanan. Since then, she started to buy vermicompost and African Night Crawler (ANC), and developed vermiculture in her own backyard. After a while, she gained customers from the municipalities of San Nicolas and San Quintin, including her former co-teachers with agricultural lands, whom she encouraged to venture into vermiculture.

"I earned quite well in vermiculture. With five kilos of ANC worth PhP2,500 and 50 sacks of cow manure worth PhP500, I earned PhP10,000 after six to seven

months. You just need to strive and work diligently for it," Mrs. Lomboy explains.

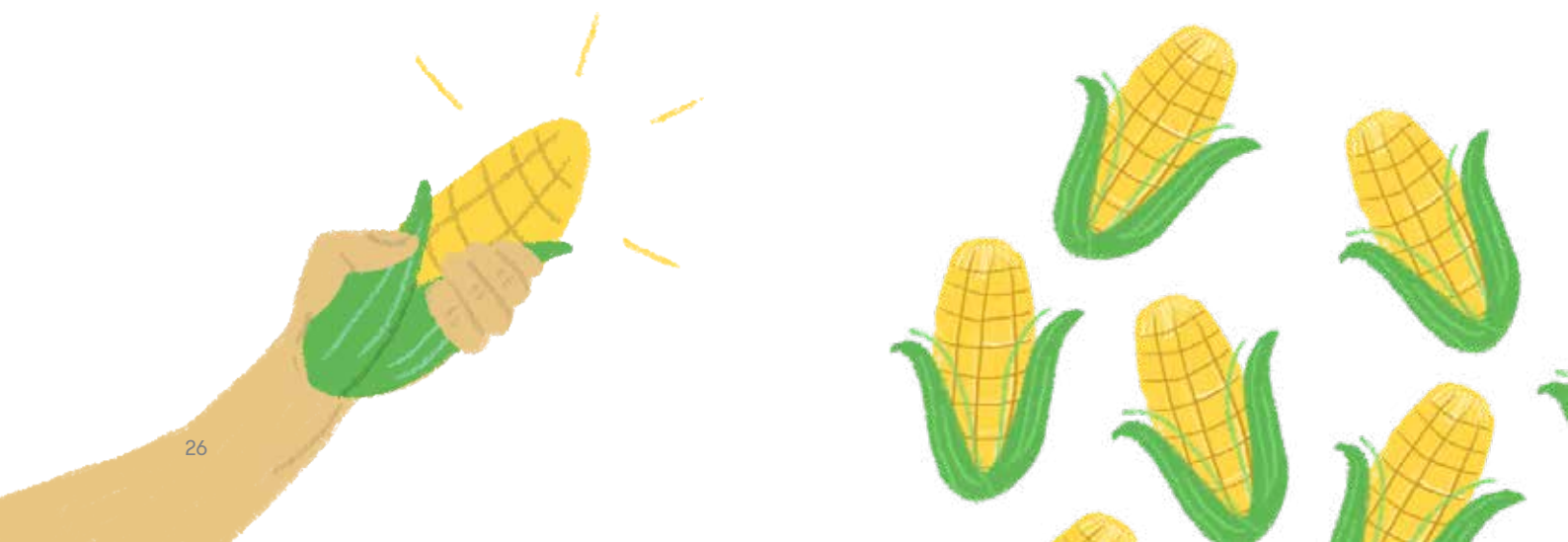
After the SOA on Sustainable Rice Production in 2014, Mrs. Lomboy organized a farmers' meeting in her barangay and asked for assistance from SOA Coordinator Irma Baltero. Her purpose was to disseminate the information and the new technologies she learned from the SOA program.

To date, Mrs. Lomboy continues to take part in farmer meetings and events to further expand her knowledge and skills. She is anxious to learn more about agriculture and farming technologies. As a result of the fulfilling experiences and the benefits she has gained from the SOA on Sustainable Rice Production, Mrs. Lomboy also enrolled in the SOA on Sustainable Corn Production in December 2015.

Mrs. Lomboy declares how the SOA on Sustainable Corn Production helped increase her corn crop yield. "SOA taught us about the benefits of organic fertilizer. When we were using inorganic fertilizer, our corn crops looked limp. When we used organic, they became healthy. As a result, we harvested 120 cavans in one hectare. Our yield increased from 43 to 80 sacks [after threshing]. SOA was really a blessing to us!"

Insight bites

Considering the SOA as her knight in shining armor, Mrs. Lomboy wants to enlighten fellow farmers who ignore the program. "The problem with many



farmers who have been into farming for quite a while is that their minds are fixed on their old ways of farming. They are hesitant to learn new things,” Mrs. Lomboy observes. “I encourage them to participate in agricultural programs like SOA to heighten their awareness on agricultural technologies, and on new and more effective ways of farming. If they will apply their learning from SOA, their harvest will improve and their income will increase. Their supply of food will also be enough while they spend less,” she adds.

Mrs. Lomboy believes that the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) should continue implementing the SOA program because there are so many people out there who need to learn and be updated in agriculture. She hopes the ATI will never get tired of training people because the ones who were not interested in SOA before might be interested now. “I do hope the ATI will continue to reach out to us through its SOA and other extension programs,” she says. Mrs. Lomboy also expressed that she wants people to concentrate and give more importance to farming because agriculture is the backbone of our economy.

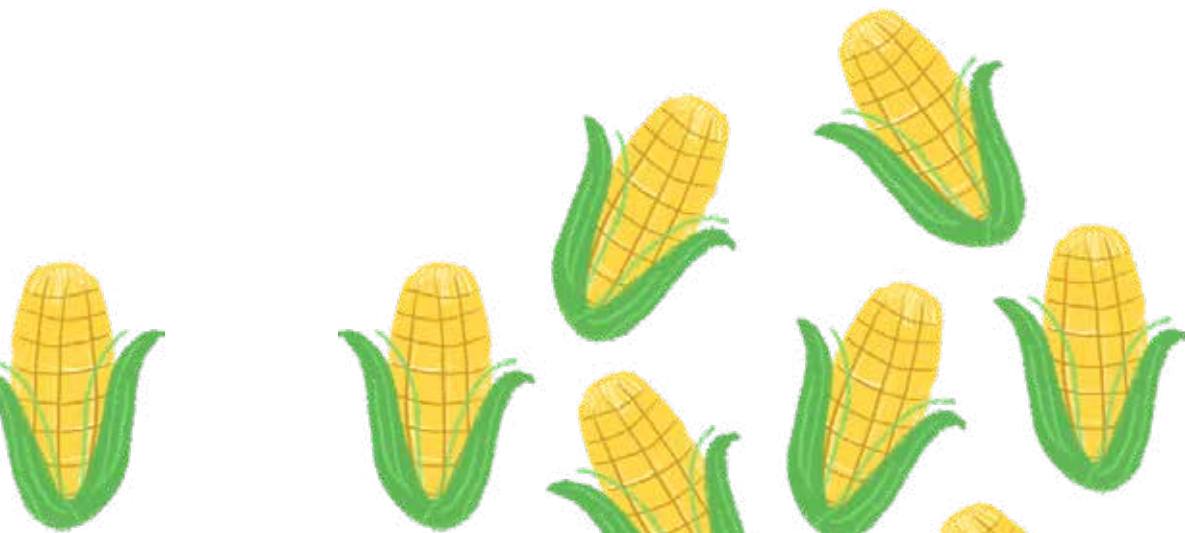
Mrs. Lomboy humbly shares her plans for the near future. “I want to give lectures on vermiculture as a means of livelihood to our barangay. People and even children can collect cow manure, which they can sell at PhP10 per sack. If they will listen to me, there will be no need to buy fertilizer. They will make money. If I will also be

given a chance to share my learnings, I will be glad to help the DA (Department of Agriculture) in giving lectures on farming.”

She feels she has a mission to fulfill. She believes she has a message to impart. “Although I’m old, and though I’m a woman, I’m still motivated and determined to learn new things. I told myself, why should I stop learning? As long as I’m alive, I can still learn and teach. I still long to help and teach other people even through farming. As long as you live, there are still so many things you need to learn and understand to improve yourself and your way of life,” Mrs. Lomboy shared.

Mrs. Lomboy remains active in agriculture and in various farmer associations. While taking care of her husband, she gets by working as secretary of the Sta. Maria Mango Growers and Handlers Association, and the Municipal Agriculture and Fishery Council of Sta. Maria, Pangasinan. Her age is not a barrier to her passion to prosper in agriculture. In addition to farming and vermiculture, she is starting to build cages for breeding native chickens. She explains, “I always want to keep myself busy, and every time I wake up in the morning, I want to see the beautiful things my farm brings.”

Mrs. Lomboy’s self-motivation and determination to succeed are admirable. She does not allow challenges to deter her from her goals; and this is why she now soars high and enjoys success. Mrs. Lomboy is definitely a woman worthy of emulation.



A Public Servant by Chance and a Proud Farmer by Choice

THE MIGUELITO OCAPAN SUCCESS STORY

BY CHARED D. LADERA

Born to a family of farmers, Mr. Miguelito Ocapan has always considered himself a farmer since birth. In fact, he hasn't stopped farming despite holding an important provincial government office for three terms now.

While he now has over 50 hectares of land, the public servant and proud farmer started with only five hectares which he gradually developed into an integrated farm.

Ocapan, known by many as Nonoy, is from Poblacion, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur. He was born on March 18, 1962 in the municipality of Margosatubig. His partner-in-crime in farming is his wife, Virginia. They are blessed with four children.

Nonoy is a public servant, a politician, and a farmer who has been awarded as the Gawad Saka Outstanding Corn Farmer – Regional Level in the year 2016.

I had the opportunity to interview Nonoy. I'd like to share with you what I learned from him:

What made you pursue farming?

Ever since he fell in love with farming, Nonoy hasn't stopped working even if he was the only one among his siblings who wanted to continue their parents' legacy. "Since my siblings are not interested in farming, I really grabbed the opportunity and even borrowed their land, with their consent, to plant different crops."

"Farming is my passion in life. I really enjoy working on the farm. I even enjoy counting the goats that return from wandering around the farm. I enjoy working while gaining income."

How did you start everything?

In the beginning, Mr. and Mrs. Ocapan utilized the five hectares of agricultural land by planting rice, corn, cassava, vegetable, legumes, pineapple, and fruit trees. They also ventured into poultry production and livestock production like swine raising, goat raising, and cattle and carabao raising.

Since crop rotation is practiced every season to conserve soil and maintain soil fertility in his area, Nonoy does this regularly. He has also divided the area into multiple cropping systems.

Even if he was born a farmer, he admitted that he still lacks knowledge in the field of agriculture. But it is instilled in his mind that "every seed sown will produce something in the future."

What are your challenges?

On the couple's first investment, the result was not good because Nonoy's upland rice crop was attacked by black bug. He was discouraged because similar results in the future would mean he wouldn't be able to send his children to school. Luckily, due to the encouragement of the agricultural technologist in their municipality, he continued (and continues) to engage in farming.

What did you do to improve in farming?

"I studied on my own. I collected leaflets and brochures and I joined trainings. After that, I applied what I learned to my farm."

He attended farmer's classes, School-on-the-Air programs, and whatever seminar and training were conducted





regarding agriculture. He was willing to broaden his knowledge of agriculture, especially in augmenting income.

Nonoy believes that in terms of farming and learning, it is better late than never and that success is not a matter of chance but a matter of choice. As such, he also joined local and international farm visits. He applied an integrated farming system and practiced organic farming diligently. These are all his stepping stones to go upwards.

Farming winning moments...

According to him, planting corn is very important to our health, especially for diabetic patients.

“I call every person to continue our profession in farming like planting corn, rice, legumes, root crops, fruit trees, and managing small livestock for there is wealth out of it. We have to use our areas, our lands that are ideal for agricultural crops.”

Nonoy continued his aspiration in farming even when he was elected as Sanguniang Bayan Member of San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur in 1996. He did not stop farming and cultivating his five hectares of land. He planted yellow corn hybrid and reaped a lot.

Every year, Nonoy develops his land. There is an area for his fishpond, for rain-fed rice, and for livestock and poultry. He continues to plant yellow corn using low cost technology.

The project rewarded the family with good health, sturdy shelter, and better lives. The couple has acquired some properties like farm machineries, a

farm building, agricultural land, and a house. The Ocapans successfully sent their children to school; they are now.

Luckily, due to his courage and good community relations, Nonoy was elected as a provincial board member of Zamboanga del Sur’s 2nd Congressional District. He served from 2006 until 2015.

Worthy of a nomination

Nonoy established his agricultural projects by adopting an integrated farming system that has helped and continues to help augment their family income and that of his neighbors.

He is an active member of the community in Poblacion, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, and a member of the Poblacion Farmers Association.

He is responsive in implementing the integrated farming system and is very active in attending trainings, seminars, and congresses conducted by the Department of Agriculture throughout the Philippines.

The Ocapans are not just an ordinary farming family; they are also active community leaders and strongly support their church and its activities.

And, as of the present...

Nonoy continues to plant yellow corn as feed for swine, chicken, goats, and fishes. At present, he has 10 heads of sow and three boars, among others. Every three months, he delivers the swine to Zamboanga City.

Nonoy finds farming satisfying. According to him, if his farm business continues to grow, it can be his stepping stone to becoming a millionaire.

Reaping the Gold

A CORN FARMER'S FLIGHT TO FORTUNE

BY EULA DEE A. LAÑADA

His dream was to become a pilot. However, he sacrificed this dream so that his siblings could finish their degrees and their family's livelihood could be sustained. Little did he know that he would still fly high, not through an airplane, but through farming.

Mr. Eulogio Cabiles, a corn farmer from Tarlac, has known farming since he was a little kid. He has lived and breathed it. Even when he was building his own family, he earned his income from farming.

Diligence leads to fortune

Although he went through a lot of struggles before achieving success, Cabiles knows he is beyond blessed. He acquired 1 ½ hectares of land and built a home for his family. In addition, he was able to buy materials and equipment for their house. Moreover, he successfully sent his children to school.

From 90 cavans of produce, Cabiles now harvests 150-180 cavans. He owes it all to his knowledge and experiences in corn farming.

However, getting to where he is right now was not easy.

Turning stumbling blocks into stepping stones

Cabiles encountered several problems, one of which was the lack of capital.

Familiarity with conventional farming also contributed to his difficult situation.

Through a training on Training of Trainers (ToT) on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) on Corn, which was conducted by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI), he adapted the right farming methods. He learned the proper way of selecting seeds, application of fertilizer, distance of one crop to another, water management, and the most important one, in his opinion, record keeping.

Cabiles quipped that in the past, the pesticides used in his farm were placed anywhere. Now that he has gone through training, he makes sure to keep them in a safe place, away from the restless hands and eyes of children and from by-products and harvests to avoid contamination.

The corn farmer also said his produce is placed in an area that prevents spoilage and contamination. He maintains his farm clean to keep rats away.

One door leads to another

Through GAP, he learned the proper way of farming to avoid contamination of products, to keep the environment healthy, and to consider the safety of his farm workers. It paved the way for his Gawad Saka Award in 2014.



Being GAP-certified and receiving the Gawad Saka award opened a door to another blessing: being accredited as a learning site. His farm is visited by people from various places every day. The visitors want to learn new technologies in corn farming, especially zero tillage technology.

Cabiles believes this is a big help to other farmers, too. He has vowed to help and teach his fellow farmers what he has learned from years of experience.

The trainings Cabiles attended did not only help improve his farm; it has also developed his confidence. He used to be an introvert but is now able to interact with others more comfortably.

Cabiles stressed that the status of their life improved through the help of corn farming. *“Ang pinakaimportante ay ang makabagong pamamaraan ng pagsasaka,”* shared Cabiles when asked to share what he learned from all his experiences.

The secrets to success

When asked what he can say to other farmers who look up to him and who aspires to be like him, Cabiles shared three points.

First, he stressed the importance of hard work. *“Maniwala kayo na walang masipag na hindi nagugutom at walang masipag na hindi umuunlad* (Believe me, that there are no industrious people

who do not go hungry and there are no hardworking people who do not become successful),” he added.

Second, he stressed the significance in believing in oneself. Cabiles emphasized, *“Kung hindi ka maniniwala sa sarili mo, sino pa ang maniniwala sayo? Kaya dapat maniwala ka sa sarili mo, na kaya mong gawin ang lahat at walang imposible* (If you won’t believe in yourself, then who will? You should believe in yourself, that you can do everything and that nothing is impossible).”

Lastly, he encouraged farmers to love what they want in life. *“Ako, minahal ko ang pagsasaka, kaya minamahal din ako ng pagsasaka* (I love farming, that’s why farming loves me back),” Cabiles said. He claimed that his success is because of his love for farming.

For Cabiles, failing to become a pilot was a blessing in disguise because it led him to the love of his life: farming. He owes all his success to it. Thinking positive, he claims that he is still a pilot—in his own life and his own farm.

Levi's Wellspring of Farming

BY VIC THOR A. PALARCA

When Rosito “Levi” Guiritan’s foray into farming went well, he himself was surprised since he was an electrical engineer by profession and had little experience in the said field. Though he did not come upon his farming venture by accident as his parents were into farming, his transition was not smooth.

Levi was a part of the cutthroat corporate world when he decided to switch career paths. He wanted less stressful work and decided that farming was the answer.

What exactly changed his mind to instead establish a farm and be active in the farming community for good?

Here is my interview with the camera-shy and reticent farmer, a reluctant conversationalist with a determined spirit in terms of growing his own food and helping the farming community he is now a part of:

Q: Can you tell us about your early start in farming and what we can see on your farm right now?

A: Levi Spring Farm is a 4.5-hectare integrated and diversified organic farm located in Osmeña, Danggagan, Bukidnon with rubber and corn as its focus commodities. Rows of herbs, cacao, and other high value fruit trees such as rambutan and durian are also

spread out in the farm. I also raise livestock, which includes goats, ducks, turkeys, and native chickens.

The farm was established in 2014 with corn as my main commodity. This linked me to the Agricultural Training Institute-Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) X where my farm became the demo area for its season-long training on corn production under the Farmer Scientist Training Program. After the training, I was invited to join a group of young farmers from Region X to attend a training on feed formulation in Maribojoc, Bohol. That training made a strong impact on me. I immediately applied my learnings when I got home. That training also led me to further diversify my farm. I now have four farm workers who help me.

Since my involvement with ATI, I went full-scale in discovering and applying new farming innovations towards organic farming. Due to my experience, I started receiving invitations to become a Resource Person (RP) on organic farming.

Q: There are a lot of Learning Sites (LS) that the Institute is involved with right now. What makes yours different?

A: I have four in mind. First, I have my wife Arlene, who is my partner in every sense of the word. That makes us a husband-



and-wife team, which I believe is a strong advantage since we maintain our *kilig* moments together in the field. Second, I have a growing network and connections with other farmer-partners like Nick Engallado, an organic rice practitioner. We are working together in developing more uses of *adlai*. Third, I have a thriving and ongoing contract with Magnolia because Magnolia regularly buys my *yautia* (English for *lutia*) harvested from 7,000 hills. Lastly, I am the only ATI-accredited Learning Site in the southern part of Bukidnon.

I also earn from selling fruits and vegetables. Last year, I earned PhP14,000 from my rambutan harvest. I also sell carbonized rice hull and charcoal.

Q: What were the problems that you encountered when you established your farm and how did you deal with them?

A: Osmeña used to be a communist-infested area. This area was a far-cry from the farm area you are seeing today. I'm glad that people nowadays are more receptive to change and are open to different avenues of development. I would like to convince my neighbors that peace can be attained through development.

Although my farm has a natural spring, I bought a rump pump to help distribute the water to hard-to reach places since some parts of my farm are sloping areas.

Some of my issues were resolved when I showed strong promise to be a proponent of organic farming, assisted by government entities like LGUs and national agencies. I am also thankful that I am invited to attend trainings, seminars, and farm tours. I was also given PhP150,000 as monetary support by the ATI to further develop my farm.

Another challenge is that I am difficult to keep in touch with since my area has a weak signal coverage. As a remedy, I hang my phone in an elevated area just to get signal.

As a farmer, there are no other substitutes in getting your hands dirty and calloused and enjoy your farm's produce.

ROSITO "LEVI" GUIRITAN



Q: What does the future hold for Levi Spring Farm?

A: I would like to see some improvement in my farm by making it a farm tourism site. I also plan to establish a livestock shelter, rest house, and formation hall for training participants. Another is to establish a processing area for my food processing venture. I also intend to plant more *adlai* for cookies, baguettes, and other *adlai*-based products.

Q: What are some personal insights you can share with your co-farmers and those who want to venture into farming?

A: Hard work really pays off. As a farmer, there are no other substitutes to getting your hands dirty and calloused and enjoying your farm's produce. I would consider my farming venture a success if I see happy people. I would be happy if my farm could serve as an inspiration to others to get into farming. I also believe in helping and reaching out to other farmers since no man is an island; that we are strong collectively if we work together for good. I learned that based on my involvement with farmer associations through Community-Based Participatory Action Research where I am

the president. I am also the Chair of the Municipal Agriculture Fishery Council. It is by having dialogue, fora, and sharing farming experiences that we help one another.

Levi Spring Farm is proof that with determination, hard work, and passion, success is possible despite the many challenges along the way.



High-value Crops

Ginger, Spice, and Everything Nice

BY SHANEMIE CARELLE O. DAQUIO



Ginger, or *luya* in Tagalog, is commonly used in the kitchen, usually as an added ingredient to our favorite *arroz caldo* and many sautéed dishes.

Luckily, in the town of Talavera, Nueva Ecija, this humble crop is abundant and is used beyond the kitchen walls. For some women, they saw so much more than just packing and selling this soothing crop. They saw an opportunity in it. They saw gold in ginger.

How it all began

It all started with a group of women in Barangay Campos who wanted to do something in their spare time.

“Dati po kasi pagkatapos naming mag-repack ng mga gulay ay wala na pokaming ginagawa. Minsan po naglalaro na lang ng baraha o mahjong (Before, we would have nothing to do after we repackaged vegetables. Sometimes, we would just play cards or mahjong),” recalled Jennifer Pineda, the current president of the Rural Improvement Club (RIC) in Brgy. Campos. The group decided to seek the help of the previous RIC coordinator

for Talavera, Edith Sarmiento, to help them formally organize the group. Its membership slowly grew and they now have 28 all-female members.

On February 10, 2015, RIC Campos’ ginger/turmeric tea was officially created.

Two years since its creation, the RIC branched out from merely making ginger/turmeric tea to other product lines like ginger candy and non-sugar ginger/turmeric tea.

What makes their products special is that their raw materials come from repacking surplus. Now, the organization grows most of their raw materials, thus, cutting on cost.

Challenges along the way

Pineda shared that it wasn’t easy sustaining the group. “We had members who came and went, members who put self-interest first above others.” However, nothing can dampen the spirit of these ladies.

“We need to push through so that our children can have a better and comfortable future. As a mother, it is natural for us to think of them first and, in doing so, put



our differences aside,” added Pineda.

Technical know-how was also an issue back then as members needed more than just interest for the group to prosper.

“As a group, we were invited to attend training programs on organic farming practices and marketing. In addition to that, we trained under Farm Business School,” expressed Milania Alimbago, vice president of the Brgy. Campos RIC. The training programs were implemented by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) in Central Luzon, in close coordination with the Municipal Agriculture Office.

Finding a conducive processing facility was also one of the issues that limited the group’s production. Fortunately, the local government of Talavera saw the need of the association. Their processing plant is now being constructed near the barangay hall of Campos.

Overcoming the hurdles

Pineda, together with the other club officers, continuously maintains the group’s solidarity through regular meetings and being transparent with the

club’s finances and issues encountered.

To ensure the regular supply of raw materials, the local government of Talavera has allocated a small parcel of land for them to grow their own produce. With this, together with the processing facility, the group is now more equipped to produce their town’s pride.

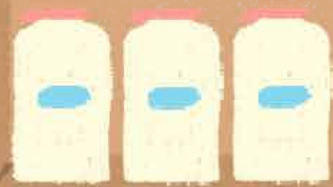
Expressing their gratitude to the agency who helped them, Pineda said, “We would like to thank the ATI for providing us not only with skills but also for giving us financial aid to apply what we’ve learned,” referring to the ATI Central Luzon’s financial assistance for the improvement of their facilities and equipment.

The group’s plans

“Now, we plan to recruit more women to the group. We are also thinking of tapping other organizations and government agencies to help us with our packaging and marketing. To date, we are displaying our products in Walter Mart and SM during their company events,” mentioned Pineda.

“We also need a regular display center

HIGH-VALUE CROPS



for our products, so that our customers would know where to usually find us even after trade fairs or agri-fairs,” said Alimbago. In addition, the group would like to expand their product lines to attract more buyers who are not into teas.

Ripples of change

“It is always hard in the beginning. To my fellow mothers and women, who, like me, only want what’s best for their families, strive to be better. If being part of an organization answers that, then, please join one. Continue to learn and re-learn things,” encouraged Pineda.

Alimbago stressed, “We may not be there yet, our organization still has a lot to prove and do, but like what Ms. Pineda said, we can always do things to make our lives better. Women aren’t supposed to be caged in the four walls of their homes. We have a choice to help and contribute not just to our family but also to the community we live in.”

Indeed, nothing is impossible for the women of Brgy. Campos. They know that they just need to see beyond what is ordinary and look further for ways to progress. Like the humble ginger that is used to spice up every meal, these ladies are here to add color and vibrancy to their community—all while banking on their skills to make the most of what they have and building on a dream that will eventually lead to a grand future.



ADELFA C. BALTAZAR



MARGELINE A. DELA ROSA

Dream, Believe, Succeed

AN ACHIEVER'S STORY

BY OLIVIA D. GATUS

Paul Jhone Dominic Ebon has always dreamt of putting up his own restaurant someday. An out-of-school-youth, Paul thought he was aiming for the impossible. But his journey to success proves that dreams do come true even for people like him.

A son of farmers Alvin and Vidala Ebon, Paul grew up in the family's 1.5-hectare lot in Calinan, Baguio District, Davao City. Their property produces assorted vegetables and fruit trees. As the eldest son, he sought for ways to turn his dream into reality. So, when he was invited by the Davao City Agriculture Office to join the 4-H Club, he was more than excited. He was fascinated because he knew that this would open great opportunities for him in agriculture.

True enough, Paul was able to participate in various capacity-building training programs conducted by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI). "The ATI helped a lot in boosting my self-confidence and they encouraged me to do more. I started to like agriculture. It has become exciting and fulfilling for me. I applied the different agricultural technologies I learned to our farm and it helped boost our family's income," he related. Not long after he joined the organization, he was elected as

president of the 4-H Eagle Squad Club in their district. Despite the challenges of handling teenagers, he continued to recruit and organize the out-of-school youth in his barangay.

"I was actively participating in training programs and applied my knowledge in our farm to showcase my learning. It was then that the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the ATI noticed my hard work and I was lucky that my project proposal on native chicken production for our 4-H Club was approved," said Paul.

The ATI granted the 4-H Eagle Squad Club Php100,000 worth of funding assistance for their poultry production livelihood project. The amount is payable in three years from the date granted. Because of this, the club members were able to put up a poultry farm on the Ebons' property, where they raise native chickens for marketing. This livelihood project also gives employment opportunities to 4-H members while they take turns in managing the poultry venture.

In 2015, Paul passed the exams for the Young Filipino Farmers' Training Program in Japan (YFFTPJ). It is an exchange program with the Ministry of Japan where qualified young farmers are sent to Japan for 11 months to learn



agricultural production techniques, management, and distribution systems. Upon returning, they are expected to impart the new knowledge, skills, and lessons they learned in their respective communities.

After the program, Paul proposed a meat processing project as value-adding for their existing backyard piggery business. He received Php50,000 worth of post-training assistance as start-up capital to apply the technologies he learned in Japan. The money was used to purchase meat processing equipment and materials to start his business. He utilized their pig fatteners to produce tocino, embutido, chorizo, and other meat products, which he sells to his neighbors and friends. He also sells fresh pork and lechon.

Aside from this, Paul also developed his personality and leadership skills. He was invited by the ATI to become a senpai or big brother who teaches basic Nihongo to other YFFTPJ trainees. He became a host brother for a local exchange program where young farmers from other localities stayed in his farm for one week to learn various agricultural technologies. Additionally, he was invited as resource speaker on different topics in agricultural

Apple picking is one of the farm activities of Paul while in Japan as YFFTPJ trainee

technology and leadership skills. “I was able to transfer the knowledge I acquired in Japan,” Paul added.

“Though I was not able to finish my course on BS Hotel and Restaurant Management, I am happy that my meat processing business now is still in line with my childhood dream. My dream of owning a restaurant is within reach. I know in the end this will lead me to where I really want to be and what I really want to do,” Paul happily confided.

“This is all because I didn’t give up dreaming. I did not give up despite the setbacks. I worked for my dreams, always armed with positivity and enthusiasm, which helped me walk through all hurdles that came my way. Above all, I am a happy person, believing God knows what’s in my heart and He will guide me all the way,” Paul ended.

Paul is worthy of emulation—someone the youth should look up to. Once an out-of-school-youth, he didn’t let go of his dream and instead worked hard to achieve it. His success is validation that dreams come true when you commit yourself to achieving them.

Burning Desire

BY EFREN C. MACARIO



She pinched her arm. Once. Twice. She couldn't believe it. Right before her eyes was her dream.

As the plane passed through thin clouds, the majestic view of Metro Manila slowly unfolded in front of her. Yes! This is it. As the plane softly landed on the runway, her eyes welled up. The feeling was unexplainable. She kept turning her head, left...right...left...right.

As the plane taxied to the terminal, and while other passengers were oblivious to their surroundings, she kept every detail in her head. She observed planes taking off and touching down. The buses that ferried passengers from the plane to the arrival hall. The open cargo carriers. The fuel trucks that fed the plane.

As she deplaned, she felt the hot breeze of Manila kiss her skin. She was now in the world of Tagalog-speaking people. She composed herself. She followed the throng of people to the bus that would take them to the terminal. While waiting for her baggage, images of her past engulfed her.

She was raised in Manolo Fortich, Bukidnon. She grew up poor and married at a young age. She has only one child. She did not finish college but she has

ambitions. She dreamt of setting foot in Manila. To a girl who was raised in this part of the country, Manila was paradise. Manila was the source of wealth and happiness. But her husband's income was barely enough for them to satisfy their basic needs. So, sometimes, her Manila dream faded like smoke. But her desire and vision drive her to find means. She realized that if she will depend fully on her husband's income, her dream would be lost forever. That is why she grabbed every opportunity to earn.

July 2015. For personal reasons, her aunt gave up a slot in a training on Farm Business School (FBS), so she took it. Every week, she religiously attended the sessions. They learned the how-tos of business; the characteristics needed by a successful entrepreneur; the proper recording process. They learned the concept of break-even price and break-even sales; the difference between variable cost and fixed cost; the importance of cash flows. They were mentored on how to develop their personal vision. She appreciated the modules on value addition and saving.

During the course of the training, she realized that a product needed to sell to



earn income. She felt that she already knew how to sell but she didn't have products. After the session on value-adding, she decided to pursue *kakanin* production. Since their resource person on value adding was offering specialized training on *kakanin* production in Iligan City, she borrowed money for fare and registration fee from their neighbor.

When she returned to the FBS class after training in Iligan City, she brought *kakanin* that she cooked and sold them to her classmates. They liked it and requested her to bring some again to their next meeting. Even employees of the Local Government Unit of Manolo Fortich tasted and liked it. So, she was able to repay her loan before their FBS graduation. She advertised her products on Facebook and FilFARM, an e-trading site established by the Agricultural Training Institute. She kept on innovating. She improved her packaging. She kept in mind the tip given by the ATI Regional Focal Person for FBS: "Packaging is the silent salesman." To avoid product boredom, she added or changed her line of products, depending on the availability of raw materials. To reduce cost, she

planted cassava for use in cakes, and banana for chips, among others.

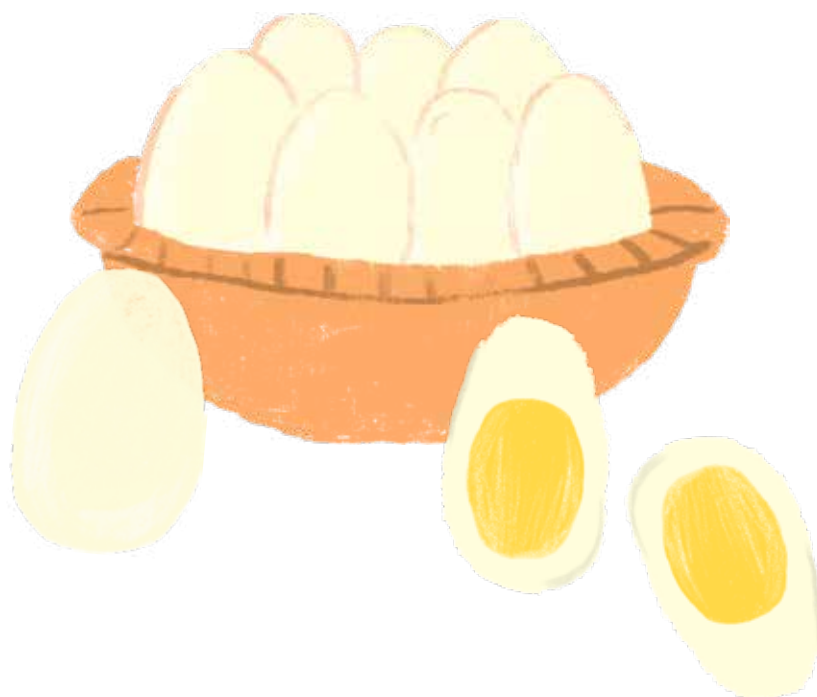
She was brought to the present when her companion tapped her shoulder, pointed to the conveyor, and shouted, "Look, our bags! Go and get them before someone else does!"

Joymee Remerata is a graduate of Farm Business School in Manolo Fortich, Bukidnon. She was invited to attend the Womens' Month Celebration in Rural Development and Education Center, Agricultural Training Institute, Quezon City. She will be showcasing her different products and hoping to capture the discriminating taste of Metro Manilans. Their association, Manolo Fortich FBS Foods & Agri-Product Producers Association Inc, is registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission and Bureau of Internal Revenue. Their group's dream to open their pasalubong center has now become a reality.



Norly's Shell

BY EFREN C. MACARIO



She wiped her brows and finished the remaining water in her plastic bottle. The water was warm but still, it rehydrated her body. The sun was kissing the highest mountain in the west. She looked ahead. Still a lot of work to do. She's been weeding her farm since the light came out. Her two-month old corn looked promising. She looked up. Silently, she gave thanks to the Lord and prayed that merchants would be good to farmers come harvest time. She just advised her two children to go home earlier to prepare for their supper.

"I am a farmer of 16 years. [We have] no guaranteed income, no stable source either. [The] cost of farm inputs are skyrocketing. [The] price of our products are dictated by the buyers, mostly to our disadvantage. Sometimes [we are] unable to recoup our investments. We've been in this predicament since time immemorial. But we have no recourse. We plant to survive. We do not plant to gain. We plant so that we may live another day."

Norly is known as a shy but friendly person, especially to her neighbors. She isn't accustomed to mingling with strangers. Her world is her home, her family, her Church, and her farm. Inferiority always overwhelm her when

people, especially those coming from the town, visit her home.

"I am lucky I was selected as participant in the training on Farm Business School (FBS) in our municipality. As a typical *barrio* lass, I am shy and unexposed [to these things]. I had a hard time adjusting to our sessions. I have inferiorities. I have no self-confidence. I'm glad we had a seasoned facilitator, Ms. Gemma, who skillfully capitalized on our strengths. She guided me in overcoming my insecurities. She slowly nurtured me in building my self-confidence. She reminded me that a timid person can't sell her products. She added, 'How can you sell your products if you are shy?' She helped me draw my vision. Possible strategies were laid. Market opportunities were discussed.

"She emphasized diversified farming and producing what the market needs at a certain time, at the buyers' specifications, and at a price the buyers are willing to pay. I planted cassava, corn, and peanut in our 1.5-hectare land. Based on our market survey and discussions, I realized cassava is a potential money maker but harvestable only after 9 months to one year. I need



food to eat every day. I needed money to buy food. So I planted peanut and corn for their shorter maturity. One of my classmates in the FBS produces peanut butter. I have targeted him as my market.”

During the launching of FBS, the speaker from Agricultural Training Institute mentioned the opportunities in the *balut* industry in Cagayan de Oro City. He mentioned that 30% of *balut* were produced locally, while 70% comes from Luzon, particularly Laguna. It inspired her to dream to establish her *balutan* someday.

Every Saturday, she wakes up early, packs her products, goes downtown and offers it to every potential customer she meets. She sells salted egg, adobo flavored egg, and golden egg (salted egg colored with grated fresh turmeric). This has been her routine for months now.

“I now have regular customers. They said they liked my products’ distinct taste. By word of mouth, there is a growing demand for my products. In fact, I advertised on social media for fresh duck eggs. The eggs from my ducks are simply not enough.”

She checked her newly purchased incubator. It was half full of harvestable

balut. She doesn’t worry about market. Buyers of raw *balut* go to her every week. She gets orders from different *balut* vendors. As demand is high, she has to turn down some orders. Her production isn’t at full capacity but she is continuously increasing her number of flocks. She selects her vigorous ducks as parent material.

The sky is bright. The air is warm. It’s already 10 in the morning. Norly has just come home from downtown. She unloaded her baggage from the top of the tricycle. Though a little bit heavy, she managed to bring it inside their home. She unpacked the groceries, washed the meat and placed it inside the refrigerator. She did the same to the fish and some vegetables from the garden along with eggs from the chicken and duckery. She counted what was left of her money and smiled. Still within her target. Unknown to her husband, she’d been saving for the later part of their life. To her, no matter how small her savings are, what’s important is saving has become a habit.

Brewing Her Way to the USA

BY NOEMI BETH G. MACARIO



“I’m going to America. I’m going to the land of my dreams—the land of not just milk and honey but, for me, the land of coffee, milk, and honey.”

I could feel the excitement even on the other side of the phone line. Imelda “Bebing” Mendoza was practically bursting with happiness. America has always been a dream destination for most Filipinos, and for Bebing, it is no different. America, after all, is the place of endless opportunities.

For most, this remains a dream. But for Bebing, not only has she set foot in America, but she has also conquered it. She went there after receiving an award for the Best Robusta Coffee—Robusta Category of the 1st Kape Pilipino Cupping Competition sponsored by the Agricultural Cooperative Development International/Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI/VOCA). The competition was tough, but Kape Maramag bested all the others and was adjudged as the grand champion under Robusta Category. This triumph allowed them to gain specialty coffee status where they were cupped and graded. (Incidentally, the Arabica Category was won by Hineleban Coffee, which

is produced by a group of indigenous people from Bukidnon.)

Kape Maramag won against 78 other known coffee producers from all over the Philippines. The 12 judges were composed of foreigners and Filipino coffee enthusiasts. The winners of both categories were then brought to the US for the Global Specialty Coffee Expo awarding. All expenses were shouldered by ACDI/VOCA, a non-profit organization founded by the US Cooperative Community based in Washington DC.

The coffee products of those who composed the top 10 in both categories here in the Philippines were brought to the US. The roomful of coffee connoisseurs tasted all the coffee and decided that Kape Maramag and Hineleban Coffee were the best in the lot. The validation and awarding was held at the Sheraton Convention Center in Seattle, USA on April 19–29, 2017.

Seattle is like Disneyland

I truly understand her sentiment. Seattle is known as the world center for coffee roasting. Any well-respecting



coffee producer knows that Seattle is the home of many popular coffee houses, including Starbucks, the most popular coffee house in the Philippines. In fact, people of Seattle are said to consume more coffee than any other American city. One study even says that there are 35 coffee shops per 100,000 residents and that Seattle residents spend an average of \$36 a month on coffee.

Victory with Kape Maramag

Bebing is the driving force and brains behind Kape Maramag, a local coffee brand in Maramag, Bukidnon. Kape Maramag is produced by the Rural Improvement Club of Maramag, a local organization composed of rural women who are into agriculture. Bebing is the president of the association, a position she has held since 2012.

“My initial aim is just to help our members earn so I partnered with Kaanib Foundation to establish a community-based coffee project.”

From a handful of members who already have a few hectares of coffee trees, the initial 100 kilos coffee produced in 2012 has reached a production level of 10 tons per year in

2017. Total hectareage of the members reached more than 500 hectares of coffee-bearing trees. Partnerships with other Institutions such as ACDI/VOCA (implementor of the USDA MinPACT Project), Catholic Relief Services, Department of Science and Technology, Department of Agriculture, local government units, and the Agricultural Training Institute further helped Kape Maramag to become what it is today.

Bebing’s journey continues—from 2013, when she visited coffee producers in Vietnam via a trip funded by the ATI, a wider world of opportunities opened up to her. And in just five years, her remarkable and triumphant adventure brought Kape Maramag to the national and international arena.

In another five years, what awaits Kape Maramag? With Bebing at the helm, I have no doubt that a very bright future awaits.



Marcos Gem

BY MARY LIE P. MONTEROYO

“Sometimes the person with the worst past ends up creating the best future.” Marcos Colanse is a perfect embodiment of this saying. His life’s journey might have made rough turns but after a painful polishing, he found a gem—and his future just keeps looking brighter as time goes by.

The gem


Sometimes, a gem is found in the most unexpected places. Marcos found his through Junior/Inspector Orson Garcia of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) of El Salvador City, Misamis Oriental. Insp. Garcia implemented a reformation program for inmates, which focused on livelihood. Amidst a number of rejections for his proposal, he finally found a partner in the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI),

which is ironically located in front of the city jail. While the proposal requested was only for a short term training, the ATI conducted a season-long training on organic vegetable production from March to June 2016. The training, which focused on the squarefoot gardening concept, gathered 52 inmates as participants.

Gem applied

When graduation came, the ATI was surprised that Marcos was not one of the graduates. This was because Marcos was released on probation for good behavior before the training ended. Unknown to the trainers, Marcos applied his learnings when he went home. He planted *pechay* organically through staggered planting so that every week he could earn money. To sustain this enterprise, he established his own plant





nursery. Aside from that, he innovated and used coconut leaves as a cover crop to reduce water consumption. This minimized his cost of production. He also practiced fallow period, knowing the importance of taking care of the soil, which is his main source of livelihood. He started to diversify the area by planting other vegetables such as eggplant, bell pepper, bitter melon, ladies' fingers (okra), water spinach, wild chili, tomato, and sponge melon. These are planted in an area of just 500 square meters around their house.

The product of his hard work and commitment to success clearly fell into place. From a small space, he was able to expand the production area to 1,500 square meters through a lease contract. The ATI gave him seeds as post-training support for his expansion. He now harvests an average of 100 kg of fresh *pechay* weekly. He sells it to a market in Alubijid, which is located near El Salvador City.

Unknown to Marcos, he became an inspiration to his neighbor, Arnel Omongos. Arnel left his construction work, which he found very tiring. He engaged in vegetable production after he observed the steady income that Marcos has. Both men joined forces and sold their produce in Alubijid Market, thereby reducing their individual transportation costs. The partnership did not just bring additional income to both of them but also forged a bond of friendship for both families.

Marcos' life almost came to an end when he was sentenced to 40 years in prison for murder. This sentence was reduced to homicide and imprisonment for just six years. At that time, he lost a loved one and the small business that he

put up. His family was not able to visit him regularly in jail because of lack of money for fare. Fortunately, in March 2016, he was released on probation due to good behavior.

Lifelong gem

Marcos now earns a minimum of PhP3,000 a week from his ten 15x1 meter plots. Looking into his eyes, you can see his happiness and gratitude. He says that buyers are looking for his produce due to the consistency of his supply—and because of their quality. Marcos revealed that, “I gained three to four times from my garden, unlike before when I had to wait for four months before I harvested. With the income I earn now, it's just like I was employed in an office.”

The fate of Marcos is like a wheel ready to turn again, and he continues to be an inspiration. Through ATI, he was able to share his experience and gardening expertise to others. This gave him confidence and the strong conviction that it is up to him to chart the way toward a bright future.

Finding Sweet Success with Bitter Tablea

BY VIC THOR A. PALARCA



A tall cup of sweet and thick chocolate never fails to bring out warm and fuzzy feelings, and nostalgic, fond memories. When was the last time you relished the sweet aroma of a cup of *sikwate*?

Sikwate is the Cebuano version of the popular hot chocolate. It is made of dried, roasted, and milled cacao beans, which are formed into bite-sized tablea. The tablea is then boiled in hot water using a special type of jug and is frothed using a wooden tool called *batiro*. Once it starts to froth, milk and sugar are added to create the much-loved chocolate drink that gives people a feeling of yesteryear.

In the case of Mr. Bernardino “Jun” Cagampang, his farming venture in Kalilangan, Bukidnon got off the ground informally in 2011. Married to Linda Cagampang and blessed with three kids, the cacao champ of Barangay Canitoan is the proprietor and manager of Junlyn Farm, an integrated and diversified organic farm focusing on cacao production and processing.

My interview with Jun revealed a person whose motivation and drive are unparalleled. To inspire up-and-coming farmers who are clueless in the field of agriculture, here are valuable inputs from the said interview.

Q: How did you come upon farming? Did you consider this your career of choice?

A: Farming has always been in my system because my parents were land tillers. Although I was not able to finish formal school, I already had a sense of idea where my passion lay and the kind of livelihood I wanted to pursue.

I have now a farm area of three hectares—two hectares of which are mostly planted with cacao and other high value fruit trees. In terms of area, mine is relatively small. However, the amount of knowledge I gained and shared within the region regarding cacao production and technology is vast. I share my knowledge and expertise to my co-farmers because it gives me a sense of fulfillment. I am happy if I see them succeed in life and not just get by.

Q: Can you tell us why you considered the cacao crop as “king” in your farming venture?

A: Personally, cacao as a cash crop is not difficult to sustain or manage since I make it a point that it’s attended to at least once a week. I also trained a farm worker to help me manage as well as keep an eye on the farm, especially when I am out to attend a seminar or a speaking engagement.



Cacao
SUMMIT

If you ask me which variety makes the tastiest hot chocolate, I can say based on my experience that variety does not matter. Instead, it is how the cacao beans were processed and how *sikwate* is prepared.

If I can harvest 20–22 pods per tree, that will be worth three kilos of wet beans, which then becomes one kilo when dried. In a month, my 30 kilos of dry beans can produce 23 kilos of tablea or 22 cubes per kilo. I sell my tablea packets at 175 pesos.

Q: What was your initial struggle and how did you manage to cope with it?

A: It was in 2011 when I started establishing my cacao nursery out from a four-hectare parcel of land I bought during my previous automotive business venture. People used to have their pre-conceived notions on how growing vegetables and raising livestock can be a source of living and how I was able to make my farm income grow. Most of them thought I was out of my mind, but I simply ignored them.

I told them to plant first for personal consumption, but their idea of farming is by engaging in the conventional way by using chemical sprays since the profit is easy to come by and it is cost-effective in terms of labor.

When my cacao venture showed strong promise as it was giving me more pods that I can process, I sought the help of Center Director Angelito Quiro of the Agricultural Training Institute-

Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) X in one of our conversations because I had no idea where I can sell them and who will be the buyers.

Q: So, what were his recommendations?

A: ATI's intervention and involvement ushered me to expand my product niche, increase my technical expertise on the cacao commodity, and widen my market share. This is through social media promotion, sharing among learning site owners, field tours, and FilFARM. FilFARM, which means Filipino Farmers are Ready to Market, is an online platform that connects farm producers to buyers. These strategies were offshoots to the increasing demand of my cacao products.

With an income of PhP30,000 a month, my regular patrons now include Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)-Malaybalay Negosyo Center and the Food Basket Center of Casisang, Bukidnon. Likewise, I always bring packets of tablea with me regularly to the trainings I attend.

Q: How has your life changed after getting involved with the cacao industry?

A: It changed me for the better and definitely sustained our standard of living. I was able to send my eldest sibling to school and he earned degree in Criminology. My other two kids are still in school now.

From an entrepreneur's point of view, I am overwhelmed how things are going



now. My tablea has already reached the locales of London, Abu Dhabi, and Hawaii through Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) who buy them when they are in the country for a vacation. I would like to tap that opportunity while the demand is still out there. As they say, “Strike while the iron is hot.”

I am grateful to the ATI management, especially to Center Director Quirog for letting me participate in their trainings on cacao production. I am being supplied regularly by a cacao cluster with a four-hectare cacao area to supplement production of my tablea. I will attend more trainings in the future even though I am quite busy and be a resource person should I be given a chance to speak and share my expertise and knowledge. My intention in attending trainings really is to improve my farm and see if the technology I learned worked out.

Q: How do you see your farm and cacao venture three to five years from now?

A: I plan to include the establishment of a processing facility and give my relatives and close kin livelihood and source of income. For now, I would really like my own roasting machine with built-in timer, stainless grinding machine, and a stainless molder since I have no machineries yet and I manually do the roasting of the beans. I am saving money for it and if someone comes along to do some counterparting, then all the better!

Also, I will still serve as resource person and teach those who show interest in farming as I engage with them on one-on-one demonstrations. I don’t charge any fees whatsoever—the only catch is that we come to an agreement that I will buy their farm produce once their cacao trees bear fruit.

Q: What are some of your personal insights that you can share with your co-farmers and those who want to venture in farming?

A: I practice what I preach. I would also like to share my realization that I can’t enforce nor shove my knowledge down my neighbors’ throats if they really don’t have the heart to do farming. And once I see that they are showing strong interest then that’s the time I will reach out and help them.

For Jun, his love for the traditional comfort drink *sikwate* gave rise to a commitment to increase local production of cacao and make more people appreciate the noteworthy qualities of local cacao products. Who would have thought that the sweet success he is savoring now would come from the very produce he harvests?

Although his personal and farming life suffered setbacks, Jun achieved successes because he learned how to turn something bitter into something sweet.



WILLIEX SAPUNGAN:

Achieving Dreams by Helping Fulfill Other People's Goals

BY ERLAN D. PASANA

As much as we admire solo achievement, the truth is that no one can accomplish anything alone. We need other people to do something great—to become successful.

Williex Sapungan wants to prove that success is built upon the foundation of teamwork. As the President of Bachao Ilaya Farmers' Association, his aspiration to become successful in vegetable farming is not only for himself and for his family, but also for the whole community of Bachao Ilaya, Gasan, Marinduque. The 35-year-old vegetable farmer knows it is not easy to run an organization, yet he is still able to look after and lead his team.

Honing an amateur

According to Williex, his first four years of tilling the land gave him so much difficulty in terms of earning money. With little knowledge in agriculture, only about half of his farm was utilized for corn farming. Williex says, “*Noong nagsisimula pa lang ako sa pagsasaka, hindi ko alam kung ano ang itanim sa sakahan para kumita ng malaki. Basta nakapagtanim ng mais, ayos na sa akin* (When I started farming, I didn't have any idea about the specific crop I should plant in my farm to get a good harvest. At that time, it was enough if I could plant corn).”

However, everything changed when Williex attended the trainings offered by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) in MiMaRoPa, which gave him additional knowledge in farming. Last March 2016, he participated in the training on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) on corn conducted in Sta. Cruz, Marinduque. As one of the corn growers in the province, he learned the safety and quality standards for the production, harvesting, and on-farm post-harvest handling and storage of corn. Williex shares, “*Madami palang kailangang isaalang-alang sa pagtanim ng mais, based sa Good Agricultural Practices* (It turns out that there are a lot of factors to consider in planting corn based on GAP).”

Also, he participated in the training on Sloping Agricultural Land Technology (SALT) on Corn last May 2017 in Boac, Marinduque. The training on SALT greatly impacted Williex's life—he learned how to grow a variety of crops without the use of expensive and often unavailable chemical fertilizers. Williex explains, “*Noong natutunan ko ang 'SALT,' ginawa ko ito sa aking sakahan. Ang masasabi ko, sapat at stable naman ang aking income dahil marami akong naaani* (When I learned 'SALT', I applied it to my farm. I could say that I have

enough and stable income because of the bountiful harvest I get).”

Now, the family’s main source of income is farming. Seeing the need to support his wife and two children, he worked hard to expand his almost one-hectare farmland to plant vegetables, peanut, and cassava. Moreover, he ventured into upland rice farming.

As a role model

Williex’s daily activities show his strong passion in farming. He gets up as early as four in the morning for his daily field work: watering the plants, cultivating the soil, sowing crops, and weeding. At night, he devotes two hours to fruit fly-picking, especially during the peak season for vegetables like *ampalaya* (bitter melon) and eggplant. He comments, “*Hindi ako kumukuha ng tao para magtrabaho sa aking sakahan. Ako mismo ang gumagawa ng mga trabahong bukid, para mai-apply ko rin ang aking mga natutunan sa mga pagsasanay na aking nadaluhan* (I do not hire a farm laborer to work in my farm. I do all the farm activities, for me to apply what I have learned in the trainings that I have attended).”

When his neighbors saw his success, many of them visited his farm. He encouraged them to go into farming. To those who believed in him, he taught all his knowledge in farming by using his farm as a technology-demonstration site. Williex states, “*Hindi ako madamot. Ang aking sakahan ay bukas sa lahat ng gustong matuto* (I am not selfish. My farm is open to every farmer who wants to learn).”

Because he set a good example to his community, the Provincial Agriculture

Office (OPAg) and the Municipal Agriculture Office of Gasan, Marinduque taps Williex to be a resource person during trainings. He teaches large groups of farmers about farming technologies, particularly on vegetable farming based on his experience. He says, “*Parang give and take lang yan. Habang nagtuturo ako ng alam ko, tinuturuan din ako ng organic farming* (It is just like give and take. While I teach what I know, I am also being trained in organic farming).”

Ripple effect from his genuine aspiration

No one can stop Williex from helping other farmers. His determination has led him to organize a farmers’ association in Barangay Bachao, Ilaya. According to him, since most of the residents in the said *barangay* are into farming, it was easy for him to recruit members in the association. He shares, “*Itinuro ko lahat ang aking nalalaman sa pagsasaka sa lahat ng miyembro ng samahan* (I imparted all my knowledge in farming to all the members of the association).”

Under the leadership of Williex, the Bachao Ilaya Farmers Association was established in 2016 with just 17 members. It started with an 800-square meter sloping land that the association borrowed from one of its members. Through their knowledge in SALT, Williex and his team converted the land into a productive area. With a capital of PHP3,000 contributed by its members, the association planted high value vegetables like *ampalaya*, okra, *pechay*, *mustasa*, and eggplant.

It was also in that same year that their organization was invited to participate in the Farmers’ Field School (FFS) spearheaded by the Municipal





Agriculture Office of Gasan. The FFS taught them new techniques and principles in organic vegetable farming; from cultural management to harvest and post-harvest management. Most importantly, the FFS made them effective and efficient vegetable farmers.

With the increasing demand of organic products, the farmers have started practicing organic farming. This year, the membership has grown to 27 active members. Williex explains, “*Sa umpisa, wala kaming pera. Ang isang taon na kita ng sakahan ay ginamit namin para bilhin ang lupa sinasaka ng samahan. Ngayon, pag-aari na ng samahan ang lupa na aming sinasaka* (At the very start, we didn’t have money. Our profit for one year was used to buy the farmland that we tilled. Now, we own the land that the association is cultivating).”

Working together works

Williex states, “*Walang tampuhan na nangyari sa bawat miyembro ng samahan. Hindi rin kami nag-aaway pagdating sa kita ng sakahan dahil lahat ng miyembro ay may ibang pinagkakakitaan* (Every member has a good relationship with each other. We never fight for money particularly when it comes to the profit of the association because each member has other means of income).”

For the smooth operation of the farm, each member is required to work there every day (particularly during land preparation and planting season) depending on their schedules. As the organization’s time keeper, Williex records the amount of time each member spends working in the farm. Each member is paid per hour. The association’s net income is equally

divided and distributed among the members of the association at the end of the year, based on the amount of time each member has spent in the farm.

In addition to that, they hold regular meetings every Saturday at 4:00 PM.

Williex says, “*Lahat rin ng gastos kagaya ng pambili ng seeds at ibang materyales ay kukunin sa sakitang sakahan ng samahan* (All expenses for the operation of the farm, such as seeds and other materials, will be deducted from the income of the farm association).” According to him, they are focused on vegetable farming because this can be feasibly grown in the farm and market demand is high.

The key is synergy

Williex explains, “*Lahat naman tayo ay gustong kumita ng malaki. Pero hindi natin ito magagawa kung hindi tayo magtutulungan bilang isang organisasyon* (All of us want to have more income. However, we can’t do it without the help of our fellow farmers, as one association).”

In 2017, the association had a plentiful harvest and earned a very good income. It earned PhP53,000 per cropping season of its planted *pechay*, *ampalaya*, beans, eggplant, and okra. The association was also able to give each member a higher salary. With this, Bachao Ilaya Farmers Association does not only prove that there is money in vegetable farming; it also shows how important solidarity is.

When asked about his biggest achievement in life, Williex affirms, “My most lasting and fulfilling achievement is often earned by helping others fulfill theirs.”

Mushroom in a Box

ADDITIONAL INCOME IN AN ECONOMICAL WAY

BY ROBERTO B. SANTOS

“Mushroom production does not require big capital. Even youth and women can start this promising business.” This is the promise of Flor “Bong” Lazado Olivar, a farmer and the owner of the Florinses Farm in San Vicente, Camarines Norte. Bong is a former member of the 4-H Club of the Philippines. He started farming in 1997 and ventured into mushroom production in 2000.

The increasing demand for mushroom and mushroom by-products motivates Bong to produce more. He has mastered the different processes in mushroom production such as spawn preparation, preparation of raw materials, and sterilization of fruiting bags. One of the most critical parts in mushroom production is the eight-hour sterilization process that keeps the fruiting bag away from harmful substances that might affect the growth of mushroom. This is completed by placing fruitings bag in big barrels and steaming them for almost half a day.

Other agricultural advances he is applying are based on his experiences when he joined the Young Filipino Farmers’ Training Program in Japan, which was led by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI). He was able to master his craft and level up his production by learning new technologies in mushroom farming and applying it to his farm.

The technology behind

In 2014, Bong developed the concept of a “Mushroom in a Box.” Since mushrooms

are prone to impurities, he designed a sealed box to avoid contamination of the produce. The fruiting bag that is ready for sale is placed inside a 10 cm x 22 cm x 30 cm specially designed box. The steps for growing mushrooms are placed on the box.

“The concept is intended to be a marketing model and unique design for kitchens or even in offices. I made it to promote mushroom production, and to serve as an effective marketing strategy,” Bong said. “It also makes the product attractive to buyers, because of its exceptional product design.”

The box also contains recipes that will help the buyers enjoy its produce. This allows new consumers of the product to learn the different value-adding technologies that will help them prepare the produce as food or add-ons to particular recipes.

The raw mixtures of the fruiting bags harvested with mushroom can also be used as fertilizer. The mixtures such as saw dust and rice brand completely decompose after three to four months of harvesting the mushrooms. This practice promotes the use of organic waste and lessens the possible intervention of synthetic fertilizers to other crops. The soil conditioner collected from the fruiting bags can be used as a fertilizer for other crops planted such as eggplant, tomato, bitter gourd, *pechay*, and others. This organic fertilizer gives you a better yield.





Marketing and sustainability

The mushroom in a box, which contains one fruiting bag, can produce up to 2.5 kilos of mushrooms in three to four months. Bong sells his products in the local markets of the Bicol Region and Quezon City. His products are sold through an arranged paying scheme; all his products are picked up in his farm. He also sells mushroom in a box at PhP100. His capital per box is PhP70; he earns up to PhP30 per box sold. Bong also sells mushroom produce amounting to PhP150 per kilo.

At present, Bong is developing a mushroom laboratory and is eyeing a bigger space for production. The mushroom laboratory will help facilitate the preparation of mushroom spawn known as the substance that has been inoculated with mycelium, the vegetative growth of a fungus. It will also allow him to avoid usual problems in production such as product contamination. “The sustainability of the production will be based on good management practices and proper handling of the produce,” Bong said.

He generates additional income because of mushroom production. He continues to teach and motivate other farmers to venture into mushroom production, not only because it is easy to manage, but also because it does not need a big capital.

Raw materials to be used in mushroom production are available in markets or even in local farm areas.

Mushroom production only requires a small working area.

From trainee to trainer

“Trainings on mushroom production, processing, and other value-adding technologies organized by the Agricultural Training Institute-Regional Training Center V help me to be updated with the different technologies and processes in mushroom production,” Bong said.

Bong also serves as a trainer to the beneficiaries of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), formerly known as the Ahon Pamilyang Pilipino of the Department of Social Welfare and Development. 4Ps is a conditional cash transfer program of the government that aims to eradicate extreme poverty in the country by investing in the health and education of poor families. He serves as a resource person for trainings and seminars for its members from all the municipalities of Camarines Norte. He also shares his knowledge in mushroom production during educational visits of students and farmer enthusiasts to his farm. Florinses Farm grows other high value crops. It serves as a training ground for students who undergo on-the-job training.

“Even if you have a small working capital, when you have dedication and willingness to do the task, you’ll be successful,” Bong said.

Spicing Up the Simple Life

THE CRISTITO DAVIS STORY

BY JONALYN G. SAULAN

“*Manakahay man ko ug lubi sauna, unya diha’y kausa nga hapit jud ko mahulog sa lubi, unya wa na baya ko nagkabata. Sukad adto, sige gyud ko’g ampo sa Ginoo nga unta tagaan ko’g trabaho nga dili nako musaka sa lubi (I used to climb coconut trees for a living. One time, I almost fell off a tree. I wasn’t getting young. After that moment, I kept praying to God to give me a job that does not require climbing coconut trees anymore),”* Cristito Davis shares.

Many times, we ask God for things that we desire. Some people say we get what we deserve in His perfect time. To the blessed few, constant prayer and hard work are the best formula to success.

Adaptable farmer

After he almost fell off the coconut tree, doors of opportunity opened up for Cristito Davis. He was hired as a laborer for a relative in a ginger production farm. This taught him valuable lessons in growing the crop under coconut trees. Not long after, he invested in 30 ginger rhizomes and a ¼-hectare backyard ginger farm with no laborers. His farm grew and in 1990, he started to hire laborers and planted 1,000 kilos of ginger.

A migrant from Cebu City, Cristito banked on his learnings to become an agripreneur and worked hard to make what he now calls the 3Gs Farm, a 4-hectare agricultural land named after his children: Gang-gang, Ging-ging, and Gong-gong.

Cristito is a Magsasaka Siyentista from Brgy. Bninulho, Javier, Leyte who produces organically grown ginger under coconut trees.

Advantageous demands

Seven years into production, the market price for ginger increased significantly. Cristito used the high market demand to his advantage. He sold the produce at PhP100/kilo. He then bought a bigger lot for ginger production. However, as prices increased, more and more farmers in his neighborhood also started producing ginger. This triggered a decline in the price, but Cristito’s passion for farming never wavered.

Today, Cristito supplies ginger largely to the region and to the nearby Javier Special Salabat Processing Center. At times, when more traders contact him for ginger supply, Cristito gathers produce from other farmers.

Best practices for replication

3Gs Farm is an ATI-accredited Learning Site for Practical Agriculture (LSPA). Davis shares his knowledge on ginger production to walk-in clients and training participants.

With the recommendation of the Javier local government unit–Office of the Municipal Agriculturist (Javier LGU-OMAS), Cristito attended a training on bio-organic inputs at the Agricultural Training Institute–Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) VIII. This started his







linkage with OMAS and ATI-RTC VIII, and also helped improve his skills in organic agriculture production.

“After I was trained by the ATI about bio organic inputs, I started planting ginger, vegetables, and corn under coconut trees,” he shares.

With notable practices in organic farming technology, Cristito received the accreditation as a Learning Site for Ginger Production in Eastern Visayas from ATI-RTC VIII after a rigorous evaluation process.

He notes, “*Sa unsa pa gyud, akong kahibalo sa the ATI niadtong nakatambong ko ug training sa organic. Kung unsaon paghimo ang mga concoctions para sa tanom* (My first-hand experience with the ATI was during a training on organic agriculture. They taught us how to make the different concoctions).” The training became a major influence on how he started to manage his farm and turned it to what it is today. He creates concoctions such as the Oriental Herbal Nutrient, which he still uses in the farm.

Passing the gift

As a Magsasaka Siyentista (MS) with an accredited Learning Site, Cristito now serves as a resource person on various ginger production technology trainings in his farm, as well as in other municipalities in the region. His efforts were acknowledged when LGU-Javier nominated Cristito during the 2016 Eastern Visayas Techno Gabay Program Summit. He won 3rd place in the Best MS category. Along with this recognition, Cristito joined the other MS for a learning journey in Benguet, where they learned more about organic farming practices.

Cristito played a substantial role in the creation of the Javier Ginger Growers Association that covers more than 22 barangays in the municipality. He is currently the president of the association and generously shares his practices to others growers. He shares, “My neighbors have seen how I was before—I climbed coconut trees, de-husked coconuts; I was a typical laborer, and that encouraged my neighbors. They learned from me—especially now that I

“Wa nako’y lain pangandoy kung dili ang matagaan unta ko ug maayong panglawas ug taas taas pa nga kinabuhi (I can’t ask for anything more except good health and long life).”

CRISTITO DAVIS



don’t have to farm in the mountains.”

Today, prices of ginger are lower than when he made his initial investment. Although there has been a decrease in the number of growers, he continues to do what he does best: plant ginger and share his gift of knowledge. It has not hindered him from continuously growing the crop that has opened doors of opportunities for his family and his community. Most especially now, when he has already established a good business relationship with traders, businessmen, and his fellow farmers.

Keeping the beat

“With ginger, if you can plant 100 kilos, you can harvest 1,000 kilos since it yields 100% given that the area is organically maintained—1,000 kilos of plant can harvest 10,000 kilos. With 10,000 kilos at say PhP50 per kilo, you earn half a million pesos.”

Cristito no longer works for others as a farm laborer and collects a good harvest all year round. He now provides employment to other farms. What does Cristito Davis pray for this time, you

might ask? He says, “*Wa nako’y lain pangandoy kung dili ang matagaan unta ko ug maayong panglawas ug taas-taas pa nga kinabuhi* (I can’t ask for anything more except good health and long life).”

He reiterates that the outcome is as important as the beginning. “If your venture is ginger, start small. Start with 50 kilos. More or less, the expense will only be PhP500. When you reach a thousand, and sell them at PhP50 per kilo, you can earn PhP50,000. Even though you have a salary, you can still earn extra income. You may have your own jobs, but you don’t have to rely on your salary when you can gain more through farming.”

Aman with a passion for and dedication to farming, who has done so much hard work in his early years, Cristito Davis continues to spice up a simple life with unwavering faith.

Small Dreams, Big Hope

JONATHAN QUITO'S FARMING JOURNEY

BY MERRIAN P. SOLIVA



“In farming, I was given so much hope,” this was the phrase that inspired Jonathan Hermodo Quito to pursue agriculture.

Jonathan, fondly called “Bunsoy” by his co-scholars in the Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Agriculture (YES) Program of the 4-H Club Batch 2014–2016, was one of the 15 grantees of the ladderized program of the Diploma in Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Agriculture at the Molding Future Innovators’ Farm Business Institute Foundation.

One of his feats during his on-the-job training (OJT) was receiving the Best Farm Manager award from the Foundation University of Dumaguete City. He was recommended by former farm manager Gomer Sarao.

The scholarship program was a gift that Bunsoy received after finishing his studies at Camayaan National High School, Agape, Loboc, Bohol. He planned to stop studying after high school so he could support the younger ones who were still in elementary and high school. At a young age, Bunsoy understood that it was his responsibility to help his parents sustain their livelihood so his siblings could go to school.

But fate was on his side—soon after graduation, Bunsoy was chosen as one

of the 4-H grantees in Central Visayas.

Humble Beginnings

Born on May 15, 1998 in Agape, Loboc, Bohol, Bunsoy is the eldest of five children to Letecia Hermodo and Julianio Quito.

As an active member of 4-H Coco Nucifera in Loboc, Bohol, he took the exam for the YES Program selection. Their 4-H coordinator, who also happened to be the Municipal Agriculture Officer of LGU-Loboc, Sylvia Cumahig, was the one who recommended him for the program.

Bunsoy was hesitant at first because he remembered his farmer-father’s advice: “Jonathan, do not go into farming because that life is tough.” However, through the encouragement of Sylvia, he applied for the selection process and was rewarded with a scholarship.

Bunsoy had to ask for permission to go to Dumaguete City and stay there for a couple of years. He didn’t have the courage to share the good news with his parents, so he waited until he was about to leave before he broke the news to them. His father’s permission encouraged him to persevere in agriculture.

In his younger years, Bunsoy helped his parents grow rice. He also helped out with backyard gardening after graduating from high school.



This was where he learned all about vermicomposting. Despite his limited knowledge on vermicomposting, Bunsoy was able to harvest 30 kilos, which was sold at PhP10 per kilo.

Today, Bunsoy and his family harvest seven sacks a month, with a price of PhP250 per sack for growers of ornamental flowers in their town.

Apart from this, he also focused on mushroom production, which he is considered an expert of. His PhP300 seed money grew and he was able to sell his produce to the local markets.

With the rising demand of mushroom, and since his family did not have enough space for his mushroom produce, the barangay—through Agape Barangay Captain Joeven Angkla—lent him a 150-square meter lot near the *barangay* hall.

Gains from perseverance

“Dako nako’ng kalipay karon kay gihatagan ko sa Agricultural Training Institute-Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) VII og kahigayonan nga maapil sa scholarship ug PhP13,000 isip puhonan sa native chicken ug labaw sa tanan, ang mga training nga akoang naapilan, dili na kini malangkat pa sa akoang kaugalingon (I am so happy that ATI-RTC VII granted

me the opportunity to be a part of the scholarship and supported me with PhP13,000 as capital for native chicken production and above all, the training that I received cannot be taken away from me),” Bunsoy said.

When asked about his plan for pursuing formal schooling, he replied that he will focus first on developing their garden, especially since many are now showing interest in his farm. He wants to show not just the community but his fellow youth that agriculture is a rewarding job.

Bunsoy further disclosed that he did not ever imagine that he would be invited to talk to young audiences, as well as visitors from other regions about his mushroom venture.

He encourages the youth to take action because “if we will not make our share of food production, who will do it for us, and what will happen to our generation?”

Bunsoy ended by saying, “I cannot even imagine that I was able to reach these humble gains. It is indeed true that small things provide big hopes to those who keep on pushing and dreaming for the benefit of all.”

FARM BUSINESS SCHOOL:

Learn to Earn in Agriculture

BY KARLENE GRACE Z. TANDANG

“Production is not enough—making money out of it matters more. Making money is not enough—aiming for financial freedom matters most.”

This is the realization of Efren Macario, a Farm Business School (FBS) regional trainer in Northern Mindanao. Recognizing the farmer’s need to be educated in financial literacy and entrepreneurial farming, Macario integrated asset diversification and stock market investing into the FBS curriculum in their area. He envisioned the farmers as esteemed business people who are goal-oriented, innovative risk-takers—a vision contrasting the stereotypical image of a Filipino farmer.

Usually, a Filipino farmer is imagined to be wearing a *salakot* (native hat), working in the field with a carabao, and with a *nipa* palm hut as his house. Under the heat of the sun, he plows his field and patiently cares for his crops, hoping for a plentiful harvest.

There also seems to be a widespread notion that despite their hard work, our farmers have just enough to get by for the day. Unfortunately, reports show that they belong to the poorest sector in the country. Ironically, with the onset of globalization and rapid urbanization, the demand for raw and processed agricultural products is increasing. This opens up big opportunities for the agriculture sector to yield higher profits. Sadly, producers or farmers who

are generally better off are the ones gaining much more from the changing market than those who need it most.

Smallholder farmers remain poor despite the chances of earning big in farming. They have been bombarded with numerous production technologies in past decades but were not prepared to acquire bargaining power in the market and have maximum profits. Inadequate access of farmers to market information worsens their reliance in middle-men and traders. The endless trap of debts hinders their income boost.

These farmers may have the knowledge in farming but lack skills in business management and entrepreneurial capabilities. In these times, technical know-how is not enough. The desire to increase the income of farmers requires them to adapt to market changes and acquire better farm management skills.

The need to develop the capabilities of marginalized farmers on entrepreneurship; improving their market access is imperative. The best way to capacitate them is through the learning by doing approach. Therefore, the United Nations- Food and Agriculture Organization developed the concept of FBS. Inspired by the Department of Agriculture (DA) Farmers’ Field School, FBS is a unique educational system that teaches farmers how to be entrepreneurs.



Using their own farms to test the lessons learned from FBS sessions, the participants gain knowledge, skills, and attitude on proper farm business management, entrepreneurship, and marketing. This helps them become self-sustainable and not simply subsidy- or middleman-reliant farmers who breed dependence on the government and traders. Likewise, this aids them in becoming free from the enslavement of debt from loan sharks.

Beginnings

Through a project led by the DA-Agricultural Training Institute (ATI), and in collaboration with the DA - Agribusiness and Marketing Assistance Service (DA-AMAS), and the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), the FBS concept was introduced in the Philippines. The project piloted in the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya and Nueva Ecija in the Cagayan Valley and Central Luzon Region, respectively.

The FBS intends to promote the adoption of a market-oriented extension modality in the public sector. It has a 25-session curriculum that consists of topics that can be tailor-fit according to the needs of the farmers. Developing a farm business plan, benchmarking, record-keeping, value-adding, and surveying the market were among the topics that highlight the curriculum

content. Also included in the sessions is the mentoring of farmers by involved government agencies, as well as social entrepreneurs tapped by the program.

Through the pilot project, over 1,600 farmers graduated from the FBS. It also resulted to several market contracts between farmer beneficiaries and buyers. The contracts resulted in the purchase of FBS farmers' products with the total volume of 13.64 tons of vegetables. This was traded to supermarkets and restaurants in Metro Manila through Organic Options Incorporated (OOI). A staggering amount of almost PhP75,000 was accounted as additional income to the farmers involved—a 64% increase of income compared to the prices offered by buyers in the agricultural trading centers and public markets.

The farmers were enlightened by the lessons taught in each FBS session. There were changes in attitudes such as treating farming as a business and moving towards demand-driven practices. Ms. Edna Urban, a participant from Ibung, Villaverde said, "*Ang pagsasaka pala ay isang negosyo na dapat kumita. Nakuha po namin kung ano yung nararapat naming itanim* (We realized that farming is a business that should be profitable. We learned how to determine the crops that we should plant)."

Another FBS participant from Villaverde, Nueva Vizcaya was

Ms. Rowena Dung-an. “*Doon po namin nalaman na dapat i-record pala ang mga gastos para malaman ang break-even [price]. Alam na naming maki-transact sa mga dealer (We realized that we should keep records of our expenses so we can determine our break-even price. We learned how to transact with the dealers),*” she said.

The success of the project was not only indicated by immediate increase in the income of the beneficiaries. The empowerment was felt by the farmers, as well as the FBS facilitators in the pilot sites. In an interview, Mr. Mark Evan Tamani, agricultural technician of Solano, Nueva Vizcaya stated, “As facilitator, *ayun mas naging confident ako sa pagdidiscuss, lalong-lalo na may part kasi sa training on facilitators na mag-FBS (As a facilitator, I gained more confidence in discussing, particularly due to the part where we are trained on how to facilitate the FBS).*”

Adding to the unparalleled zeal of the implementing agencies and Agricultural Extension Workers (AEWs), the support of the chief executives in the LGUs is deemed crucial to the success of the project. Mayor Philip Dacayo of Solano, Nueva Vizcaya stated, “*Iyon po ang aking suhestiyon-na dapat ituloy [ang FBS]. At kung kinakailangan na ang*

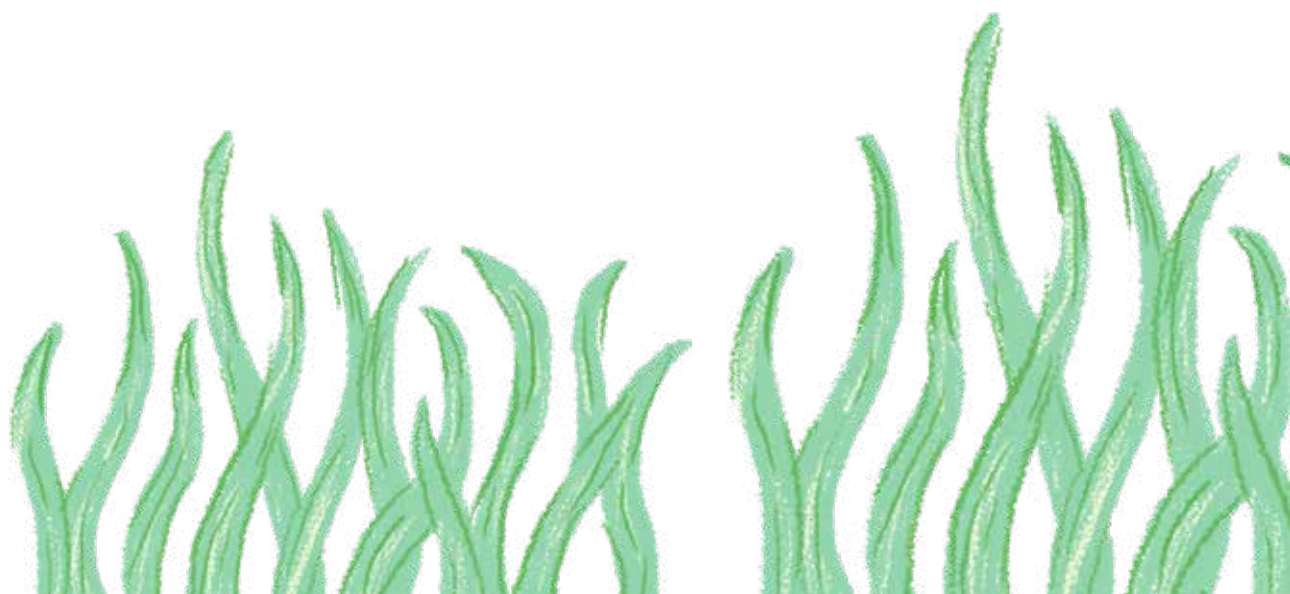
local government unit *mismo ang mag-finance nito or mga interested parties, gagawin po namin iyan. Handang-handa po kami at laging nandito po kami para tumulong po sa [mga magsasaka]* (That is my suggestion—to continue the FBS in our municipality. If necessary, our local government unit will be the one to finance this or if there are other interested parties, we will do that. We are always prepared to reach out to [farmers].”

Scaling-up

With the accomplishment of the project during its first year of implementation in 2013, the ATI immediately took action to scale up the initiative nationwide. The FBS was institutionalized by the ATI in 2014. It became a part of the Institute’s regular program from then on.

ATI replicated the process of the pilot projects by training focal persons from the Regional Training Centers (RTCs) along with the representatives from DA-AMAS regional counterparts. They served as the trainers of the AEWs in the chosen sites. These trained AEWs served as the FBS facilitators in their locality. Now, there are over 400 FBSes established and assisted by the ATI nationwide.

Following the footsteps of ATI, the DAR deemed that the nationwide implementation of FBS for their Agrarian



Reform Communities and Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries was vital. They scaled up the conduct of FBS in 2015.

Combatting poverty and transforming the lives of people in the rural areas are now easier to achieve because of the FBS. Even rebel groups in Mindanao, such as the New People's Army, were given opportunities to live peacefully and abundantly. In Plaridel, Lanao del Norte, all former NPA members in the barangay of Mamanga Gamay underwent training through FBS. They now produce a variety of organic vegetables depending on the needs of the locals. Through FBS, they were presented with choices: harmony and abundance through agriculture or chaos and hunger through insurgency.

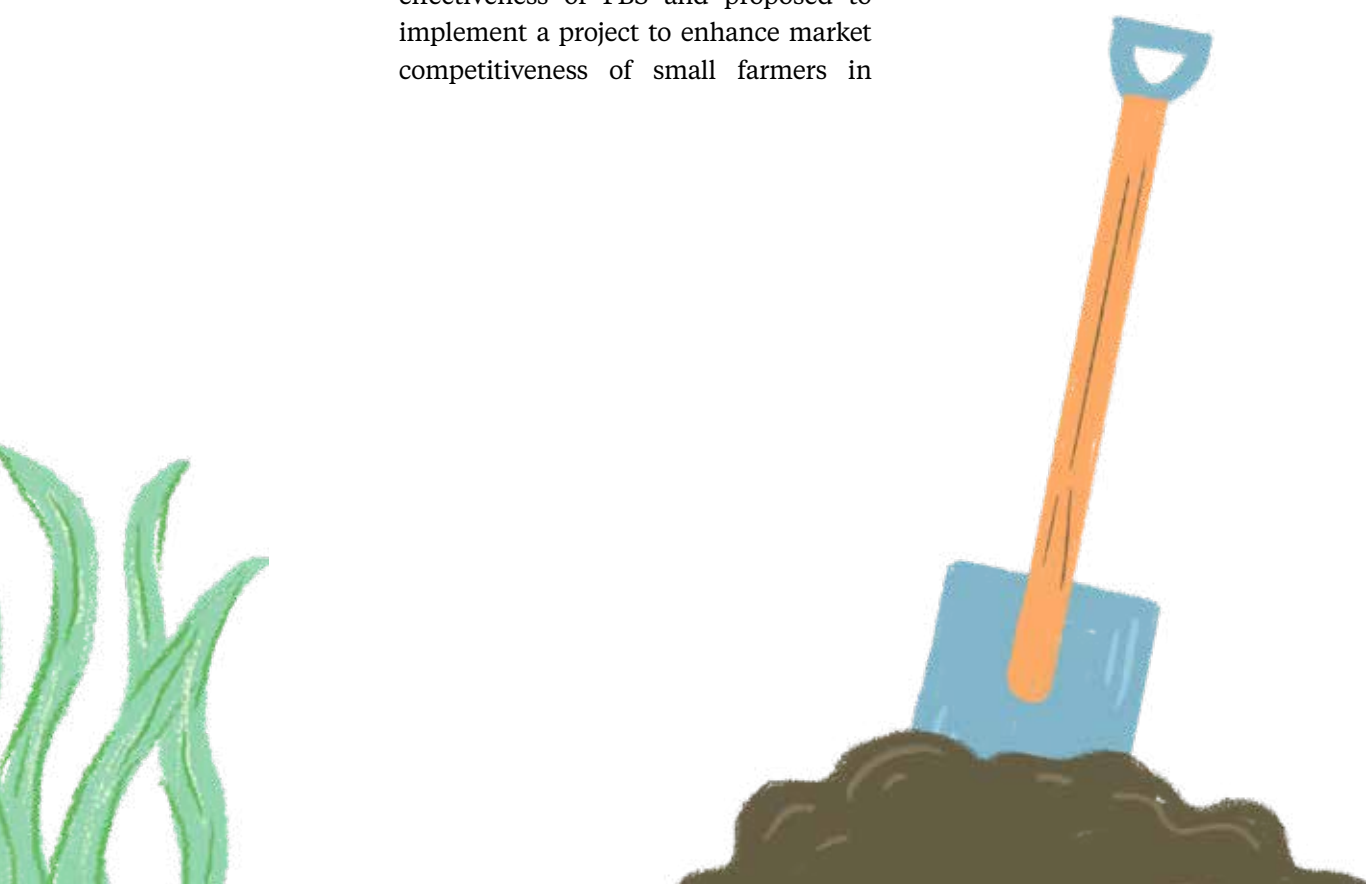
Continuing innovation

The FBS as a relatively new extension approach has been recognized as one of the best modalities to empower small holder farmers. Significant increases in funding for the continued implementation of FBS have been reported since the pilot project. Other international organizations such as the United States – Millennium Challenge Corporation also acknowledged the effectiveness of FBS and proposed to implement a project to enhance market competitiveness of small farmers in

selected agricultural commodities. On a local scale, there were several talks with GoNegosyo for the possibility of riding their program with the FBS.

Reducing inequality through transforming the lives of rural people necessitates several players to work in harmony. The FBS embarks upon the improvement in the capabilities of farmers to engage in business and enhance market access. This will help them to be more competitive and open to opportunities that benefit from the rapid economic growth.

With the proliferation of farm business schools, we are no longer looking at tiresome farmers with saggy clothes exposed under the scorching heat of the sun. What we now see are farmers who think and act like proactive, innovative, vision-building, risk-taking, knowledgeable businessman. We now see more farmer entrepreneurs empowered with the right tools, ready to take on modern challenges in farm business.



The Green Romance

ROMAINE LETTUCE PRODUCTION IN THE CLOUD-CAPPED MOUNTAINS OF BAUKO

BY ADRIAN CHRIS P. VELASCO

When you hear the word “lettuce,” the next thing you might think of are salads, burgers, and sandwiches. Well, there is nothing wrong with that. Who could say no to these crispy, succulent, and nutritious green leaves? But have you ever wondered what’s needed to grow them successfully?

Let us learn from Mr. Cornelio C. Matias, a Magsasaka Siyentista, whose research has taught him how to sustainably and profitably grow lettuce. Mr. Matias is a native of Monamon Sur, Bauko, Mt. Province. He is happily married to Mrs. Aglina Bay-an Matias; they are blessed with six children. Mr. Matias grew up in a farming family and has been into farming since childhood.

Attraction

According to Mr. Matias, most of the farmers, himself included, grow potatoes, cabbage, and carrots. But that was until he decided to try something new. He stumbled upon lettuce when he was looking for a crop that is not usually cultivated by farmers in their community. Mr. Matias explained that lettuce, aside from its uniqueness, can also be sold to buyers outside the common market at a higher price. He further revealed that lettuce, especially the romaine variety, is one of most

sought after high value crops from the Cordillera highlands by consumers locally and in Manila, both in high-end and common market outlets.

Mr. Matias realized that he can take advantage of the concept of growing lettuce under a protective environment: a greenhouse.

The Courtship:

Romaine Lettuce Production

Aside from being a full-time farmer, Mr. Matias is also designated as the Magsasaka Siyentista (MS) of the Bauko Farmers Information and Technology Services (FITS) Center since 2008. A Magsasaka Siyentista is an outstanding farmer recognized for his/her use of both science-and-technology-based and indigenous technologies. MSes complement the services of the FITS Center.

Mr. Matias is known among his fellow MSes as very active and consistent in his aim to produce better products through better methods. His perseverance in pursuing his goals convinced the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development of the Department of Science and Technology to fund his romaine lettuce production project under the Science and Technology-Based Farm (STBF) project.



The STBF project aims to bring down the concept of research on the level of both the farm and the farmer, where the farmer himself is the researcher or the scientist—which is why they are called *Magsasaka Siyentista*.

According to Mr. Matias, a greenhouse basically protects the crop from damages that can be caused by excessive or strong rainfall, wind, and direct exposure to sunlight. To some extent, it helps regulate pest infestation and disease. Depending on the availability of materials, a greenhouse can be made out of iron bars, plastic pipes, wood or bamboo poles, and a plastic canvass.

Mr. Matias harvests an average of 600 kilograms of romaine lettuce every two months, regardless of the season, from his 150-square meter greenhouse. He shared that the greenhouse allows him to produce lettuce through a programmed production at a weekly interval where supply is made available the whole year round. He also added that the greenhouse is an effective method of maximizing time and labor resource as the farmer can work inside the farm even during rainy days.

Additionally, he was able to increase the planting density of lettuce from four seedlings per row, as commonly practiced by most farmers in their locality, to six

seedlings per row. Likewise, he advocates the use of seedling trays to lessen root injury and transplanting shocks for healthier and more vigorous growth. Mr. Matias also makes his own compost, including the production of vermicast, which are the main inputs of his farm.

He further shared that the use of plastic crates during harvest lessened “rejects” brought about by broken, crumpled, and torn leaves due to the rough surface and deep cargo area of bamboo crates that causes severe compaction. Mr. Matias shared, “Just imagine how much effort you invested in the care and maintenance of the crop, from seedling establishment until these are ready for harvest, and after harvesting you will just cram these in the bamboo baskets. Consequently, when the produce reaches the market, they are already damaged and are either rejected by buyers or bought at a very low price.”

Based on his record, Mr. Matias invested about PhP5,866.67 for lettuce production in six months or three cycles. Out of this, he earned a net income of PhP12,133.33 for every cycle. This increased during the wet season with a net income of PhP43,533.33 for every cycle. Mr. Matias shared, “Productivity and economic viability are the principal



indicators why the intervention is successful. The increase in the volume of production per cropping is another visible indicator. These are what I think some of the rewards brought by the intervention, that is why I continue to practice it and even improve it.”

Drip irrigation project

Along the course of his lettuce production venture, Mr. Matias observed that their expanding production area required more water for irrigation. However, their water source cannot sustainably supply the volume of water needed in the production process. He also noted that the sprinkler irrigation system used in the locality wastes a lot of water.

This led him to the idea of adopting drip irrigation, which he learned in one of the trainings he attended. He also discovered that some farmers in Benguet started adopting the technology. Mr. Matias explained that drip irrigation is a water-saving irrigation method where water is directed to the base of the plant and the volume and timing of irrigation can be centrally controlled. He elaborated that this is possible by laying plastic water pipes on the plots. These water pipes are punctured with holes, with each hole strategically placed beside every hill.

He also shared that through the drip irrigation system, water is concentrated

only on the base of the plants and not everywhere as what happened before.

Through this, a huge amount of water is saved. His drip irrigation project is also a technology demonstration project of the Agricultural Training Institute – Cordillera Administrative Region.

Struggles

Mr. Matias admitted that putting up and sustaining the romaine lettuce production in a greenhouse is full of challenges. He shared, “Under a relatively fair weather, the plastic canvass used in greenhouses can last for more than five years, which is longer than its estimated life span. However, a newly installed 20-meter plastic canvass worth Php6,000 can be gone overnight once a strong typhoon strikes.”

He said, “Usually when my relatives, neighbors, and townsfolk visit the farm, they won’t ask about my farming practices. Rather, they ask if I was able to realize the returns from my investments in the greenhouses especially if these are damaged by typhoons. My answer is that, just think of it as a brand new car, which will eventually have some engine problems. Therefore, I have to spend for repairs for it to continue functioning if I still wish to profit.”

He shared, “When I was starting to practice organic farming, I had a very difficult time maintaining the quality of



“This is why the farm is always open so the farm workers and other farmers will be able to witness that this system of farming is possible.”

CORNELIO MATIAS

my produce. I cannot sell my vegetables with all those damages made by insect pests because the market will not buy it. So I had to strategize.”

Another challenge is marketing. “When I just started contract growing, buyers would first ask me about the area of my farm and they will set a volume for me to deliver weekly. I realized I cannot supply all of their requirements. That is why I encouraged other farmers to venture into romaine lettuce production so that together we can sustain the supply.”

Commitment

As an MS, Mr. Matias has a social obligation to influence and convince his fellow farmers to adopt his science-and-technology-based agricultural practices. The usual “to see is to believe” mentality of farmers, which makes them reluctant to try new but proven practices because of their “fear of losing,” hamper his intentions. Nonetheless, Mr. Matias was never discouraged. Instead, he continued to operate, expand, and improve his farm amidst these challenges and the watchful eyes of his neighbors. His hard work bore fruits in due time. His neighbors realized that they can replicate what he is doing and that there is really money in it.

Mr. Matias shared, “Before, when my neighbors and farm workers see

vegetables along the road, which are either left out after harvest or fallen from trucks, they gather them because these can still be eaten or sold.”

After working for some time in the farm, they became conscious about the dangers that pesticides carry to both consumers and farm workers. This made them apprehensive about harvesting or gathering vegetables if they are not sure about the source of these vegetables. Thus, he was also able to inspire his neighbors to adopt his practices, enabling them to sustain both their timing and volume of production and access larger markets. Mr. Matias remarked, “This is why the farm is always open so the farm workers and other farmers will be able to witness that this system of farming is possible.”

As a guiding principle, he adopted the adage “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” By producing vegetables that are pesticide-free and of good quality, his family and other consumers of his product will not be afraid to eat the vegetables even if these are served raw.

At present, Mr. Matias grows his romaine lettuce exclusively for institutional buyers and for home consumption. His journey to success is indeed a romance that started with his attraction to the potentials of lettuce and fueled by his perseverance. Indeed, his beautiful “green romance” with romaine lettuce is in full bloom.

Livestock

No More Take Two

BY KIMBERLY DOROTHY LAQUI

“One is enough, two is more than enough.” This statement applies to a woman who was able to overcome challenges in pig raising after completing only one training.

While most farm owners rely on private technicians and caretakers, one woman stands alone in the middle of challenges. After becoming more skilled, she successfully grew and managed her business.

Humble beginnings

Evelyn Perico, a mother from Pangasinan, once attended training in the International Training Center on Pig Husbandry (ITCPH). Through her perseverance and love for animals, she developed a diversified livestock production of ducks, goats, and pigs.

After facing financial difficulties in her artificial insemination (AI) and piggery business in 2012, she became a hands-on pig raiser. She happily engages her only child in swine raising, too. At the age of nine, her daughter was already encouraged to clean pig pens.

Pigs have always been her first love. As a child, she already cooked for them. “*Bata pa lang ako, nagluluto na ako ng pakain sa baboy; niluluto ko yung darak* (As a child, I was already cooking food

for the pigs; I cooked rice bran),” Evelyn said. Her mother had one or two sows at that time. This became her only background on swine raising.

Evelyn’s turning point came after she gave birth to her eldest child in 1993. She got bored staying at home and this pushed her to start pig raising. It became her pastime. “*Libangan lang talaga yang pag bababoy sa akin nung una* (Pig raising was really just a pastime for me in the beginning),” she revealed. To provide the needs of her family, she ventured into selling feeds.

As a feeds supplier, she was asked to attend a training on artificial insemination by a feed company. As all fees were covered, she joined without second thoughts.

The better she

It may seem ironic but one’s failure can become someone’s beginning.

When Evelyn started pig raising as a hobby, she had no plans of expanding. However, the opportunity to go bigger came when a debt was settled with farm equipment. “*May naluging farm, binayaran ako ng mga gestating pens at farrowing pens kapalit ng utang sa feeds* (A farm business went bankrupt, and they paid me with gestating and farrowing



pens for their feed debts),” she stated. Piglets were also given to her. This paved the way for her having a 50-sow level farm behind her house in Sta. Maria.

However, as the years passed, she did not earn anything. There was not a single profit from her endeavor. The piggery business was at stake. She had no choice but to shut down her AI center in 2012. Caretakers and AI technicians were also terminated. Evelyn was left alone.

Acquainted with the traditional way of raising pigs but without a proper background on swine, she went through a lot of trials. However, she managed to maintain a 30-sow level farm. “*May mali sa management* (There was something wrong with management),” she whispered. She realized that mismanagement led to non-profit. “*Bakit wala akong kita nung 50-sow level, samantalang nung ako na lang mag-isa, na 30-sow level, napupuno ko pa yung mga pens ko* (Why didn’t I earn anything when I had the 50-sow level business while all the pens were full when I had the 30-sow level and I worked alone)?” she recounted.

Left alone in raising pigs, farm administration was no easy task. “*Puro bukol-bukol yung mga biik ko* (My pigs had lumps),” she shared. This was due to improper injection techniques.

Production is a major concern in any agricultural venture, especially in pig raising. For example, the handling of pregnant sows entails proper management. Evelyn had to rely on the availability of technicians to assist sows in giving birth. “*Pag manganganak, di ko alam ang gagawin kasi Sabado lang pwede ang technician* (Every time a pig was about to give birth, I didn’t know what to do because the technician was available on Saturdays only),” she said.

Learning the ITCPH way

After attending the National Course on Artificial Insemination, Evelyn realized her shortcomings. She then worked to improve all her practices, especially since the AI training was not limited to artificial insemination only. “*Hindi lang AI ang natutunan ko duon, like yung mga physical abnormalities and medications gaya nung paggamit ng dahon ng bayabas* for lavage (I learned not only about artificial insemination, but also about physical abnormalities and medications, such as how to use guava leaves for lavage),” she explained.

Evelyn also shared that she was advised once before to cull one boar because of its unequal ball size. During her training at ITCPH, she regretted following her technician’s advice



because she learned that boars with this condition are not required to be culled. Though it can be genetically inherited, it is still functional. This wrong decision made her lose nearly PhP100,000.

Aside from learning the basics of semen collection, tips on hygiene and sanitation were also highlighted. It was an eye-opener for her to see how these can increase her farm production. Semen dilution and caring for the AI equipment were just some of her realizations during the training.

Empowered by her experience and learnings from ITCPH, Evelyn continues to take care of her farm alone. Right after the training, she started practicing castration on newborn piglets. Now, she is a skilled and wise farm owner.

“*Huwag aasa sa technician. You are the best technician kasi you are the one monitoring (Don’t rely on your technician. You are the best technician because you are the one personally monitoring the situation),*” Evelyn advised.

Getting there at once

Evelyn is a dentist by profession. She practiced this for two consecutive years. So when asked about tooth clipping piglets until their third day, she jokingly shared, “*Dati, iniingatan ko talaga ‘wag magtanggap ng ngipin, ngayon*

nagtatanggal na ako (I didn’t really take out teeth before, but I do so now).” Tooth clipping is important to avoid hurting the sow’s nipple during milking, especially since piglets have sharp teeth. This is one of the practices Evelyn learned and adopted from ITCPH.

From injecting anesthesia for tooth extraction and other operations in dentistry, Evelyn now uses vitamins, iron, and other medications in farm administration. Furthermore, microscopes are also used in calculating the motility and quality of boar semen.

Her 5-day course on artificial insemination at the ITCPH led to the quest of keeping her piggery. When asked how ITCPH helped her, she proudly shares, “*Confident na ako ngayon. Hindi na ako takot (I am confident now. I’m not afraid anymore).*”

After eight unproductive years, Evelyn’s AI Center is ready to operate again.



Legado

DEFINING HER RETIREMENT'S WORTH

BY KIMBERLY DOROTHY LAQUI

Service is about kindness, novelty, intelligence, and passion. It is a positive energy that runs in one's blood, and it is passed on to others. It is something to be proud of. Serving is giving and requires nothing in return. It is something innate and not provoked.

Career build-up

Students as her daily vitamins, trainings as supplements, and family as inspiration: these have made Dr. Lydia P. Libunao's teaching career a wonderful experience. But after 35 years, she has decided to leave Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University (DMMMSU) Bacnotan Campus. She is proud to have been able to change lives during her stay in the university.

But Doc Lydia is even prouder that her success story started when she decided to make agriculture and farming a part of her life, and when she decided to share her knowledge and expertise with the DMMMSU community.

The Basic Meat Processing Course in 2004 was Doc Lydia's first training at the International Training Center on Pig Husbandry (ITCPH). Upon learning more about the ingredients, procedures, and packaging details, her practice of delivering fresh pork to the community shifted to selling processed meat such as *tocino*, *longganisa*, and *embutido*, among others. "Proven na maganda, walang spoilage and accepted ng mga customers (Customers like these products because they do not spoil)," Doc Lydia proudly uttered. This brought a huge impact to the life of Janice,

who was one of Doc Lydia's students. The income the doctor gained from this venture aided Janice's family and helped her graduate.

Eventually, Doc Lydia started teaching meat processing to second year Bachelor of Science in Agriculture students, requiring them to produce a kilo of any processed meat product to sell at a particular price. This way, the students were taught about entrepreneurship as well.

Career accumulation

Eager to learn more, in 2005, Doc Lydia went back to the center and had her two-month National Trainor's Course on Pig Husbandry. As the Project Manager of North La Union Campus Piggery Project then, she was held accountable of its five-sow level operation.

"Nung wala pa akong training, wala akong iniisip na mga target ng farm (At the time when I wasn't trained yet, I didn't care to think of any target or goal for the farm)," she shared. The subject on stock projection came as her vantage point as it equipped and challenged her with knowhow in increasing the farm's stocks through the sow's production cycle.

After building up her career, she began accumulating the fruits of her labor. The Piggery Project successfully increased its operations to 15-sow level. History in the Extension Services Department was made as the farm generated a net income of half a million pesos in its first year of operations. The generated income was used for the construction of ten farrowing buildings and crates. "Ang paanakan namin before ay sa floor



lang (In the past, our pigs gave birth on the floor only),” she revealed. The farm invested in crates upon realizing the benefits of an elevated farrowing crate for the elimination of diarrhea. Additional ventilation for piglets was also prioritized.

During her Animal Science days, piglet castration was taught traditionally. “*Nung nag-college ako, may taga hawak kami tuwing castration* (In my college days, somebody was always there to assist us during castration),” she narrated. It was ITCPH that honed and introduced her to castrating by herself, in addition to piglet processing and umbilical cord cutting.

Currently, DMMMSU’s Piggery Project, now a 20-sow level farm, serves as a training ground for students in practicum. After piglet processing, the produce are sold while some are left for fattening. The farm supplies raw pork to the university’s fast food center.

Doc Lydia’s hard work paid off as she was hailed an outstanding awardee and became the first Income Generating Project (IGP) Manager of the Year (university level) among 49 IGP managers in 2005.

But her story doesn’t stop there, for she was able to make her caretaker an awardee as well, through shared knowledge and skills.

Along with the accolades, Doc Lydia was designated dean of the university’s College of Agriculture.

Career transfer

Building and accumulation are two things vital for a strong career foundation.

Looking forward to establishing the university’s Artificial Insemination (AI) Center, Doc Lydia started training for it. The first step for her was to befriend a boar.

She then focused on producing skilled AI graduates and started exposing her students to boar training, semen collection, and insemination procedures. “*Kasi* after graduation, they will be technicians (This is important because they will become technicians after graduation),” emphasized Doc Lydia.

Her hopes for DMMMSU shine brightest. “Four years *na lang*, I will be retiring (In four years, I will be retiring),” she said, smiling. But before retirement, she will mentor a potential manager for the Piggery Project.

“Dr. Lydia Libunao is an epitome of an expert in swine production. She is the person behind the success of DMMMSU NLUC Piggery Project. Being an academician, her expertise has transpired to numerous people in line with swine farming,” proudly shared Dr. Greg, one of her faculty members who would be sent to ITCPH for another career build-up, accumulation, and transfer.

Service is like an investment. One has to dedicate love, passion, and commitment for it to be more meaningful and worthy. These are the investments of Doc Lydia’s legacy. Something she did—and continues to do—for herself, the people, and the institution she has served.

Only a few are chosen, and it’s a good thing that Doc Lydia is one of these few.

Organic Agriculture

Practicing Good Agriculture

A FARMER-LEADER EVOLVES INTO A GAP-CERTIFIED VEGGIE GROWER

BY GINALYN V. ARBUTANTE

To keep up with the new standard of producing fresh and organically-grown vegetables, Epifania Antoquia focused on becoming a certified practitioner of Good Agricultural Practice (GAP). She knew that she may be able to apply and maintain the standard processes in her own vegetable garden and harvest fresh produce that would benefit her neighbors and friends as her consumers. “Being a certified GAP practitioner, I produce vegetables that are safe for the health and the environment,” she proudly said.

Being a simple farmer

At 58 years old, Epifania, Aling Panyang to those close to her, is still an active and innovative farmer in their barangay. Most of her neighbors love her kindness and down-to-earth attitude.

“As farmers, we should share our blessings by extending help to others who need it most because the more we give, the more we receive,” she said during our visit to her farm in Purok 5B, Brgy. Antongalon, Butuan City.

“*Kusog ko mohatag ngadto sa akong mga silingan ug gikaluy-an pud ko sa Ginoo kay daghan pud ko’g abot* (I give so much to my neighbors, that’s why God blesses me with more harvest),” she added. This is manifested in her active involvement in any agriculture-related activities without compensation.

Aling Panyang and her husband Mang Francisco started farming together in 1987. They tilled their one-hectare land with rice and vegetables. With their perseverance

and hard work, they were able to acquire an additional two-hectare field, which they bought from their parents.

Leading others, going into GAP

“Before the GAP certification, we would just put the freshly harvested vegetable on the ground. We didn’t have the knowledge back then on proper handling or even on using the right harvesting facilities,” Aling Panyang recalled.

Today, she is one of the 13 farmers who received GAP certification on vegetable production. This is through the High Value Crops Development Program (HVCDP) of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) in Region XIII.

She took the chance to involve her neighbors and active members of the Antongalon Farmers’ Association in Caraga, Inc. (AFACI) to attend the training on GAP certification for vegetable production.

Together with AFACI members, Aling Panyang underwent a series of trainings and meetings to qualify for the certification.

“We were taught proper handling, processing, and marketing of produce, as well as the internal control system, which involves proper arrangement and preparation of tools and equipment used. We also learned about the basics of first aid,” she shared.

“After the training and farm evaluation, we, together with the 12 diligent AFACI members, certainly hit the spot as GAP-certified vegetable growers,” Aling Panyang proudly said.





Overwhelmed with such an achievement, Aling Panyang convinced the other AFACI members to avail of the certification and helped them become GAP-certified individuals on vegetable production in Region XIII.

“Dako gayud kini og tabang sa ako ug sa akong mga silingan tungod kay dinhi namo nahibaw-an ang mga saktong proseso gikan sa pag-harvest ug pag-market sa mga utanon. Ilabi na ang pagmintinar sa kalimpyo niini (Being a GAP practitioner helped me and my neighbors a lot because through this, we learned the standard processes—from harvesting to marketing our vegetables. Most of all, in maintaining cleanliness),” she expressed.

Benefits of GAP

Aling Panyang admitted that the process of GAP certification affected her and her fellow members’ families. But knowing the benefits they will reap from this, they kept on going, “Since we had to comply with the requirements of GAP certification, we needed to attend a series of training activities and meetings. There were times when our husbands would get mad at us because we had little time for our families. Still, we persevered to get through it and acquire the certification. The time came that our partners understood and eventually followed and supported our advocacy.”

According to Senior Agriculturist Heracleo Paler, one of the trainers from the

ATI, the GAP certification is a requirement in domestic and foreign markets. Having safe and good-quality products that are free from chemicals and physical hazards were among the elements of GAP.

In this aspect, Aling Panyang passed the said requirements since she prioritized the welfare of her workers and was able to produce good quality products without using pesticides and other chemicals to protect the environment.

What she hopes for now is for the right time to come for her to produce farm products that can compete globally. Through her GAP certification, she already has an edge among other farmers or stakeholders who are planning to export their products.

At the moment, Aling Panyang enjoys what she has. As a mother of two, contentment is reflected on her face. She still actively participates and performs various responsibilities in agriculture development.

Aling Panyang’s family currently owns more than three hectares of land and maintains eight hectares planted with rice, coconut, banana, cacao, lemon, fruit trees, and other crops.

Knowledge gained through training is vital to all farmers who produce food for the Filipino people. The importance of GAP certification cannot be overemphasized, especially now that our country is raising the standard of our agricultural products for the global market.



“As farmers, we should share our blessings by extending help to others who need it most because the more we give, the more we receive.”

EPIFANIA ANTOQUIA (ALING PANYANG)

“It’s a blessing and very timely that we all learned the information we needed through training interventions conducted by the ATI,” she added.

Generous at heart

“I helped my neighbors and other co-farmers by sharing the knowledge that I gained from the trainings I attended through the ATI,” Aling Panyang shared.

“In our farm, we employ 15 people as caretakers and maintenance crew,” she noted. “I also support working students and welcome agriculture students from different universities who want to conduct their feasibility studies in my farm,” she added.

As the Magsasaka Siyentista of the Farmers’ Information and Technology Services Center in Caraga State University, Aling Panyang also acts as a resource person in training programs. She would discuss organic fertilizer, how to make concoctions, topics on rice production and management, and more.

“I try to influence others to practice organic farming by sharing the knowledge I gained a lot from the training I’ve attended so I can teach others how to formulate organic fertilizer, for example. I also share some of the reading materials I have,” professed Aling Panyang.

Helping her neighbors is always in her heart. According to her, serving others

with compassion is the most fulfilling part of her life here on earth. “Seeing people happy and successful in their endeavors through my help is also my happiness,” she smilingly confessed.

As a farmer-leader, her passion in farming and her dedication to her work can be seen through her performance as the undisputed president of AFACI for more than eight years now.

Planning for more

“I want to build my own training center so that I can fully accommodate more visitors—may they be farmers, extension workers, students, or other stakeholders. Through this, I can share more knowledge and personally demonstrate the technologies that I have in my farm in applying the good agriculture practices,” uttered Aling Panyang.

Aside from the training center, Aling Panyang also plans to build a *pasalubong* center someday, because she observed that her visitors would often look for some fresh and organic vegetables to buy after their farm tour.

Aling Panyang is confident that a few years from now, she can already export her farm produce to foreign markets.

As Aling Panyang’s dreams are never farfetched. And continuing her advocacy of serving and helping others remains her priority.

Convincing takes some effort...to win her husband's heart

BY GINALYN V. ARBUTANTE



According to George Moore, Jr., a winner is just a loser who tried one more time. This accurately portrays Fe Sarabia's experience in convincing her husband to go into organic farming.

Perseverance takes time

Forty-eight-year-old Aling Fe from Brgy. Tag-uyango, Sibagat, Agusan del Sur is a graduate of Bachelor of Agricultural Technology from Caraga State University, Ampayon, Butuan City. She married Mang Rolando and started farming in 1995 as their source of income and to help them raise their children.

From the start, Aling Fe said that it took courage to convince her husband to avoid using inorganic chemicals that would harm their family's health.

"At first, my husband hated me for convincing him to go into organic farming. It came to a point where we would always argue because we had contrasting points of view. He wanted immediate results and yield while

I wanted lesser cost of inputs and healthier measures," Aling Fe shared.

Despite all these, Aling Fe did not give up. She continued to persevere in encouraging her husband to turn organic.

Trying it once, twice

"On our first attempt in using organic fertilizers, we were really devastated with the lower yield for two cropping seasons. My husband blamed me for what happened. In 2000, we tried the 50:50 ratio, wherein we mixed inorganic and organic fertilizers and waited to see the results. My husband wasn't convinced then because our harvest decreased due to lower yield. My husband lost hope and still insisted his belief that going organic is not good at all and gains nothing," Aling Fe narrated.

In 2014, when she became a barangay agricultural worker, she again encouraged Mang Rolando to apply organic agriculture technologies since she had all the access to information



“Farming is my passion, this is where I can exercise and relax while seeing my crops growing healthy. I feel relieved and happy.”

ALING FE

from the training series she attended with the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI). “I vowed not to lose hope because there are lots of technologies that we can apply to attain higher yield and income,” Aling Fe said.

She learned the advantages of not burning rice straw and instead letting it decompose in the field after harvest. She learned that it can later be used as compost because it is rich in potassium, which is one of the essential elements needed by plants. Aside from rice compost, they also adopted the green manuring techniques by planting mung bean during fallow period, which gives off a lot of nutrients, particularly nitrogen.

Owing it to ATI

Aling Fe proudly said that she gained knowledge on organic agriculture from the training programs of the ATI-Regional Training Center (RTC) XIII. In fact, the Institute’s School-on-the-Air (SOA) program on organic agriculture that was implemented in Agusan del Sur sparked her interest to practice organic farming. “I felt the eagerness then not only for financial but health reasons as well.”

Convinced at last

The time finally came when Mang Rolando discovered techniques in applying organic agriculture in his own farm.

“I just realized that I only needed discipline on what kind of fertilizer that I should use. Department of Agriculture and the ATI personnel advised us that, as farmers, we must examine the whole area of our farm and observe the condition of the crops following the organic practice. With this, one can already see the recommended solution against any pest and diseases that may attack the farm,” he revealed.

An organic advocate

The couple has been practicing organic farming for four years now. They have reaped the fruits of this practice as they have also put up a *sari-sari* store and an Internet shop. They were also able to send their three children to college, all of whom are now taking up agriculture and fishery courses.

Their vegetable farm is planted with okra, *kangkong*, *siling labuyo*, *ampalaya*, *sibuyas*, and eggplant. They also have cultivated land for rice



and corn production. “Farming is my passion, this is where I can exercise and relax while seeing my crops growing healthy. I feel relieved and happy,” Aling Fe said with a smile.

With her persistence and hard work, she was awarded as Best BAW in 2016 during the 5th BAWs Congress held in ATI-RTC XIII. She was chosen because of her innovativeness in applying organic farming technologies in her farm.

Increasing yield and income

Aling Fe continues to count their blessings.

“We harvested 42 bags at 55 kilos per bag from my half-hectare upland rice *dinorado* plantation. This is quite an increase from the 33 bags harvest before I applied organic fertilizer,” Aling Fe proudly said.

Deep in Aling Fe’s heart, she knows that she made the right decision to shift to organic farming. Her recent expenses also lowered to Php4,500 from Php10,000 for a half-hectare parcel of land. Less expenses, more yield and income. These figures are supported by her farm records. “I keep my records updated, I list in detail the

expenses for inputs for the farm, as well as the outputs in terms of yield and income,” Aling Fe stressed.

This is what Aling Fe wants to emphasize and share with her neighbors and co-farmers. She further said that in venturing into organic farming, a farmer not only saves his money and his health, but also saves the environment.

The winner takes it all

At last, Aling Fe won the heart of her husband as far as organic agriculture is concerned. Today, her husband serves as her partner in advocating for organic farming.

With her numerous involvements in community work, Aling Fe found an avenue where she can disseminate information worthy to be shared. Together with their children, the couple continue their legacy in advocating organic agriculture among neighbors, friends, and other people for a healthy and wealthy community.

The Art of Balay sa Hardin

BY HONEYLOU C. BASTASA



*B*alay is the Visayan word for home while *hardin* means garden. However, for the Fernando family, Balay sa Hardin is more than its literal Visayan equivalent.

The ARTspiration

“The inspiration behind Balay sa Hardin is our love for our family and their health,” stated Ms. Gloria “Glo” Fernando, wife of Mr. Arthur “Art” Fernando, the owner of Balay sa Hardin. “A place that offers you comfort food with an ambiance which you can only find at home,” she added.

“We both dreamt of having this kind of farm,” Art revealed.

The ARTgritecture

Balay sa Hardin is a small-scale organic integrated farm nestled in a 3,000-square meter lot at Purok 3A, Barangay Luinab, Iligan City. It has herbs, ornamentals, vegetable crops, and fruit trees of many kinds.

All commodities are gorgeously arranged around a humble *kubo* (nipa hut) where Art and Glo receive visitors

and clients. The *kubo* gives you a perfect view of Balay sa Hardin—a view that you will surely fall in love with because of its homey and cozy ambiance. Art shared, “We have families who dine in this *kubo* after a tour around the farm.”

Beside the *kubo* is a nook under a passion fruit trellis surrounded by diversely grown ornamentals. It is a spot where you can engage in small talk with family and friends. “After dining here, visitors can choose which activity to do next. They can either play with our board games or just chill out. We make them feel at home,” explained Glo.

Art’s background in landscaping, which he acquired after attending an international horticulture course in Pampanga in the ‘90s, is a major factor in their farm’s artistic touch.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the farm also has a training hall, lodging facility, and a small pond where visitors can go fishing.

The farm boasts of their livestock and free-range chicken, ducks, rabbits, and goats. “We formulate our own feeds using the resources in our farm,” Art shared. He



is experienced in livestock and poultry management since he was once employed at Villaluz Farm and Ilagan Farm, two major livestock farms in Region X. He is also a graduate of Bachelor of Agriculture Technology of Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City.

The stART

It was not an easy venture for Art. “I started small, but I think my passion has made it grow this far,” he explained. “I started by putting up a nursery of fruit trees, bamboo, and ornamentals in a small lot in Barangay Mahayahay.”

“We usually displayed our ornamentals at Limketkai Mall in Cagayan de Oro City back then. We did not let opportunities like that pass since we had four children to raise,” Art added.

With his bamboo enterprise, Art was appointed as a Magsasaka Siyentista (MS) of the Farmers’ Information Center Iligan City in 2010. In 2013, Art, together with a group of MSes in Region 10, attended a training on organic agriculture at the Costales Nature Farm in Majayjay, Laguna. It was organized by

the ATI Training Center in the region.

“It was my turning point,” he said. “From there, I started my transition to organic farming, applying the technologies I learned from the training.”

Art started producing his own organic fertilizer like natural concoctions such as Indigenous Micro Organism, Oriental Herbal Nutrient, Fermented Fruit Juice, Fermented Plant Juice, Fish Amino Acid, as well as some soil amendments such as vermicast, vermitea, vermiworms, carbonized rice hull, compost, and *bokashi*.

“From ornamentals and some herbs that we have in the farm, we made it more diversified and integrated at the same time,” he disclosed.

The hARTvest

“Our bestsellers are our herbs, soil amendments, and soil media for succulents,” Glo stated. “But one of the best we could offer is our healthy food,” Art added. Their food service is on appointment-basis only. Moreover, they also have tours and orientations priced from PhpP25 to Php50. They feature



“The secret is you have to discover your sense of purpose. Patiently learn how you can achieve that purpose by starting small.”

GLORIA “GLO” FERNANDO



healthy fresh and processed products of their farm, as well as products from other Learning Sites (LS) in the region.

Balay sa Hardin became an LS of the ATI in the region in 2015, while it became Good Agricultural Practices certified in 2016.

In addition, Balay sa Hardin has also hosted several trainings with its partners in the private and public sectors, including Department of Agriculture, ATI, LGU-Iligan City, Iligan City local government, Philippine Science High School, and many others.

“More than the monetary successes of the farm is the involvement of the whole family in the various farm enterprises,” said Art. Jeckoy, their youngest, is managing their farm’s food services and display center. El Dani, their eldest, acts as the in-house veterinarian and takes care of all their livestock enterprise. The herbs and crops are tended by the couple.

Presently, Balay sa Hardin is one of the model farms in Iligan City. Tourists, students, professionals, and small farmers

visit for leisure and learning. It is a home to families who want to spend healthy, quality time together.

“The secret is you have to discover your sense of purpose. Patiently learn how you can achieve that purpose by starting small,” Glo boldly explained.

The farm that was borne out of the love for their family now serves as a home of healthy inspiration and a garden of learning to those who visit it.

Homecoming

MAKING A BETTER LIFE WITH ORGANIC FARMING

BY DEODITH GRACE H. BATICBATIC

“Our government is spending on programs that enable us to learn the different technologies in agriculture. These technologies help us improve our production thus providing enough and healthy food for our family, as well as additional income. So why won't we grab that opportunity and practice what was taught to us?”
—Merlie Delco

After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Commerce, Merlie landed an office job in the Municipality of Makato. In 1987, she worked as a community worker for the Gabriel M. Reyes Memorial Foundation, a local foundation in the province of Aklan. However, a salary of PhP11 a day was not enough for Merlie to support her siblings; thus, she decided to work in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Luckily, she was employed at the consul general's house, where she worked as caregiver and did office-related tasks.

Years later, Merlie got married and started her own family. For the times that she was not with them, her consolation was that she would be able to provide for their needs. She found a good employer, one that allowed her to go home every two years to visit her family.

As time went by, the long distance relationship between Merlie and her husband became more difficult. Misunderstandings and miscommunication took their toll on them. Merlie hoped to save her marriage by going back to the Philippines, but she was too late. Her husband had already left her and their children for a new family.

Her passion for farming begins

In 2004, Merlie decided not to go back to Jeddah so she could raise her seven children. As a single parent, she was determined to provide for their needs. Merlie decided to venture into farming by renting a one-hectare rice land.

Being a former employee of the agriculture office in their municipality, she had the opportunity to attend trainings conducted by the local government unit (LGU), where she learned natural farming technologies. As she became an active farmer-leader, she was elected as an officer at the Municipal Agriculture and Fishery Council (MAFC), as well as the Provincial Fishery Council (PAFC). In 2008, she served as the chairman of the High Value Crops (HVC) Council in their municipality.

In 2012, Merlie became one of the enrollees of School-on-the-Air (SOA) on Organic Fertilizer Production implemented



by the Agricultural Training Institute – Regional Training Center VI (ATI-RTC VI). The SOA is an the ATI distance learning program that features a series of radio programs focusing on agriculture and other related subject matters.

The SOA program in Region VI has a unique component where the participants of the program get to attend face-to-face classes, aside from listening to the radio broadcast. This is called the Farmers’ Field School (FFS). In FFS, the participants apply the technologies taught to them during the radio airing.

“During the SOA on Organic Fertilizer Production, we were taught how to make the different organic fertilizers including Fermented Plant Juice (FPJ), Fermented Fruit Juice (FFJ), Fish Amino Acid (FAA), Effective Microorganism (EM), and Organic Herbal Nutrient (OHN). We were also taught about vermicast production and its uses,” says Merlie.

“I am very thankful to the Lord for giving me an opportunity to learn about the ATI and its programs and services. Through SOA, I was able to learn the easy way of preparing various organic concoctions and fertilizers, not only for my consumption but also as a source of additional income. Besides, I was able to help protect Mother Earth in my own little way.”

Dedicated, passionate, and committed to practice all the lessons she learned during the SOA on organic fertilizer production, Merlie did her best to gather raw materials for vermicomposting.

“People laugh at me every time they see me carrying rice straws and banana stalks, and picking up animal manure for my vermicomposting project. They would sometimes murmur at each other about how silly I looked. But I didn’t care. All I had in mind was that I needed to produce those organic inputs to be able to use it for my rice and vegetables.”

Merlie was also able to acquire black rice seeds during their SOA’s educational tour in Negros Occidental. Since she practiced vermicomposting, from a mere 10 kilos of black rice seeds, she was able to harvest 58 cavans of palay. Since then, her family started consuming organically grown black rice. In addition to this, Merlie used a surplus of her produce to earn. From 2012 to the present, she has sold her black rice for PhP65 per kilo.

In 2013, Merlie participated in another SOA program that ATI-RTC VI offered. This time, it was on organic vegetable production. The knowledge and skills she acquired in this SOA program pushed her to venture into organic vegetable production. Eventually,

Merlie found herself growing vegetables in a 400-square meter land. She planted *pechay*, tomato, and *ampalaya*. In just one cropping period, she was able to earn more than PhP15,000 in cash for her produce.

Diversifying her farm

Merlie's older sister saw her determination and decided to help her by providing financial support to establish a vermicomposting facility.

According to Merlie, since 2012, when she started to practice vermicomposting, she has sold about 7,000 kilos of vermicast, which is equivalent to about PhP40,000 in cash. Her consumption of vermicast in her ricefield and vegetable area were almost the same. Aside from vermicast, she was also selling different concoctions such as FPJ (at PhP 600.00 per 1.5 liters), FFJ, and FAA (both at PhP 800.00 per 1.5 liters).

The year after joining her second SOA program, Merlie again joined the SOA on organic *darag* chicken production that the ATI-RTC VI conducted. Aired over RMN-DYKR every Sunday from 12 to 1 PM, Merlie was one of the 550 enrollees in the program. Out of these participants, it was Merlie who was awarded with first honors. Winning had its perks and Merlie was given a start-up kit consisting of 15 pullets and two cockerels.

Formulating organic feeds that they also learned during this SOA program was too tedious, but Merlie sustained it for the sake of producing organic *darag* chicken. To date, she has sold

almost PhP30,000 for *darag* alone. She had already expanded her poultry house (from 200 square meters to 800 square meters), with 35 heads ready to lay, 30 pullets, and five laying heads. In addition to all these Merlie also sold *darag* to a friend residing abroad.

In addition to the income she earned, Merlie also considers her family's consumption of safe and healthy food of great importance. Also, her fellow farmers in the nearby barangays (Cabatanga, Cayangwan) were already emulating her practices, such as the production of organic concoctions and organic vegetables.

"Now I am very happy to see my neighbors doing the same practice," she says. "They would ask how I make my concoctions and I am happy to teach them. Sometimes, I would ask the agricultural technician inviting me to attend trainings if I could invite some of my neighbors to attend, too. I am more than happy to share my knowledge to my fellow farmers. With that, we can do our little own share of protecting our environment, aside from producing healthy food for our family. Lastly, there really is money in farming. It's just a matter of *sipag at tiyaga* (hard work and determination)."



Transforming Lives as an Organic Agriculture Advocate

BY JON IAN D. BELO

The scholar

Eric Miguel is a 39-year-old agriculturist from the City of Koronadal, South Cotabato. He was an agricultural technologist in 2010, when he applied for a scholarship. Eric's goal is to widen his horizons as an extension worker, and this was his motivation to enrol for a higher degree. He took up Master of Science in Rural and Economics Development at the University of Southern Mindanao (USM) in Kabacan, North Cotabato. USM is 120 kilometers away from Koronadal City, where Eric resides.

"My Saturday routine was to wake up at 3 AM and leave the house at 4 AM and drive myself to graduate school," he stated. Eric believes that when you start doing something, you must finish it. "Your efforts, resources, and your time will be wasted if you opt to quit before reaching the end," he confidently added.

While finishing his thesis, he was challenged by the long travel and the rotating power outages in North Cotabato. He vividly recalls that he

would wake up at midnight, when electricity was still available so he could edit, print, and re-edit his materials. His perseverance paid off. He finished his master's degree in two years and graduated in April 2012.

This was just the start for Eric as more good things were to go his way soon. One of the first opportunities that came his way was courtesy of the ATI.

The ATI, or Agricultural Training Institute, is mandated to better the lives of its beneficiaries through its core programs. One of these is the Expanded Human Resource Development Program (EHRDP). Eric chose the ATI for additional training since he was confident that the institute's program could help him become more competitive in his work.

The advocate

After his graduation, Eric got promoted to Agriculturist II and became the focal person on the organic agriculture (OA) program of the city when the program kicked-off. This started his OA advocacy journey. "Organic agriculture is my



Eric Miguel together with Ms. Shirley Beldia of the ATI XII with the jail guards of General Santos City Jail on their prepared fermented organic concoction activity.

prime advocacy. Aside from the fact that I am the focal person, I am also personally convinced of its advantages,” said Eric.

It was also ATI-Regional Training Center (RTC) XII that helped him gain more knowledge in this field. He was often invited to OA trainings and exposure and learning journeys conducted by the center.

As the OA focal person of the city, he has spearheaded a lot of OA campaign-related activities for their farmers. One of those that he leads is the creation of the five-year OA plan for the city through an executive order.

Eric is proud that Koronadal City can be considered as the most supportive local government unit (LGU) in the region in terms of OA. The LGU created a Local Technical Committee to oversee the implementation of the five-year plan and Eric served as trainer for the committee members, so they, too, can learn to appreciate OA.

In 2015, they trained more than 1,000 farmers on OA. “What’s more

unique about our five-year plan is that we will actually give a reward to the farmers who will adopt the technology—one-peso incentive for every one kilo of organic rice produced,” he enthusiastically shared.

When asked how they convince farmers to shift to the OA technology from the conventional way, this is what Eric had to say, “It was really hard, however, we were determined. We brought them to successful OA farms and we even established demonstration farms. *Bago namin araruhin ang lupa, inaararo muna namin ng kaalaman ang isip ng aming mga magsasaka. Dapat kasi naniniwala sila para may sustainability* (Before we tilled the land, we first educated our farmers. They have to believe in OA so there’s sustainability),” he added. Aside from his OA endeavor, Eric is also an active member of Kiwanis Club and Guardians Brotherhood Incorporated. And prior to his work as agricultural technologist, he was connected to a non-government organization that promotes sustainable



Eric (rightmost) together with other OA coordinators of Region XII in Bokashi preparation during the farm exposure at Costales Farm.



Preparing harvested lettuce for processing at Costales Farms.

“Bago namin araruhin ang lupa, inaararo muna namin ng kaalaman ang isip ng aming mga magsasaka (Before we tilled the land, we first educated our farmers).”

ERIC MIGUEL

farming. He worked there for almost nine years. This was his foundation in becoming an OA advocate.

The partner

Eric is an all-time partner of ATI-XII. He became a regular participant of trainings conducted by the center and also became part of the season-long Rice Specialist Training (RST) in 2010. “My heart is really close to ATI,” he admitted. “After our RST, we organized a Regional Palay-Check team, where we successfully conducted 16 FFS on rice production, which were all funded by ATI.” Now, he is one of the ATI’s most invited resource persons on OA and climate change-related trainings. This, according to him, “is [his] payback to the organization that motivated and molded [him].”

What are his future plans? “Farmers are now more informed than before. This might be because of the trainings conducted by the ATI and their quick access to information such as information, education, and communication materials, and the Internet. Thus, we, extension workers, must also upgrade. We can only cater to their needs if we are more equipped and knowledgeable than them,” Eric

stated. According to him, extension workers should not stop learning. As such, he still wants to pursue a higher degree. He also wants to visit other countries for exchange studies so he could learn about their agricultural and economic policies. Eric is hopeful that through this, he will be able to help his countrymen become more prepared and competitive not just locally, but globally as well.

Giving back

Inspired by his wife Dee and his daughters Von and Sheen, Eric continues to serve his community. “One thing is for sure: I will be giving back whatever the government is providing me through community services, in my line of work, of course. Knowledge acquired but not shared is a sin,” he said. “I hope that the EHRDP and other programs that are in harmony with its objectives will be pushed through.”



Love to Last Generations

BY JON IAN D. BELO



“When you really love what you are doing and when you know that you inspire other people, nothing is really hard,” said Nilda, when asked about how they get to manage their time as parents, hands-on farmers, and public servants. Nilda Cordero is the co-owner of Gernil’s Farm.

Gernil’s Farm is located in Barangay Topland, a few kilometers away from the City of Koronadal. It is an organic model farm and is open for farmer-visitors and technology demonstrations.

Looking at the farm’s name, one would surmise that it is a product of love. GerNil is actually a combination of the owners’ names: Gerardo and Nilda, a couple who have been together for 37 years. They have six children.

Gerardo, “Boy” to family and friends, is an agricultural technologist in Koronadal City, while “Kumander Nilda”, as she is fondly called by her husband, is a barangay kagawad and one of the Magsasaka Siyentistas of Region XII. Both of them are dedicated to farming and in spreading the good news about organic agriculture.

Gernil’s Farm has three parcels. One is a six-hectare fully contoured farm planted

with cacao and coconut. The one near their house, which they feel closer and are more attached to, is a 1.6-hectare parcel planted with cacao, banana, coconut, mangosteen, *guyabano*, and *lanzones*. This farm is the one consuming much of the couple’s time since it is fully diversified. It is also a product of a series of tests and experiments they conducted, mostly organic practices.

The third one is a four-hectare farm and *palay-isdaan*, the visitors’ favorite. This is planted with coconut, *calamansi*, cacao, and *palay* and is surrounded by fishponds. Here you can taste aromatic coconut, which they’ve dubbed as “the sweetest buko juice in town.” This farm is also where you can enjoy freshly caught organically grown tilapia that are all fed with azolla grown everywhere in the *palay-isdaan*.

Boy also has a unique way of growing tilapia under his *palay* crop. “I make sure that tilapias are collected before the *palay* becomes mature and ready for harvesting,” he said. “This technology is the one that amazes a lot of our farmer visitors, so I also teach them how to do this so they can replicate it in their communities.”

“If you love your children and want them to grow up and grow old, stop using harmful chemicals. Let us go organic.”

GERARDO “BOY” CORDERO

The challenging road

Gernil’s Farm was once a conventional farm where synthetic farm inputs were used in producing food. A lot of their products were once laden with poisonous chemicals. This changed in 2009, when Boy attended a series of trainings on organic agriculture. Eventually, he shifted his practices from conventional to organic.

Just like any beginnings, their organic venture was not easy. Nilda admitted that at first, she was not convinced and was doubtful because she was used to the conventional way of farming. But this changed when she noticed the difference. “Convincing her into this organic revolution took me a lot of time and courage,” Boy confided. “However, as we continued applying organic fertilizers and she realized that this shift could also help us prevent serious diseases caused by the fertilizers and pesticides we were using before, she wholeheartedly showed her interest and became my number one supporter,” he added.

“Gusto ko rin kasing makita pa ang aking mga apo at gusto ko pang humaba ang buhay naming mag-asawa kaya na-convince niya na rin ako sa organic way of farming (I want to see my grandchildren and I want my husband and I to live longer, that’s why I was convinced to embrace organic farming),” Nilda proudly said.

One of Boy’s successful organic farm practices is the use of vermicast and vermitea. He discovered that these are effective and efficient when it comes to crops diseases, as well as for the well-known brontispa disease of coconuts. The couple has confidence in the capabilities of the vermicast and vermitea as bio-control agents, repellants, and fertilizers for plants and animals. Boy uses vermitea in raising his organic swine. In addition, he produces all of the organic fertilizers used in Gernil’s Farm.

It is also noticeable that wild peanut or *Arachis pentoi* is grown under the fruit trees. According to Boy, these weeds are leguminous. Hence, they



help in maintaining the nitrogen content in the soil. “The soil is the most important thing to be considered in organic farming,” said Boy. “For as long as your soil is healthy, you are on the right track,” he added.

These efforts have been recognized by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI). Their farm became one of its organic agriculture Learning Sites in 2014 and was eventually upgraded as School for Practical Agriculture in 2015. According to Nilda, this ATI intervention helped them in promoting their farm and at the same time, it inspires more and more farmers to produce organically grown products.

Looking at a healthier future

Why does this couple really want everyone to know that organic agriculture is a must nowadays? “We are advocating organic agriculture not because we want us and everybody else to become rich,” Nilda said. “We just want them to stop killing themselves and the future gradually because of the

Nilda Cordero trains members of a Rural Improvement Club on processing cacao.

synthetic fertilizers they’re using,” she added. “If you love your children and want them to grow up and grow old, stop using harmful chemicals. Let us go organic,” Boy said as an advice to his fellow farmers.

“People must realize that going back to the basics of farming will not just help them but also their children’s children, their grandchildren, and the environment as well. Going organic can be our legacy. A legacy that will certainly last, like love. The road to a healthier future will be tough, but with love, everything can be possible,” he added.

Boy and Nilda’s story inspires people to become an organic farmer and to become one of those who advocate green and natural living for years to come.

Achieving PureGreen

BY RALPH MARCO I. CABRERA

Who would have thought that a Certified Public Accountant would become a farmer and the proud owner of PureGreen Eco Farm in Brgy. Malabago, Calasiao, Pangasinan? Ramon Reyna, Sr., fondly called “Kuya Mon,” practiced his profession as the general manager of Dagupan City Water District before he fully embraced his passion in farming.

Kuya Mon’s 2.5-hectare land is an integrated organic farm with plenty of greens. “I initially planted only a few vegetables, but now we have expanded,” he asserted. The vegetables now include lettuce, cabbage, spinach, eggplant, cucumber, bottle gourd, radish, tomato, chili, spring onion, and bitter gourd. His fruit trees include papaya, mango, banana, and java plum. He also grows rice and corn, and raises native pigs and free-range chickens. The aromatic scent of his growing herbs will also greet you as you tour around Kuya Mon’s farm. Among the new crops in his farm is Chinese kale.

He shares his story on how Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and organic

agriculture transformed his small farming business into a successful and fulfilling endeavor.

Foundation

“We started with a piggery, then we ventured into goat-raising, then cattle-raising, and cultivating a few vegetables,” shared Kuya Mon, who, at 69, has no plans to stop working in his farm any time soon. “It’s hard, especially when we started to grow vegetables as they were always being attacked by pests and diseases. We didn’t know how to prevent it; we didn’t know what to do. We always had losses when it came to our vegetables and other crops,” he revealed.

So Kuya Mon sought the help of the local government unit (LGU) of Calasiao, the Department of Agriculture (DA) Pangasinan Research and Experiment Center in Sual, and the Agricultural Training Institute – Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) I in Sta. Barbara. He learned from these institutions the basic ways to effectively combat different pests



and diseases of vegetables. Applying the knowledge he learned, he now sees the crops grow without any damage.

Realization

It was in 2013 when his relatives in Leyte, who owned an organic farm, convinced him to try organic farming. He visited his cousins' farm in Tacloban, where he learned some concepts of this practice and instantly became interested in it. "I was convinced to try organic farming because it is good for the health, especially since I am diabetic. They showed me how easy it is to be an organic farmer. Likewise, I didn't like fruits and vegetables or any crops that were treated with chemicals," he explained.

He then instantly applied organic agriculture methods in his farm. He also started to attend conventions and training activities conducted by ATI-RTC I. "It was my concept and idea to put up PureGreen. With the help of my relatives and the assistance from different government agencies, I did it," Kuya Mon quipped.

Hard work pays off

Kuya Mon's farm was recognized as a Learning Site (LS) on high value crops on November 20, 2015. An LS is an ATI-supported model farm supported that showcases different farming technologies. It also serves as the ATI's partner in providing extension services to other farmers and stakeholders.

With Kuya Mon's hard work in continuously developing his farm, it was immediately elevated as a School for Practical Agriculture (SPA) on integrated organic farming on December 8, 2016.

His training in GAP on fruits and vegetables equipped him with knowledge on GAP procedures. He then became interested in adopting these procedures and quickly asked for assistance from the LGU of Calasiao on how to apply for certification. "It was hard. We had to comply with all the requirements and recommendations on GAP given by the inspectors from the DA. But we complied. My training on GAP with ATI-RTC I was a big help, since

it was one of the requirements for a farm to be accredited,” Kuya Mon recalled.

Kuya Mon applied everything he learned to his farm and transformed it into a fully GAP-compliant farm for fruits and vegetables. Then came his accreditation as a GAP-certified farm, which was awarded on February 21, 2016.

Moreover, Kuya Mon and his farm workers were trained on making natural farming inputs like fermented fruit juice, fermented plant juice, fish amino acid, vermitea, vermicompost, and botanical sprays, which he used in vegetable production.

PureGreen Eco Farm also became a Certified Organic Farm on June 13, 2016 under Ecoland, a second-party certification body on organic agriculture. His accredited organic products include rice, corn, vegetables, herbs, mango, and papaya. He markets his fresh fruits and vegetables to local groceries. Considering the potential market for his vegetables, he established four greenhouses in his farm to produce off-season vegetables in Calasiao and to control climatic factors and the pests that may damage the vegetables. He also owns a 500-square-meter land in Urdaneta City and put up a greenhouse producing papaya and other seedlings. Aside from this, he acquired a one-hectare-lot in Barangay Patapat, San Fabian, Pangasinan as an expansion area for his vegetable production.

Sharing the knowledge

Despite all of his accomplishments, Kuya Mon never fails to help other farmers in the community. He invites them to visit his farm to learn new technologies and encourages them to go into organic farming.

Kuya Mon holds seminars and training activities in his farm with the help of ATI-RTC I and the LGU of Calasiao. He also offers hands-on training on the production of organic vegetables and agricultural inputs. His farm also serves as a venue for students who want to try basic farming practices. He accepts on-the-job trainees from ATI-RTC I, Pangasinan State University, and other nearby schools.

“I have learned a lot from ATI-RTC I. They always help me in my farm by teaching new knowledge and skills. With all of these, I am planning to expand my farm. Someday, I hope to establish a farm tourism site here in Pangasinan, where I can help more farmers and spread more information about GAP and organic agriculture. I also hope that other farmers will adopt GAP so they can reach a wider market for their produce,” remarked Kuya Mon.

“Here in PureGreen, you can get your everyday greens,” were Kuya Mon’s parting words as we left his farm of abundance.



A Family's Pursuit for a Continuous Learning Experience

BY BOB JOHNSON F. GALVAN

“A family that farms together, stays together.” This is true for the family of Ms. Palmy Meliton—from her 89-year-old father, Mr. William Delfin, down to her four-year-old grandson, Carlos William. Their family-run farm serves as their primary source of food and income. It has helped send all her children to school. Their venture operates under the principles of integrated diversified organic farming systems (IDOFS). “All we want is to have safe and synthetic chemical-free food for the whole family, and a sustainable source of food and income to supplement our needs,” Ms. Meliton said.

How it all started

In 1982, the family farm was developed into a two-hectare land in Barangay Libas, Banga, Aklan. They started with 100 singkom fruit trees. After harvesting, they were able to acquire an additional three-hectare farmland, which they devoted to integrated-diversified organic farming.

From 2000 to 2009, they planted 200 coconut, 100 rambutan, 50 *pomelo*, and 200 *lanzones* fruit trees that are now bearing fruits. Just recently, they planted papaya, corn, and banana crops and

ventured into livestock, rice, medicinal, and herbal plants, and vegetable production.

With these new enterprises, the farm is now known as Meliton Integrated Organic Farm, an accredited Learning Site of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) and identified as one of the tourist destinations in the province by the Provincial Tourism Office of Aklan. Guests would visit the farm and enjoy picking fruits and vegetables that they can bring home. Also, the farm is currently hosting five students from 4-H Club's Adopt-a-Youth Program. It is an intervention program for out-of-school youths (OSY) with immersion in demo farms for at least three months so they can learn about organic farming technologies.

Coping up with challenges

Just like any other farmer in the region, the Meliton family farm was devastated by typhoon Frank in June 2013. A large portion of the farm was damaged. Several rehabilitation and money loans were taken to bring it back to its regular operations. Due to continuous crop production, soil nutrients were gradually depleted and soil erosion started to occur.



Ms. Meliton was quick to address the problem by contouring the land and establishing forage areas. Also, concoctions were applied so the soil can recover the nutrients lost during several cropping seasons. Then Ms. Meliton expressed concern about the pesticide residue from the inorganic farm near their area. To address this, they established buffer strips that filter farmland run-off before it could enter the farm. To her delight, it not only protected the farm but also improved the topography of the land.

“I learned all the technologies and countermeasures for these problems from the different trainings and workshops of the ATI that I attended. I was able to learn and improve my skills in farming. After the trainings, I was always eager to apply the lessons I learned together with my family,” Ms. Meliton remarked.

Where to?

The family plans to extend and improve the farm by putting up additional facilities such as a greenhouse, equipment, and machineries, and

hopefully a mushroom site soon. “We want our farm to be equipped so students can learn a lot and could bring something that is worthwhile during their on-the-job training,” referring to the students of a practicum program they are assisting.

Realizations and pieces of advice

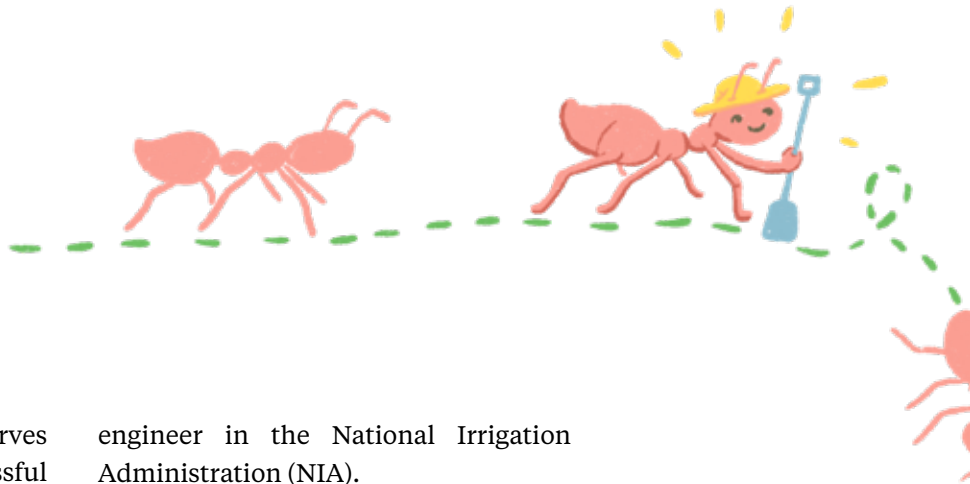
As she recalls, most of their neighbors are not yet open to organic farming. She hopes that through their continuous efforts in the farm, they could gradually influence and encourage the community. This is so that they could open their eyes and minds and accept that integrated organic farming is one way of improving livelihood and saving our community and environment for the next generation.

“Farming is a tough business. That’s why farmers should never stop learning. Always engage in trainings and seminars to advance your craft and experience. After all, these trainings are free. The best things happen when you are doing what you love and doing it together with your loved ones,” she concluded.

The “Ant Man”

WORKING HARD AND DREAMING BIG

BY JASON PAUL DADS E. JAMPAC



Neither Lucio Tan nor Henry Sy serves as the inspiration of this successful organic rice farmer from Bayugan City, Agusan del Sur. Instead, he looks up to a small, yet hardworking ant that never gives up and dreams big.

Engineer Carlos “Bong” Salazar, 61 years old, shares that his secret to success is emulating the qualities of an ant: wise, hardworking, responsible, and resourceful, among others.

Bong comes from an impoverished family in Cotabato. He recalls how hard their life was during his childhood years. “Both my parents did not finish college. It was only through farming that they were able to feed us eight siblings. We would spend almost the entire day in the farm and only return home at sundown, dirty and weary, riding our carabao. Every time we passed by a group of bystanders in a *sari-sari* store, all eyes would be on us with this pitying look,” he professes.

Bong took poverty as a challenge. He knew he could crawl out of it if he followed an ant’s ways. He studied hard while working part-time. He eventually finished college with a double degree in civil engineering and agricultural engineering. After obtaining his license as an agricultural engineer, he moved to Bayugan in the ‘70s as an entry-level

engineer in the National Irrigation Administration (NIA).

At work, his “ant ways” hoisted him to higher ranks. He became the Regional Director of NIA in Caraga and ultimately, the National Administrator in the NIA Central Office. Yet, while experiencing the leaps and bounds in his career, he never rested on his laurels. “I never forgot farming. I always put much importance to it,” Bong quips.

Luck was on his side when he met a friend who offered him a parcel of land that was payable in installments. He grabbed the opportunity and started cultivating it with lowland rice.

He invested the fruits of his labor in farming by acquiring more farmlands and innovating new technologies in growing rice. The Department of Agriculture, Philippine Rice Research Institute, and the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) are among the agencies that provided him with vital information, especially the technical briefings on rice production. “There are more interesting things to know in farming, you just have to tap friends who can help,” Bong notes.

The brainchild of SSIA

Unknown to many, Bong conceptualized and introduced the Sustainable System



of Irrigated Agriculture (SSIA) based on his readings, experimentation, and innovative ideas. This is a system in rice production that uses less water and seedlings but attains a higher yield. It also involves proper transplanting, planting distance, practice of organic agriculture, and good farm management.

Bong believes that the water requirement for the rice plant should just be at the minimum especially during its vegetative growth period. “Why water up to the stem? Where does the rice plant absorb water? It should only be up to the roots!” he argues.

In SSIA, water requirement varies depending on the stage of the rice plant. This is the reason why Bong practices the intermittent irrigation method—there are times when a thin layer of water is introduced into his rice paddies, while there are also times when they are left dried and cracked.

Furthermore, he notes that he doesn’t use water from the NIA canal in SSIA. He installed his own deep well pump to supply the water requirements of his lowland rice production. “All sources of water should not be taken from where everyone else is taking. Hence, you must have your own source of water or filtration system to avoid contamination,” explains Bong, who is an organic agriculture advocate.

In Bong’s SSIA, he only uses 5 kg of seeds per hectare compared to the traditional practice of using 40 kg. He only plants one seedling per hill at a distance of 30 cm x 15 cm. Surprisingly, this method helps him produce more than 100 tillers with an average harvest of 180–200 cavans per hectare, under normal weather condition.

Bong likewise formulates his own concoction of organic fertilizer. It is composed of 40% vermicast and 20% carbonized rice hull. The remaining 40% is his compost, which is a mixture of banana peels, chicken dung, azolla, corn cobs, rice hulls (from his pig pens), and hog or goat waste. All the substrates are from his own farm, for less expenses. Bong’s organic fertilizer is not only economical and environment-friendly, it helps improve soil texture and increases rice yield as well. It is also an income-generating activity for Bong because he markets it in different parts of Mindanao.

Organic rice boot camp

Bong continues to advocate the practice of SSIA and organic rice farming to other farmers, extension workers, and students in Caraga Region who visit his farm. Recently, his farm visitors increased tremendously after he was

“You are still young.
Invest in agriculture.
You’ll never know when
the rainy days come.”

ENGR. CARLOS “BONG” SALAZAR

certified as ATI’s Extension Service Provider (ESP) through the Agricultural Machineries on Irrigation Growing Organic (AMIGO) Farm. As an ESP, his farm became an organic rice boot camp where farm lovers undergo trainings on organic agriculture.

This paved the way for Bong to convey his rich and invaluable learnings and experiences. He constructed his own training center, dormitory, and kitchen facilities for this purpose. “I am so thankful to the ATI for helping me hone my knowledge through their trainings and for opening windows of opportunities as a certified ESP,” Bong acknowledges.

Preparing for rainy days

Income from his organic rice and fertilizers finances other farm projects such as his piggery (Babuyang Walang Amoy), goat, poultry, vermi, and fishpond that includes koi, azolla, and floating shed. Looking far and beyond, his ultimate dream is to develop his farm into a premiere farm-tourism destination in Caraga. He already had

initial talks with the Department of Tourism and the ATI on how they can help realize his dream. He prays it won’t take too long so he can still leave something for his children before his life ends.

“You are still young. Invest in agriculture. You’ll never know when the rainy days come,” he shares while recalling the time he was comatose for three days. Bong explains that had it not been for farming, he would not have had money to cover his medications, huge hospital bills, and other post-operation treatments. “That’s why I owe my second life to God and to farming,” he concludes.

There is a famous line that Bong holds so dear. He framed it and hang it on his wall as a reminder to be always as wise and persevering as an ant. It reads: *Be like ants... busy preparing for the rainy days...*



Certified and Satisfied

ROSENING'S FARMING WINNING MOMENTS

BY CHARED D. LADERA

“Being certified as an organic farm proves that the food we produce and eat is safe from harmful chemicals.”

Rosenda “Rosening” Consolacion, a 63-year-old organic practitioner, is from Maragang, Tigbao, Zamboanga del Sur. She was born on March 1, 1954 and enjoyed married life with her late husband Bonifacio Consolacion. The couple has three children. Rosening, along with her husband, is an active member of their church and an advocate in promoting organic agriculture in their municipality.

Rosening owns and manages a five-hectare organic farm that has been certified by a second party certification, ECOLAND Organic Certification Services from the University of the Philippines, Los Banos, Laguna, with the assistance of the Convergence of NGOs/POs in Zamboanga del Sur on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (CONZARRD).

Their beginnings as rice farmers

Rosening grew up in rice fields. She started farming when she was a young girl. She claimed that their family started farming using excessive chemicals. However, in the '90s, she learned organic farming that was being promoted by the Catholic Church. Henceforth, she learned how to take care of Mother Earth and how to preserve life through organic practice.

The family started converting 25% of their rice area into organic produce for

their own consumption. For the rest of the area, they continued their inorganic practice. They then realized that they were just saving themselves, but not Mother Earth and the people around them. So they finally converted all of their land to organic farming in 2000.

Why pursue organic farming?

“In 1973, my husband was poisoned by the chemicals we used in our rice fields. Even if he was poisoned, we still continued the inorganic way because we were not taught about organic agriculture during that time,” Rosening shared.

In the '90s, after learning about organic farming, they decided to shift their practice because they were offered a choice. A choice that would not harm their family, the community, and Mother Earth. Rosening said, “Safe food and safe life, not only for me but for the next generation.”

Her life after the death of her husband

In 2010, her husband died. Rosening thought that it was also the end of her journey in farming. She was now alone with all of the responsibilities to her family, her farm, and the community. Despite these hardships, Rosening realized that she had to continue their dream as a family. She then decided to continue what they had started.

Just like before, Rosening continued to attend meetings, seminars, and trainings to broaden her knowledge in agriculture.



She remained involved in Church activities and in her advocacy for organic agriculture in the municipality.

Going certified integrated organic farm

As she continued her pursuit in organic farming, her rice-based farm was expanded to an integrated farm. She cultivates assorted vegetables, fruit trees, raises poultry and livestock, and keeps a fresh-water fishpond. She maintains her vermicomposting and formulated bio-liquids for the nourishment of her plants, poultry, and livestock. She also has a forest that functions as a reserve for water supply in drought.

With her exemplary efforts in organic farming and sustainable agriculture and her status as a consistent practitioner for more than 10 years, she has been given a second party certification for her organic farm.

Rosening has not stopped developing and enhancing her farm, which is often visited by aspiring organic practitioners.

Rosening's ultimate goal

Rosening dreams of the day people will adopt organic farming and sustainable agriculture, so everyone can experience the benefits of eating safe food. She vows to continue promoting organic agriculture to her fellow men.

She does not only promote organic farming—she also tries to supply more organically grown produce in the market.

Rosening demonstrating her water management in producing rice

This is so more people can eat safe and healthy food.

This generous and God-fearing organic practitioner never forgets to share her blessings. Every cropping, she gives to the Church, and yearly to the community. Dubbed *pasalamatan*, she usually prepares a feast-like celebration and she invites the less fortunate, especially sick neighbors and indigenous people. She does this so they can eat abundant, delicious, safe, and healthy food.

The benefits of organic farming

“Since I’m practicing organic farming, I don’t have any problems in my field because the soil has already reversed the damages from excessive use of chemicals. I can harvest more yield without the use of chemicals. The food that my farm produces is chemical-free and safe to eat.”

She proudly shares that, at her age, she is very healthy. She added, “In organic [farming], food security and food safety will be achieved.”



Building the Minds of the Young Ones Towards Agriculture

BY EULA DEE A. LAÑADA

The heart to help children pursue organic farming

Children nowadays cannot identify crops or plants without seeing their fruits. Alarmed, Ms. Cynthia Tizon, an organic farmer, saw herself as an instrument to teach them through her farm. With this, she believed, children would be well-acquainted with various crops. Aside from helping children familiarize themselves with crops, Tizon also saw this as a chance to share her love for organic farming.

Located in Magalang, Pampanga, the size of Tizon's farm is $\frac{3}{4}$ hectares, or 7,500 square meters, with only 1,200 square meters considered as productive. However, she did not see this as a hindrance to growing crops.

Some of the crops available in her farm are arugula, different varieties of lettuce, Japanese cucumber, and cherry tomatoes. Known as Charisma Nature Farm, Tizon opens her farm to children as an educational destination.

The love for agriculture and future generations

Charisma Nature Farm educational trips always start with an orientation. Tizon explains to the children what organic farming or natural farming is. Likewise, she emphasizes its benefits and the activities to be done while in the farm. These activities include seed sowing, planting, and feeding the pigs, chicken, and ducks. Children also have a chance to go fishing and touch earthworms in her vermiculture area.

Tizon also makes sure she mentions the need to take care of the environment. She knows how important it is for children to know the value of preserving what is left of Mother Earth.

When asked why expose the children to farming, Tizon said, "I have in mind that if these children reach high school and college, they will opt to take up agriculture." Whatever one's position



is, whatever one's status in life is, one needs to eat. Because of this, farmers are needed. Tizon emphasized that farming is very important and it is a noble profession. Without farmers, no one will feed the world.

The joy of serving others

Since the accreditation of her farm as a Learning Site of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) in 2011, Tizon started to regularly conduct trainings on integrated diversified organic farming system or IDOFS. She also conducts three-day trainings for organic vegetable production. This includes lectures and hands-on activities. She believes that when you hear, see, and do something, you will never forget what

you have learned. In addition, hands-on activities will help make it easy to do the process back home. It will also be easier for trainees to teach other people.

Aside from conducting trainings, Tizon was also given a chance to host a television program on PEP TV 3, a local channel in Pampanga. The program is called *Going Green*—it is aired every week and replayed daily. Experts from the different fields of agriculture are invited as resource speakers to encourage urban dwellers to produce their own food because it is very difficult to find healthy, nutritious, and poison-free produce in the market. Thus, they encourage the viewers to do FAITH gardening (“Food Always in the Home”). Viewers are often reminded that one can never go hungry



if they have plants at home, even if their area is small. If there's no available area to plant, one option is the use of vertical gardening or a riser with several shelves, or even hanging plants.

Today, aside from conducting trainings and educational trips, Tizon also produces organic products using all the available resources in her farm. She named this line of products "God's FARMacy." The line includes soothing balms that can treat insect bites, virgin coconut oil, vinegar made from pineapple, and tomato soap, among others. Aside from being organic, they also have affordable prices. She showcases these products during the educational trips in her farm.

Likewise, Tizon delivers her produce to restaurants and individuals

who prefer organic vegetables. She practices the farm to kitchen strategy and is also into processing.

The hope for the future

Tizon's heart is devoted to organic agriculture, health and wellness, trainings, love for country, and information dissemination in taking care our health and the environment. She also advocates the need to become sustainable with safe and nutritious food. Tizon wants to pass on all the various trainings she has experienced and the many lessons she has learned to the younger generation who will eventually, and hopefully, become agripreneurs.

Penny for Her Thoughts

BY NOEMI BETH G. MACARIO



How 2 be u po?
This is common millennial lingo. The one asking the question looks up to the person addressed, usually a person worthy of emulation.

Who better to emulate than Nemia Penita Buhian of Manticao, Misamis Oriental? Penny, as she is fondly called, seems to have Midas' touch since everything she has done, she has done successfully.

Risk-taker

At 23 years old, Penny was already an overseas Filipino worker. She worked as a domestic helper in Hong Kong for six years and as a nanny in Australia for five years. At that time, she felt that the only way to earn more was to go abroad. She said, "There is no better way to succeed than to go out of your comfort zone. Abroad, you get to be exposed to menial jobs, which I have not even done here in the Philippines. It makes a person stronger and ready to face challenges in life."

Planner

In 2004, after 11 years of nonstop working while battling loneliness, she decided that she was ready to change her career path and go home permanently.

"I felt that I already had enough savings and that I could start a business here. I was not getting any younger," she shared. With her earnings abroad, she was able to buy a house and lot and a vehicle. She also bought a one-hectare lot in Camiguin, which she plans to develop as a vacation house in the near future. She used what was left of the money for a copra buy-and-sell business. Later, the income from this business allowed her to buy five hectares of coconut land.

Politician

After going back to her hometown, she was urged to run for public office. On her first try, she won as first *kagawad* in their *barangay*. After one term, she ran as municipal councilor and had the third highest number of votes. She was tasked to head the Committee of Agriculture, an opportunity that opened doors for her.

Implementer

That committee chairmanship led her to the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI), when she attended a training on organic agriculture. That training led to more programs including the Farm Business School, which had a strong impact on



her as it showed her the importance of identifying the market before going into an enterprise.

Another experience that greatly influenced her was her visit to Costales Nature Farm in Laguna. She became more convinced that she was on the right path. Every time she learned something new, she immediately applied it in her farm.

Entrepreneur

In just one decade, the once monocrop farm has transformed into an integrated diversified farm that is going organic.

With the support of her husband, Engr. Edgar Buhian, the farm is now a thriving agribusiness. It now boasts of various farm enterprises on different crops and livestock such as free-range chickens, laying hens, ducks, turkey, goats, pig, tilapia, mushroom, assorted organic vegetables, and herbs. They also process their produce into virgin coco oil, coco jam, coco bread, coco *pancit*, hot chili sauce, and other coco-based products.

The Buhian Diversified Farm is accredited by the ATI as one of its learning sites. With this, Penny opened her farm to the public.

Penny conducts briefings and lectures on the practices and technologies they use in the farm. In addition, she has built two training halls and dormitories and is slowly developing the facilities to make it ready as a farm tourism site.

Awardee

Within 10 years, the farm is slowly but surely gaining recognition. Visitors are slowly trickling in. The farm is also a recipient of several awards despite the fact that Penny was practically a neophyte in farming.

In 2015, she was recognized as an Outstanding Woman Farmer by TOFARM. She also won as an ABS-CBN AgriBida and was the Grand Winner in the Micro Entrepreneurial Award for Mindanao by MASSPEC, a well-known non-government organization. The Buhian couple was likewise awarded as Outstanding Organic Farm Family by Department of Agriculture Regional Field Office X during the 2nd Agri Fisherfolk Month.

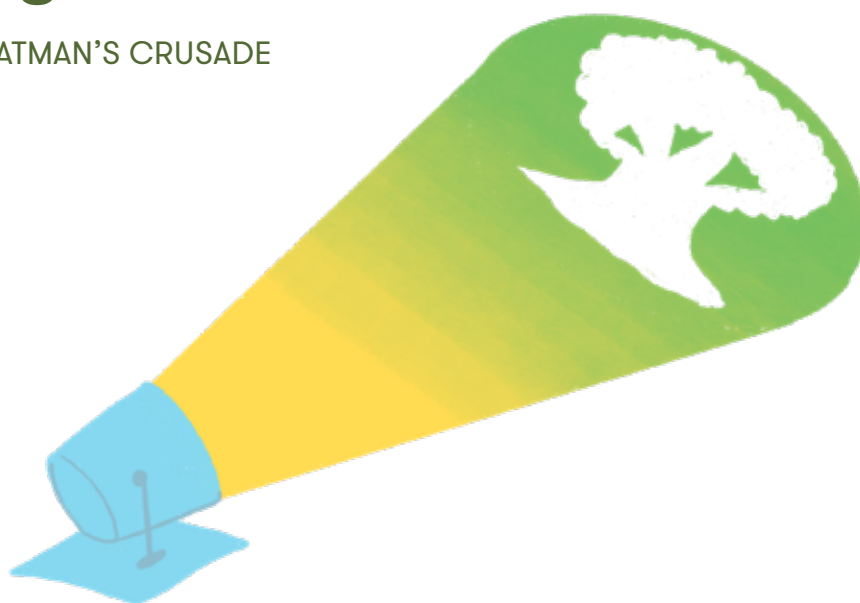
In the 2016 elections, Penny made a bid for reelection and won as a municipal councilor again.

What do you think Penny will embark on next? Your guess is as good as mine!

From Dark Knight to Agent of Light

THE STORY OF KUMANDER BATMAN'S CRUSADE FOR ORGANIC FARMING

BY VIC THOR A. PALARCA



His colleagues and my officemates call him “Kumander Batman.” The thought that maybe his moniker had something to do with the popular DC comic book character crossed my mind, having been a comic book reader myself growing up. When I was told to cover a story about the first Maranao Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebel returnee turned farmer-leader, I bailed out on the day of travel. Our Center Director, Angelito Quirog, whom I was supposed to go with, was livid, of course!

My intuition and self-preservation kicked in when I heard from a source that Kumander Batman’s bailiwick, Lanao del Norte, is mired with insurgency and political unrest. However, my interview on April 7, 2017 with Minalang Mapandi, a.k.a. Kumander Batman, showed me that my preconceived notions about him and Lanao del Norte in general were all wrong. Accompanied by his wife Normida, Kumander Batman, 57, lives up to his namesake because he does not say much and, if ever, would only share

what is asked of him. If only I could be his sidekick, Robin, or perhaps Alfred, his trusted butler.

Here is my first interview with the man who laid down his arms, sided with the government, and now considers organic farming as his way of life:

Q: First things first, why are you called “Kumander Batman?”

A: I grew up liking Batman when I was a kid. I admired his heroic exploits and problem-solving skills despite him being the only superhero without actual super powers.

Q: What made you decide to join the MILF movement?

A: I have to say that my story is quite different because I did not join the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) before the MILF, which is what most people would think. My previous involvement was entirely for my religious beliefs and the Islamic faith that I am affiliated with. As an active MILF member for 30 years,



I also have to say that as a member of a minority group, we seldom got support and opportunities from the government way back when I joined in my early twenties.

Q: How did you come upon farming? How did you consider making organic farming your career of choice?

A: It was in 2005 when I was invited to several training activities initiated by the Agricultural Training Institute – Regional Training Center X (ATI-RTC X) like the Season-Long Training on Diversified Integrated Organic Farming System and Training on Peanut Production for War-Affected Areas in Lanao del Norte. Seeing so much promise and potential in my farm, they granted me monetary assistance on May 31, 2012 worth Php 300,000 to jumpstart its development through the From Arms to Farms project.

I was told that I am the first Maranao MILF rebel-returnee who joined the project. Through From Arms to Farms, my co-returnees and I were engaged in

activities such as Lakbay-Aral, Camp and Farm Visits, PalayCheck, and Farmers’ Field School. We were also given various training assistance and livelihood support. The ATI, through Center Director Quirog and Mayor Rommel Arnado, also played a big role in my venture into organic farming. Also, I realized that eating organic produce ensures good health, and producing safe-to-eat food is my way of doing good for my family and community.

Q: How has your life changed after getting involved with the project?

A: I am married to Normida with nine kids and I consider them as my treasures. Life after getting involved with the project was so much better, since we were given commitment and support. That was February 20, 2014; other returnees have joined me such as Kumander Ismail Sarip, Kumander Ondak Limbona, Kumander Saidomar Mutia, Kumander Benjie Lucsadatu, Kumander Agila Laksudatu, and Kumander Dante Batingolo.

“We all deserve second chances and we should never lose hope in everything.”

MINALANG “KUMANDER BATMAN” MAPANDI

Witnessing and experiencing the support (moral, monetary, or otherwise), with their desire to improve our lives, opened new livelihood opportunities for us. Surrendering also gave us the chance to air our plight on the unfulfilled promises of incentives in line with the government’s Balik Baril initiative.

Q: Speaking of farming, can you share what we can expect to see in your farm?

A: Right now, I have more than 100 hectares of farm land in Barangay Bigmiladok, Tangkal, Lanao del Norte, replete with hard wood such as *falcata*, two hectares of *latundan* and commodities like *abaca*, coconut, banana, *marang* (johey oak), durian, jackfruit, *sibujing* (a kind of leeks from the onion family), cassava, garden-variety vegetables, and livestock such as cows and native chickens. The farm lot has also a fishpond with tilapia and *kasili* (a type of eel).

Q: What are some life lessons you can share with your co-farmers and those who want to turn their life around and venture into farming?

A: It was difficult to start and establish my farm, having lived an

unconventional life with the thought that work opportunities even after my surrender were slim to none. Going into organic farming and practicing diversified farming was just like creating opportunities for myself since I am now producing and capable of selling my produce. I also plan to engage in processing since the ATI intends to give us more training very soon.

Also, we all deserve second chances and we should never lose hope in everything. Our faith in Allah or God is also a source of strength we can rely on.

Proving that his past does not define his future, Kumander Batman demonstrated that once opportunity knocks on the door, one should say yes and grab such opportunity with both hands.

Organic farming, he pointed out, is now his advocacy—a crusade he feels is worth campaigning for. He now lives a life of productivity and peace, and is bent in sharing his life and farming experiences to others to shed light on the matter.



Chasing Her Dreams

AN INSPIRING ACCOUNT OF AN ATI SCHOLAR

BY HANNADI G. POMPONG

“If one stops believing in dreams, life loses its meaning, loses its color,” this is how Rhealiza relates her life experience as a hopeful young lady with bigger dreams than fears.

Rhealiza Gines Corpuz, 24, a resident of Mamali, Lambayong, Sultan Kudarat, believes that life is not easy. What she has been through in her young life could attest to this. “*Hindi po madali ang buhay, ngunit kaya natin. Kinaya ko sa ngalan ng aking mga pangarap* (Life is not easy, but we can do it. I made it through challenges because I focused on my dreams),” she proudly says.

She was in 2nd year high school when her mother, who suffered from stage 4 breast cancer, died and left her and her older brother. Her father worked very hard to provide their needs. “*Nakatapos kami ng kuya ko sa high school na parehong may karangalan* (My brother and I finished high school with honors),” she shares. This was the reason why their father never lost hope and persevered more to send them to college.

Rhealiza considers herself one of the millions of Filipinos whose dreams are at risk because of poverty. She even thought of becoming a working student just to continue her studies.

YAFP scholarship

But her father never stopped looking for any possible means to enrol them in higher education. Fortunately, the Municipal Agricultural Office of Lambayong, Sultan Kudarat informed them about the Youth in Agriculture and Fisheries Program (YAFP) Scholarship. With her father’s utmost desire to give his children a comfortable future, he encouraged them to apply. Rhealiza applied and luckily passed all the requirements for the scholarship.

Rhea took up Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Major in Entomology. She strived to maintain her grades and good standing at the University of Southern Mindanao (USM) in Kabacan, Cotabato. She also joined extra-curricular activities to foster her leadership skills. Rhea became one of the board members



of the University's College of Agriculture Local Student Government.

Aside from being a consistent college scholar, Rhea was also an active 4-H Club member and participated actively in the extension activities conducted by the North Cotabato 4-H Club USM chapter.

"May mga pagkakataong may problema sa pag-aaral pero naniniwala akong parte at normal lamang iyon sa pagiging estudyante (There are times when problems related to school crop up, but this is all part of a student's life)," she narrates. Luckily, she can buy whatever she needs in school and be a normal college student because of the monthly stipend provided by the scholarship.

Rhea was in her third year when fate tested her resolve yet again: her father had a stroke. *"Nang ma-stroke si Papa, kinailangan namin ni Kuya magdecide kung sino ang hihinto muna para may mag-alaga kay Papa* (When Papa had a stroke, my brother and I had to decide who would stop studying so someone would take care of him)," she reveals. She

admitted that it was one of the hardest decisions they had to go through. Since Rhea was doing very well in school and had a scholarship grant to maintain, her Kuya Caesar gave way for her to finish her studies.

Enduring tough times

Everything changed. Rhea had to endure hardships in life again. Her father did not only lose strength but his source of income as well. Almost all of their parcels of land were leased to support her father's medication. Life became a lot harder that Rhea had to work part-time at the Office of the College's Dean during her free time to augment her stipend, *"Aaminin ko po, parte ng aking allowance sa scholarship ay napunta sa mga gamot at iba pang pangangailangan ni Papa* (I admit, part of my stipend was used for buying papa's medicine and other needs)," she honestly affirms.

Those were also the times when she had to bear with life's difficulties.

Even at her very young age, she never considered quitting. She strived because she knew that time has always been her good friend. She never lost hope.

Rhea finally finished her bachelor's degree in April 2013, when she marched bearing her *cum laude* award. She delightfully dedicated this to her father who was not there to join her on stage because of his illness. "*Ang karangalan kong iyon ay para sa aking ama* (The honor I received is dedicated to my father)," she proudly shares.

With the help of some amount she saved from her thesis allowance, Rhealiza took the formal review and prepared for the Licensure Examination for Agriculturists (LEA). August 21, 2013 became another significant date for the young lady as this was when she passed the LEA.

Securing a job was next on her agenda, but her faith was tested again. Two weeks after the release of the LEA result, her father died. "*Sadyang siniguro lang muna ni Papa na kakayanin na naming magkapatid bago niya kami tuluyang iwan* (My father made sure that my brother and I would be able to stand on our own before leaving us)," Rhea says. She had to bear pain of losing a parent again. "*Sa lahat ng nangyari sa amin, iyon na yata ang pinakamasakit* (My father's death was the most painful challenge for us)," she tearfully adds.

Newfound Family

Right after her father died, Rhea had to move on and continue her life. She was about to get her certificate of scholarship from the Agricultural Training Institute-XII in preparation for her application to various government and non-government offices. She called it a blessing in disguise when she was told that the Center was looking for a job order for the Rural Based Organizations (RBO) Program.

Rhea became part of the ATI family in September 2013. She was very thankful to have found another definition for friendship and family. In the ATI, she developed her skills in facilitation and communication and became a channel of the institution in its extension services. "*Natuto akong makipagkapwa-tao. Hindi maikakaila na ang ATI ang humubog sa akin mula sa aking pag-aaral hanggang sa ako'y makapagtrabaho.* (I learned how to interact with people. It cannot be denied that the ATI molded and shaped me as a student and even now that I am already working)."

This writer and the rest of the ATI employees know Rhea personally. We can all attest that she never showed weakness in public. She is a happy, tactful, and witty girl. There are times when she admits to missing her parents and longing for their care, but most of the time, she keeps this to herself.



The very first time this writer saw her weep was during data gathering in preparation for this write-up and for her presentation during the ATI National Year-End Assessment in 2016, where she was asked to share her success story.

Rhea and the ATI XII Information Services Section team went to their old place in Mamali, Lambayong, Sultan Kudarat to get some of their old family photos to be used for her visual aids. She found very few photos of her childhood and only one family picture. Upon arriving in the dormitory, this writer noticed Rhea in tears while going through her father's old wallet, which she took from their old house. What Rhea found was some proof of receipts from Western Union and ML Kwarta Padala. "*Tinago lahat ni Papa ang mga resibo ng mga pinapadala ko sa kanya noon* (I found out that my father kept all the receipts of all the money I sent them before)," she tearfully says.

Strong as she may be, Rhea also knows how to show emotions. The very first time the writer saw Rhea cry was also the time she badly needed people to lean on to. So it was good that the ATI staff has been her family—a huge family that's always there for her.

Mr. Abdul I. Daya-an, Center Director of the ATI XII, became her second father who helped her in some of her decision-making tasks.

Inspiring others

Rhea is grateful for ATI, for never giving up on her. She wishes that the institute would continue making Filipino dreams a reality, just like hers. "*Habang buhay kong tatanawing malaking utang na loob sa ATI ang lahat ng tagumpay ko* (I will be grateful to the ATI for the rest of my life, for helping me achieve success)," she tearfully says.

"*Iba-iba man po tayo ng definition ng salitang success, pero para sa akin tagumpay nang matatawag ang pananatiling matibay at lumalaban sa kabila ng lahat ng pinagdaanan ko* (We have different definitions of success. For me though, the ability to stay strong and fight against life's adversities is already a major success)," she proudly adds.

Rhealiza's story is just one of the millions of Filipinos who never give up. With the help of people with genuine hearts, her Kuya Caesar is already back in school, and Rhea has been hired by the Provincial Government of South Cotabato as an agriculturist, where she handles the RBO Program.

There are a lot of inspiring stories of people whose lives have been touched by the ATI. May this story and many more similar ones inspire people who go through tough times to not give up and to always stay positive in life. Rhea is living proof that one's dreams should be bigger than one's fears.



Sharing Knowledge, Empowering Others

BY HANNADI G. POMPONG



With her strong desire to serve her co-farmers, Lyda Estacio, 51, a resident of Norala, South Cotabato, accepted the challenge to be a Local Farmer Technician (LFT) in her *barangay*. She started serving as LFT in 2012 and has four major functions. These include conducting the Farmers' Field School (FFS); serving as Bantay Peste Brigade in the community; conducting Usapang Palay with other LFTs in the entire municipality; and to further enhance her knowledge, she is required to attend trainings conducted by the Department of Agriculture (DA), particularly the Agricultural Training Institute-Regional Training Center (ATI-RTC) XII.

The trainings she attended capacitated her as one of DA's frontliners in technology delivery. The FFS she conducted in Poblacion 7, Norala with 30 participants highlighted her accomplishments as an LFT. In her classes, she echoes the technologies she learned about during trainings, to give her farmer-participants a better chance of getting higher yields. Some of the best farming strategies that were adopted by the farmers are the use of certified seeds

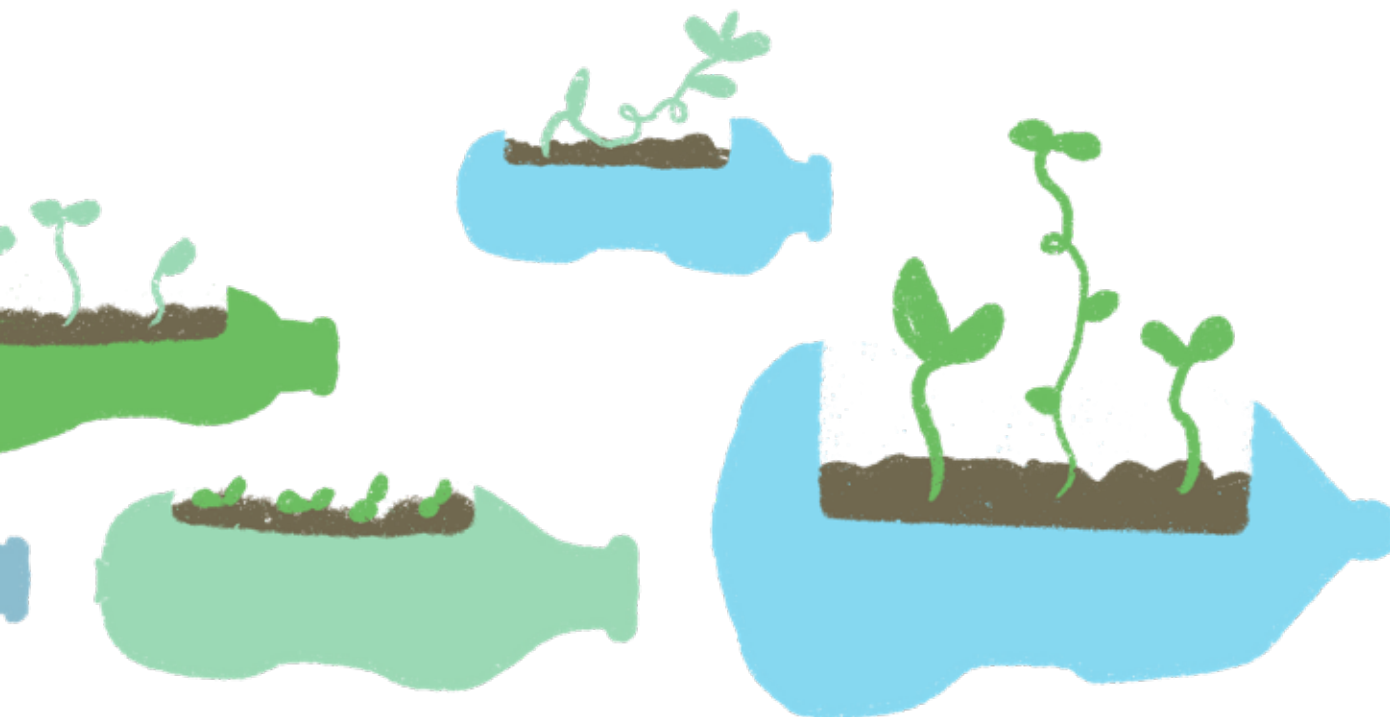
as one of the basic foundations in having good yield, the use of *Trichogramma* to fight rice stemborers, *Metarhizium* to control black bugs, and vermicompost to reduce the use of synthetic fertilizer. As an officer of their Irrigators Association (IA), Lyda also convinced the farmers to practice synchronous planting following the IA's planting calendar.

Less chemicals

Albert Archede, one of the FFS-participants, said that the knowledge they learned helped them increase their yield by almost 100%. "We barely got 45 sacks per hectare before but because of the technologies introduced in the FFS led by Ms. Lyda, we harvested 98 sacks per hectare," he stated. Moreover, through the use of *Trichogramma* and *Metarhizium*, they reduced the use of chemicals for spraying. "Because of *Trichogramma* and *Metarhizium*, we're healthier now since we do not spray many chemicals any longer," Archede added.

Improved ISF collection

Since many farmers in the community have at least 20% increase in yield, Mr.



Herman Adremesin, the IA President of the area, gladly announced that the Irrigation Service Fee (ISF) collection increased by 77% and they achieved an 11% increase in ISF incentive. They were really grateful for the technologies they have adopted because these did not just increase their yield, they also taught people not to neglect their social responsibilities like paying their ISF.

Always-on-the-go LFT, single mother, and farmer

Riding her single motorcycle, Lyda monitors each FFS farmer-participant in their farms and personally attends to their queries. She usually leaves home at dawn and goes back to check on her only daughter Therese at lunch time. This has been her daily routine. It's tiring, but she finds fulfillment in every inch of this tiredness.

When asked if it was hard for her to encourage farmers to attend her classes and adopt the technologies that she's sharing, Lyda proudly answered, "It was difficult to convince them at first, but as we got along, they showed interest in learning new things and that made me

more inspired to share what I know." Lyda also manages her family's 15-hectare rice field, where she also put into practice the technologies she advocates.

She simultaneously manages her own farm, raises her daughter by herself, and serves other farmers with sincere gratitude. It is also amazing that she remains humble about how much she has changed other people's lives. How does she feel when people express gratitude in the services she extends? "Very inspiring, it motivates me to give them more of what I know because I always believe that God has sent me here for a purpose and that is to empower others out of my utmost capability," she said.

Story of fearless farmers

This story is not only about Lyda's extraordinary strength and ability—it is also about an LFT who contributed so much in uplifting rice farming in Norala, South Cotabato. This is also a true success story of farmers who became successful after adopting newly introduced technologies.

Growing and Going

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN THE HEART OF AN EXTENSIONIST

BY JAILA SAGPA-EY

More than the personal accolades of being the focal person on organic agriculture (OA), the opportunity to impart knowledge to his community is what matters most to Marvin Pascual.

Although not a native of La Trinidad, Benguet, Marvin wholeheartedly helps guide farmers in the locality in adopting organic farming technologies. “Sharing is a great attitude, along with the virtue of love. Working in the community without love is not work at all,” Marvin shares.

The seed

Marvin, 34, is the firstborn of seven siblings. He took his Bachelor’s Degree in Agricultural Technology at the Provincial Technical Institute of Agriculture at Isabela State University-Cabagan Campus. Although already a scholar, he needed to work while studying so he could fully support his schooling and other needs. He graduated in 2004 and passed the Licensure Examination for Agriculturists in 2005.

It is by choice that he worked in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). Although of Cordilleran origin, he was raised and lived in Isabela in his younger years. Even with the option to stay in Isabela, Marvin chose to take a leap of faith after getting married and started a new life in Benguet. It was a completely different environment for him.

The cultivation stage

After graduating from college, farming

became a way of life for Marvin. He opted to till his own farm. However, his crops were damaged by floods and drought. With the losses and pressure to look for other sources of income, he was prompted to work in a motorcycle company. Working there gave him new knowledge. However, he longed for more.

Eventually, he was employed as an economic development staff (EDS) at a non-government organization (NGO) funded by World Vision International. Working with the NGO equipped him more in dealing with the farmers. He was also trained to be a facilitator in community organizing, planning, market linkage, and economic enterprise. As an EDS, he trained the farmers on organic farming and helped them be more organized.

After four fruitful years with the NGO, he was hired as a job order personnel (JOP) at the Department of Agriculture – Regional Field Office (DA-RFO) in CAR. He was employed as a nursery worker under the High Value Crops Development Program (HVCDP). Later, he was transferred to the OA program of DA-RFO CAR as a JOP technical staff; it was during this time when the OA advocacy was at its peak. He significantly took part in crafting the roadmap of the OA program in the region and the formation of the Local Technical Committee (LTC) on OA in Apayao and Ifugao.



In March 2012, he was permanently employed as Agriculturist I at the Office of the Municipal Agriculturist (OMAg) of La Trinidad, Benguet. He was also designated as OA Focal Person.

Being rooted

The Municipality of La Trinidad is dubbed as the Strawberry Capital of the Philippines. Additionally, it produces cut flowers and highland vegetables and practices the conventional way of producing its agricultural crops. These past few years, La Trinidad has been shifting to an organic agriculture.

Marvin recounted that when he started working as Agriculturist I, La Trinidad had intensified its advocacy on OA. After the approval of the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 or Republic Act No. 10068, the municipal government immediately passed an ordinance and administrative order supporting it. The Local Technical Committee (LTC) was also formed as the law required. Although, way back in 2003, the La Trinidad Organic Practitioners (LaTop) was already organized and has since been promoting organic farming in the locality.

However, reports show that before 2012, the number of organic farming practitioners in the municipality, excluding coffee producers, was only 65.

As the focal person on OA, Marvin knew that he needed to work harder to implement OA programs that would increase the number of adopters.

Thankfully, the OMAg supported his endeavors. He started to conduct training programs and Farmers' Field Schools (FFS) on OA, some of which were funded by and held at the ATI- Regional Training Center (RTC) CAR.

In mid-2013, Marvin saw the need to reorganize the LTC into Organic Agriculture Sustainability and Development Council. However, he knew that this would not be easy. As a strategy, he personally explained the program to the Sangguniang Bayan (SB) Chair of the Committee on Agriculture. He then assisted in drafting the ordinance on the reorganization of the LTC. Twice, he was requested to help explain the ordinance to SB members during regular sessions. In 2014, it was approved and passed as it was combined with the agritourism ordinance. However, no fund was appropriated for this particular ordinance. A budget for the implementation of the program was already institutionalized under the OMAg.

With the legal basis onhand, Marvin was more inspired to embark on his journey as the OA Focal Person of the La Trinidad OMAg. Furthermore, the full support from OMAg helped him implement OA programs in the area.

Aside from the political support, Marvin needed to deal with the farming communities. He acknowledges that during his first training and FFS, he was not familiar with highland vegetable production. With training activities

with ATI-CAR staff on this topic, he was able to gain confidence that he knew what he was sharing.

Getting acceptance and the lack of cooperation from the members of the group was the most challenging part. He shares that in the case of La Organica, an organized group of organic producers in the area, he needed to be firm for the group to get its certification. With the support of some members, all of them slowly agreed and complied with the requirements towards their certification.

Despite the individual differences of the members, Marvin was able to surpass the issues of community organizing and mobilizing. With his genuine dedication to his advocacy, it did not take him long to earn the farmers' confidence.

Fertilization

Introducing new and improved technologies to a community with existing farming practices inherent to them was a challenge to Marvin. Slowly, he introduced these concepts while assuring them that these will help improve their farm productivity. Gaining their trust and confidence to adopt the technologies he was imparting required much of his time and dedication.

Marvin relates that the training activities and FFS he facilitated were not enough for these farmers to apply the technologies. He needed to strategize so that farmers could truly apply the technologies. As such, FFS trainees only graduate if they allot 200 square meters for OA farming.

Even after the trainings and FFS, Marvin took time to regularly visit and monitor these farmers—officially and beyond his working hours. During visits, he joyfully extended technical assistance, coaching and mentoring these farmers to ensure that the technologies are understood and applied. When he sees the potential of the farmers, Marvin would

motivate them to be cooperators and turn their farm technology demonstration areas and learning sites for the FFS.

Domingo Betnac of Ambiong, La Trinidad narrates, “Marvin has the charisma to organize people. He shares all his knowledge with no reservations. He is not hesitant but straightforward in sharing what he wants us to know.”

Side topic

Domingo Betnac, 55, of Gulon, Ambiong, La Trinidad, is a member of the La Trinidad Organic Farmers Association (LaTOFA). He is one of the graduates of the FFS that Marvin facilitated in 2012. At first, he only committed 200 square meters of land for organic farming as required by the FFS. But seeing the same net income between cut flower production and organic farming, he chose the latter. At present, he devotes his 6,000 square-meter-farm to organic vegetable production. Unlike him, his fellow LaTOFA members are into both organic farming and cut flower production.

He shares that, at first, Marvin and his fellow farmers thought that he was not serious about learning what organic farming is. Showing how serious he was about it, Betnac learned what he needed to know about OA and immediately applied the knowledge he gained.

Betnac involves his family in his farm activities. He even gave a portion of his farm lot to his son, provided it be tilled through organic methods. He voluntarily offered a portion of his farm to serve as a demo area for the second batch of organic FFS conducted in their community.

Together with his fellow organic practitioners, Betnac is finding ways to encourage farmers near the creek to practice organic farming so that the water flowing in it will not be contaminated.

The fruits

Since 2012, Marvin has been able to

facilitate five training activities on basic organic farming technologies and seven FFS to groups of farmers. Along with these, Marvin integrates community strengthening as part of the topics.

With his assistance, the graduates of the FFS formed the La Trinidad Organic Farmers Association (LOFA) in 2013. Marvin guided them to establish their manual of management resulting in the installation of their Internal Control System (ICS) on organic production. LOFA, having a trade name of La Organica, was able to establish a relationship with Charlene Tan of Good Food Community. In 2015, a memorandum of agreement with Max Group of Companies Incorporated was signed for a particular partnership. Meetings are now being conducted for Max Inc. to buy La Organica products.

Also in 2015, Marvin helped the organization of the Highland United Natural Farming Association, a group that concentrates on savings mobilization and credit, trading, and marketing. The group was once linked to Henry and Son's, the biggest coffee importer and exporter in Asia, for coffee trading. The organization is presently linked to a private individual buying their produce.

Aside from the two organizations mentioned, Marvin is also assisting other smaller organic farmer groups organize in *barangays* like Ambiong La Trinidad Organic Producers Association, Ambiong Rural Cooperative Organic Practitioner, Tawang Organic Farmers Association, and Balili Organic Farmers Association for their group strengthening, group certification, marketing, and linking.

He is also being tapped by fellow agricultural extension workers (AEWs) as resource person in community organizing and organic agriculture.

The laurel leaves on his head

His initial accomplishments as AEW were acknowledged in 2013, when he was given National Recognition for

Outstanding AEW at the National Organic Agriculture Achievers Awards. In 2016, he was awarded the Regional Outstanding Agricultural Extension Worker.

During the second Training Program Graduates' Assembly at ATI-CAR in April 2017, Marvin was awarded second placer for Top Performing Local Government Unit Trainer/Coach under the Organic Agriculture Technology and ICS for his exemplary performance as AEW. These awards remind him to continually do his job with love. At the same time, it keeps him grounded.

"There is still a lot of room for improvement for me. What makes me happier is when farmers tell me '*Salamat kadagiti in sursurom*' ('Thank you for sharing your knowledge')," he shares. It also makes him happy to hear someone tell him, "*Adan metten ti income*," or "There is now income from OA."

To date, with the training activities, FFS, and visits extended to the farmers, there are almost 250 individuals involved in organic farming in La Trinidad. Indeed, the municipality is slowly turning into an organic-producing area in the region.

Where to go next?

Marvin is also the focal person of the rice program of OMAg. Unknown to many, La Trinidad maintains its rice-producing terraces and Marvin vows to dedicate his time in advocating organic farming technologies in rice production while continuously empowering farmers through technology transfer. He shares, "As a child of God, this is my work. Even if I am not employed in any office, my advocacy remains: safe and responsible farming as a child of God."

Now, he looks forward to setting up his own farm again and looks forward to personally managing it.

My Lolo's 20-Peso Farm

BY KARL LOUISE M. SALIBIO



“My lolo (*grandfather*) is from Negros.

He went to Cotabato with only PhP20 in his pocket. He was not certain about everything but farming. He was a dreamer just like me. He once told me that if you plant 10 trees everyday, you will also harvest daily in the future. For what I have become, I owe it to him.”

—Greggy Saljay III

Gregorio Saljay III, also known as “Greggy” of Pigcawayan, Cotabato is the general manager and co-owner of GBS III Agro-farms. It is a 4.9-hectare coconut-based farm, intercropped with fruits and orchards. His dream of being a farmer was inspired and cultured by his grandfather who established a coconut farm in the early ‘80s. Inspired by that dream, Greggy studied Agriculture and graduated from Central Mindanao University with a major in Animal Husbandry.

Since he is the only agriculture graduate in the family, his parents gave him the responsibility to manage the farm. Greggy took it as a challenge and slowly converted the farm’s practices to natural and organic farming.

Learning and application

Applying his learning from university, Greggy deviated from the farm’s conventional practices and concentrated on natural farm management. He slowly converted it into an organic farm, with the belief that going back to the basics of natural farming will help eliminate

its harmful effects to people and the environment.

Greggy also pioneers a small ruminant project comprising of goats and sheep for dairy and meat. He allows the goat to feed on unwanted weeds in the farm. He uses natural dewormer and goat urine as insect repellent for the ruminants. Effective micro-organisms also serve as foliar fertilizer for his fruit trees.

Moreso, he improves the existing coconut trees and orchard composed of durian, mango, and *lanzones*, which his grandfather planted, and added other fruit trees. He likewise added vegetables as well as dragon fruit in his farm. He assures the availability of irrigation and the application of organic fertilizers to the trees. Later on, he added vermiculture together with goat manure to sustain the supply of organic input in the farm.

When opportunities knock

His commitment to life-long learning inspired him to open his farm to agricultural researchers and innovations from the academe, non-government organizations, and government agencies. He likewise links up with agricultural institutions for new technologies in organic farming, and applied these technologies to his farm. It paves the way more value-adding activities with the integration of his livestock to various high value crops, including the dragon fruit.

Opportunities continued to grow with the assistance of the Agricultural Training



Institute (ATI) on capability development and training on organic agriculture. With his farm now a Learning Site and a School for Practical Agriculture accredited by the ATI, Greggory was able to establish a small dormitory and further improve his organic edible landscaping project. It also adds to the farm's income since most training activities of the ATI on organic agriculture are held in his farm.

"ATI's intervention gives high morale to farmers like me. We also learn so much through field exposures. What keeps motivating me to develop my farm is the inspiration and challenge from the ATI," he states.

Advocacy is the root of all

After the help of the ATI, Greggory decided to share his technology with his community. He believes that it is part of his responsibility to influence people to go into organic farming—not only by providing them knowledge, but also by setting an example and changing their attitude towards organic agriculture.

He regularly helps young farmers and out-of-school youths by providing free training on deworming and the use of natural vitamins for animals. Planting materials from his farm are also being distributed for free from time to time to help assist his community in starting their own organic backyard garden.

"Isa sa mga advocacy ko ay makatulong. Masarap ang feeling na pagdating ng mga trainee ay nababago natin ang kanilang

character and technical knowledge (One of my advocacies is to help others. Knowing that I have helped trainees and facilitated a change in their character and improved their technical knowledge makes me feel good)," he shares.

There's never success without lolo

Greggory reveals that he got inspired by the works of his grandfather. As such, his grandfather has always been the main player in building his career as a farmer. Of course, the constant motivation coming from his parents is just as important.

"My *lolo* started small. All he had was PhP20, which I know is not enough. But he was persistent, kind-hearted, and full of passion. He loved helping people, which inspired me to help people, too. It has since then been my advocacy. Like I said, there would never success without my *lolo*," he narrates.

From a farm that started with a 20-peso bill, Greggory's business has grown and supplies fruits, coconuts, organic fertilizers, goat meat, and organic vegetables to most of the leading establishments in Cotabato. He also plans to expand and elevate his farm into a farm tourism site so others—such as consumers, those interested in agriculture, and people from all walks of life—can visit and enjoy the farm.

Truly, it is not the farm that makes the farmer; it is the love, passion, and character of the person. More so, you are lucky if you have a *lolo* like Greggory's.

ATIng Gulayan Street Caravan

TILLING YOUNG HEARTS AND CONCRETE LANDS

BY LARRY ILLICH N. SOURIBIO

Kids are asked, “Do you know any vegetables?”

“Yes!” was their resounding reply.

“What kind of vegetables do you know?”

An elementary pupil exclaimed, with sincerity in his eyes, “French fries!”

This is a group of urban youth whose childhoods revolved around tall buildings, concrete roads, and heavy traffic. Few of them know how to grow mungbean (*munggo*). Only a number of them can identify the difference between lettuce and cabbage. Nobody knows that *sayote* is a vine.

In a city that has a land area of 613.9 square kilometers and a population of 12.88 million or roughly 21,000 individuals per square kilometer, the space is not even enough to house these families. There seems to be no room for a simple vegetable garden to thrive. Food is readily available through fast food chains. How, then, can they ever learn to appreciate agriculture?

“We can’t establish a vegetable garden because we don’t have any space. We can buy food from the supermarket, anyway.”

This remark from one of the walk-in clients of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) motivated the agency to influence the urban youth to appreciate agriculture through its ATIng Gulayan Street Caravan.

Caravan in the city

With instructions from Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel Piñol, the ATI brought gardening back to the urban setting through the ATIng Gulayan Street Caravan. This caravan is an offshoot of the ATIng Gulayan ng Department of Agriculture program launched in October 2016. A team from the ATI goes to different schools, communities, and organizations around Metro Manila to brief them about the basics of urban gardening.

Prepared with the necessary information and materials, the team teaches these communities the importance of agriculture. They also demonstrate container gardening, vertical gardening, and square foot gardening. These technologies are appropriate especially in urban settings



because they allow people to plant in small spaces with limited sunlight. In return, the beneficiaries must establish their own communal garden by using the knowledge, skills, and materials that the ATI has provided them.

Why schools?

“The youth is the hope of the motherland.” This is an eternal quote from Jose Rizal that rings much truth in agriculture. With farmers whose average age is 57 years old, the number of young people who engage in farming is dwindling. This is evident through the number of enrollees who take agriculture courses. According to the Congressional Committee on Higher and Technical Education (CHTE), enrollment in agricultural courses continues to decline, posing a serious threat to the country’s agriculture sector.

In Metro Manila, agriculture courses are not offered in any public or private universities. To address this concern, it is the objective of the street caravan to penetrate schools and universities and instill in the hearts of young people the

love for agriculture. While recognizing the limitations of soil and area, the ATI gives these schoolchildren ideas and motivation to start their own vegetable gardens in novel and creative ways while also taking care of the environment.

Starting with the soil

Topics included in the street caravan teach them to value the soil. All that we eat and the luxury we enjoy comes from the earth that we oftentimes neglect. With this, the kids are introduced to kitchen waste composting, vermicomposting, and nutrient management. Each of them is required to prepare his or her own planting media by mixing organic fertilizer with ordinary garden soil. They are often reminded that whatever was put in the soil will eventually become the plant that will be consumed by animals and people. Therefore, organic agriculture is promoted to discourage them from using synthetic fertilizers and chemicals that have harmful effects to a person’s health.

“When we have our own garden at home, we do not have to spend anymore.



We can also ensure that the food we eat are healthy and free from chemicals because we are the ones who grow and take care of them,” says Jen, a Grade 6 student from Old Balara Elementary School in Quezon City.

These young people are also taught how to recycle plastic bottles and transform them into unique planting materials. Instead of throwing them away, which contributes to the country’s garbage problem, these improvised planting pots can be used as home decorations. They can hang these on windows, walls, or small spaces. They can also display them around their houses. At the same time, these can also be planted with vegetables like cabbage, mustard, lettuce, and spinach. This is also a way of igniting the imagination of the

youth to establish edible landscapes in their schools and in their homes.

Prospects of hope

As of this writing, the ATI has reached 532 individuals through ATIng Gulayan Street Caravan and more than half of them are youth. The caravan has also helped establish school gardens in Caloocan, Makati, and Quezon City.

At first, the ATI reached out to schools and communities to bring interventions and programs. Now, it is the school and the communities that approach the ATI. Most of the requests that come to the Institute are from student organizations interested in establishing their own urban gardens.

Through the caravan, more people recognized how uncertain they are with the food they eat, if these are fresh or



exposed to harmful chemicals. They became aware that most of their food comes from commercial commodities that are subjected to preservatives and additives. Moreover, they understood that the food in the city is dependent on the products from nearby provinces. What happens if calamity strikes? What if there is another Ondoy? Transportation and logistics will be paralyzed, and no food will enter the city. How will the people eat?

With this street caravan, the ATI envisions a green metropolis where every community will be productive through urban gardening. The key is to educate the people, but especially to transform our youth. Redirecting their focus back to agriculture and its importance will instill an attitude of patriotism. The Philippines is an

agricultural country, and empowering our agriculture sector through the youth will uplift our nation for progressive and sustainable development.

“I feel that the ATI wants to strengthen agriculture. They also want us to teach our communities about how useful it is in our everyday life. Indeed, it is necessary to bring back the interest of the youth in agriculture,” remarked Junie, a Grade 10 student from Mt. Heights National High School in Caloocan City.

For the youth in urban settings, learning how vegetables grow is just the starting point. French fries indeed come from potato, which is technically a vegetable, so our pupil is somehow correct. Potatoes are root crops that you can also grow in your urban gardens. If all households in the city practice urban gardening, no one will be left hungry.

An Overnight Success

ATING GULAYAN NG D.A. FREE SEMINARS

BY LARRY ILLICH N. SOURIBIO

The first “ATIng Gulayan ng DA” free seminar in January 2017 was attended by 15 people in a small hall at the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI). The topic was Edible Landscaping. It was rather an underwhelming number for such an interesting topic.

The second free seminar was held less than a month after. More than 500 individuals showed up, so two training halls were used and a broadcast was done outside the building and through Facebook live. The topic was Mushroom Production.

In the succeeding months that free seminars were conducted, more and more people showed up to learn new knowledge on agriculture and fisheries. Attendees included almost every societal group in the metro.

How did this simple event earn so much recognition in such a short span of time?

The power of social media

Recovering from disappointment after the first free seminar, the ATI utilized a promotion that is ingenious but familiar. It turned to Facebook for its massive information dissemination about the undertaking.

Within hours of posting the infographic about the schedule of the seminar series, the “ATIng Gulayan ng DA” Facebook page earned 2,000 likes. It was also bombarded with hundreds of direct messages asking

for the details of the topics and the seminar’s requirements. Phones also rang non-stop from calls from interested individuals who are not tech-savvy. The image was shared more than 5,000 times and reached more than 100,000 Facebook users. It was a viral hit that even then National Youth Commission chairperson Cariza “Aiza” Seguerro shared it on her Instagram feed.

One netizen, Alberto Bryan Lanica III, rated the Facebook page five stars and wrote a review: “This is good for all. This helps us learn new ideas and technologies through research and development that is relevant in our times.”

Keeping the momentum

The success of the Mushroom Production Free Seminar opened the ATI to the urban community. More people from all walks of life continued to visit the agency to inquire about the different programs and activities in agriculture and fisheries. More people are now talking about how they can start their own gardens in their homes and communities. They are also talking about the wonderful programs of the government for urban residents like them.

“I attended [this seminar] because I know that there will always be new knowledge that can be learned. If there are no seminars like this, those who seek



for new knowledge will have nowhere to go,” shared Bong Jiao, a businessman who attended the Mushroom Production Free Seminar.

Recognizing the requirements in which this knowledge is applicable, the ATI culled out topics that are appropriate and relevant to the urban setting. Requests of walk-in clients were also considered.

In every topic that was presented, experts from the Department of Agriculture (DA) network were always invited. This way, participants are always active in asking questions to find out new information and to clarify unclear concepts.

Attendees of these free seminars were amazed about how they can apply the knowledge that they gained even in their own households. The concepts and practices are very applicable even without farm lands. Furthermore, the topics are not restricted to highly technical agriculture topics. There are also topics on livelihood ideas through food processing.

The cost of free

Aside from attending the seminar, participants are also required to bring plastic bottles. One bottle will be turned into a planting container for vegetables. They can then take this home as a souvenir during the seminar. Another bottle will be donated to ATI.

This will be used as an improvised container for planting vegetables for the “ATIng Gulayan Garden” within the ATI compound. Not only do they learn something, they also help the environment by donating plastic bottles that oftentimes contribute to the garbage problem of the city.

Free to dream

Free seminars will still continue to educate the people of the city. Aside from teaching them essential and relevant topics, these will show everyone that agriculture is an important sector in our country.

Thousands of individuals have already attended the free seminars offered by the ATI. Even though it initially intended to cater to residents in the city, many of the participants came from different provinces all over the country.

It is the goal of this activity to educate the people of the possibilities in farming and fishing. It also envisions an urban population who practice agriculture through urban gardening.

From a mere 15 people, 15 hearts, and 15 minds, ATIng Gulayan ng DA Free Seminars will continue to touch thousands more. In the years to come, Filipinos would know how to feed themselves and their families and no one will go hungry.

Plant and Multiply

'NAY DETING'S GREEN THUMB MAGIC ON HERBS

BY RENELLE JOY A. TABINAS

Medicine and money can grow right in your own backyard. With persistent soiled hands, both natural remedies and wealth can be uncovered from herbal plants.

Opportunities of medicinal herbs

Herbs can easily grow and reproduce through a gardener's diligent cultivation and care. More than being cost-effective, medicinal plants serve as a good source of income. Even a small herbal production area can provide great earnings through its seedlings and flowers, as with the processing of plant parts for tea, juice powder, and herbal capsules.

Likewise, most of these greeneries can be eaten fresh or used as flavor enhancers. Herbal plants also serve as an attraction for tourists interested in its medicinal value or those into organic farming.

As one door closes, another one opens

A native of San Dionisio, Iloilo, Nanay Deting had relied on her mango production as a source of living for years. However, Typhoon Yolanda damaged her farm. She was then forced to search for other alternatives to replace her mango trees.

From November 3 to 5, 2014, 'Nay Deting was among the rural women of San Dionisio, Iloilo who participated in the then newly launched agri-herbal tourism program of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) and Remnant Institute of Alternative Medicine (RIAM).

"The only herbal plants I knew were oregano and *lapunya*. During the seminar,

our trainers presented to us different kinds of herbs considering also the usefulness of each plant medicinally and economically. I saw unusual plants and learned the accurate process in utilizing each one of them effectively. However, even after the training, I still didn't recognize the specific names of each," Nanay Deting relays her first experience on the training on herbs.

Planting the seedlings of success

From a pot containing seedlings of *gayonara*, catwhiskers, and peppermint sprouted 'Nay Deting's large herbal production area. After the training, she immediately started to plant using cuttings of the seedlings she got, "I really went looking for the species of herbs that I didn't have."

'Nay Deting reveals that, "The seedlings given after the training were not just ordinary planting resources, they opened the beginning of my herbal career as well."

At first, 'Nay Deting's children were against the idea of herbal production because they thought its income could not sustain and support her. Nevertheless, she pursued her chosen venture on herbs as she loves doing the dirty work in her garden. "I've considered it no longer a pastime but my passion," she says.

Planting is what 'Nay Deting wanted to do. Even if she didn't know where to sell the herbs or what the consequences of her desired acts might be, she still kept on planting and growing herbal plants until these were gloriously sprouting in her farm. "If it were planted by another person, it would not be the way it is now," she mentions.



“Never did I stop planting even if I had no assurance that I would get benefits from what I was doing. Soon enough, my much-loved herbs began to flourish until they reached a thousand in number. I never noticed how a single plant could multiply to so many, which now constitute my mini-herbal farm.”

How herbs changed her life

The few seedlings she got from RIAM have now multiplied into a large herbal production area. She is considered as the “Stevia Queen,” having the largest production of the sugar substitute in Iloilo, and most probably in the whole Visayas region as indicated by Dr. Joel and Michelle Palma of RIAM.

“After five months of entering the herbal world, I was able to produce seedlings and vermi-worms. Now, visitors have to look for my area to see the true beauty of nature through my herbal plants,” she shares.

“Who would have thought that these herb seedlings would earn a lot and would give me a chance to improve my life and the lives of others? Now, my production continues and my hands never cease to passionately nurture these magical plants. Continuing this career may be a choice for me, yet fate has already decided to let it be my life,” states ‘Nay Deting.

Seedlings multiplied and shared with the community

“Various groups have visited my farm. People from nearby towns also have no choice but to see the magic in my herbal

garden. These instances furthered me to expand my herbal area to almost a hectare. What I have built is not just a garden of salvation but also a paradise that exemplifies the real essence of nature,” elaborates Nanay Deting.

“Herbal production has given me a chance to touch the lives of others. Workers in my farm are given much that made them earn more to sustain their daily needs. This also gave me satisfaction with the choices I made. I will never regret the day I embraced herbal production.”

‘Nay Deting further attests to God’s blessings after CARE Philippines granted a group of women in San Dionisio a livelihood project. Fortunately, they proposed to have an herbal production project. That was how ‘Nay Deting was able to deliver the Php54,000 worth of seedlings to each of the five barangays involved in the project.

Moreover, the Philippine Agri-Herbal Growers also ordered three trucks of herb seedlings worth more than Php200,000 from ‘Nay Deting’s farm.

“As they say, grab every opportunity that comes your way. It just so happened that I offered the same sets of planting materials to my neighbors who have been longing for progress in their lives. They asked me what to do with the seedlings and all I’ve always told them was just plant and plant and you’ll have a bountiful production. Who knows, better opportunities might come knocking on your door tomorrow. Just keep on planting,” remarks Nanay Deting.

Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation

The True Measure of Success

BY BERNARD JAMES R. TANDANG

“If you do not measure results, you cannot tell success from failure.”

This is a phrase often used by evaluation practitioners to describe the power of measuring results. It suggests the importance of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system that is capable of determining the results of our interventions in order for us to know whether we have been successful or not. But what do we mean when we say that our interventions have been successful?

Not just about being busy

Traditional M&E is capturing the inputs used, activities conducted, and outputs delivered by organizations. It is used to tell the general public of the accomplishments made, which justify the busy work we do. It shows that we have been able to comply with our work and financial plans, complete our targets, and use our budget allocations. It is the practice and idea of measuring our success.

However, recent progress in the field of evaluation that has risen from the increasing pressure from the general public for greater transparency and accountability led to the creation of a new trend called results-based monitoring and evaluation (RBME). It takes on a perspective that searches for real results that came from our interventions. It goes beyond showing off that we are busy with day-to-day work but helps

answer the “so what” question: So what if we have successfully implemented our interventions? Did these interventions produce the actual and intended results for our beneficiaries? Did we achieve the changes that we wanted to happen when we first developed these interventions?

This trend is relatively new, having been developed in the early 2000s. It has yet to be fully embraced by government agencies in our country. There are several initiatives from the government that use the term “results-based,” such as the organizational performance indicator framework and the strategic performance management system. Observations on these initiatives show that the practices we observe still involve the traditional way of M&E. They have failed to answer the “so what” question.

For years, the way we do things have been traditional because it is the system that we are familiar with. It has become a part of our culture. It is not our fault that we feel that the traditional way is sufficient in measuring our successes. However, as dictated by global trends, it is important that we recognize that it is not enough and there is a need for change.

This is what we at the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) have been trying to do for the last couple of years. The development of a RBME system that not only looks into the inputs used, activities conducted, and outputs



delivered, but also the outcome of our interventions. We are now shifting our thinking towards the measurement of our performance. It is emphasized that success does not simply mean the conduct of trainings, establishment of technology demonstration sites, and provisions of information, education, and communication materials and advisory services but to show actual improvements in the lives of our beneficiaries.

Knowing our organizational goals

“If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will lead you there.” This phrase from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* suggests that before we can measure the results of our interventions, we must first know what our destination is or what to measure. This means that we have to identify the scenarios that we expect to happen when we do our interventions. The assumption here is that all our interventions are directed towards positive changes for our beneficiaries. Therefore, in a RBME system, the measure of our performance and success is whether these identified results have been achieved or not. It is to see whether we have reached our target destination or, if not, at least know where we are on the road that will take us there.

Furthermore, knowing our goals is important because it gives direction and meaning to the work we do. An agreement

on what our goals are must be made, so that all of us have accountability and ownership in achieving it. It also gives us the extra motivation to ensure that all interventions are properly delivered because we know that it leads to something better for our beneficiaries.

In the ATI, the results we have identified focus on the changes that happen to our beneficiaries, primarily farmers and fishers. These include the increase in the beneficiaries’ access to our interventions, increase in knowledge and skills, productivity, empowerment, resiliency, and competitiveness, among others. These results are arranged in a logical manner using the Theory of Change (ToC) model.

ToC is a concept that connects the outputs we deliver to the identified results that we want to achieve. It is also called the logic of intervention because it shows the causal arrangement of how our interventions are related in achieving our desired goals. The different results identified are divided depending on the possible timeframe to achieve it: short-term, mid-term, and long-term. This acknowledges that some results can be seen immediately while others take time to be observed. The important thing we should remember about the ToC is that it is a framework used to see whether we are going towards the right direction in achieving our identified results.



To make the ToC a working RBME system, each identified result is represented by a number of measurable indicators. These indicators are the direct translation of the identified results that shows either a quantitative or qualitative measure of performance. These are what we measure to determine whether an identified result has been achieved or not.

Changing the way we do things

The measure of whether there are changes in the lives of our clients were found to be missing in the traditional M&E system. Possible results of interventions, though identified, appeared to be used only for the sake of documentary compliance to sell the interventions as excellent and noteworthy. However, with the RBME system, the way we do these things will change.

More than just reporting for compliance, it will be a management tool that helps us know which of our interventions work, which don't, and why they are or are not working. The failures and successes of the interventions determined through the RBME system can be translated into

lessons learned that help us perform better as an institution and as individuals doing these interventions. The RBME system is used to promote credibility and public confidence by reporting not just the number and types of interventions we have conducted but also their results and how they have changed the lives of our beneficiaries.

It gives us credible information that can be used during the planning of our yearly physical and financial targets. It would help us decide what interventions should be prioritized and have more resources compared to others. As mentioned by Dr. Tomas M. Austral, Professor of Caraga State University, during his impression on the RBME training conducted in 2016, "RBME has been very helpful because I was able to see the significance and importance of the RBME concept in relation to our strategic plans. Through this concept, we can improve our M&E tools that would lead to better provision of our programs and services."

Furthermore, the results gathered from the RBME system will provide feedback to the decision-making process. The policy-makers and



decision-makers in our office will have factual evidence to support appropriate actions needed to improve the delivery and provision of existing interventions we implement as well as the development of new interventions. “RBME helps organizations, particularly those in government, to manage their policies and programs effectively,” Ms. Jody Z. Kusek of the M&E Group of World Bank said. “RBME is a strategic part of an organization that must be integrated into key management systems and processes such as policy formulation, project or program planning and management, and budget allocation processes.”

Moving towards institutionalization

The development of our RBME system seems to be an easy task to handle on paper. However, the reality of setting up this system includes several challenges such as resistance of some personnel to the proposed change, and the different levels of understanding of the people in the organization regarding RBME. Hence, more capacity building activities and information campaigns within the

Institute must be conducted. This is to ensure that everyone knows what RBME is all about and how it connects to each of our roles and responsibilities.

This process of institutionalizing the RBME system may be slow, but at least we know we are on the right track. As supported by Dr. Romeo B. Santos, Executive Director of WorkLand M&E Institute, noting that, “If the ATI establishes this RBME system, it will be the first of its kind in the Philippines.” In any chance that we might feel discouraged in pursuing results-based thinking, remember that the way to know if something will work for us is by just doing it and learning from it. Doing something is better than doing nothing.

However, building our own capacities is not enough. We, as the lead agency for a harmonized and unified agriculture and fisheries extension, must be able to share our knowledge and experience about RBME to other stakeholders. This is our contribution to spreading a results-based culture that determines the true measure of success.

Rice

Goodbye Slur, Hello Confidence

BY MARIA ELOISA A. AKUT

Under duress

Forced by his father to train for the Training of Trainers (TOT) on Lowland Rice Production with Emphasis on Palay Check System in May 2011, Marlon found it hard to sit in a classroom. He has always been insecure of his slurry and sometimes incomprehensible words. One can only imagine his fear of speaking in front of his training classmates and facilitators. However, the TOT was the catalyst of this now confident and vibrant resource person. One who is a reliable hands-on speaker, not only on rice production, but also for vegetable production and tilapia and hito production and breeding.

A native of Barangay Silae, 57 mountainous kilometers from the city of Malaybalay, Bukidnon, Marlon Guinabo grew up in a small rice farm. At a young age, he was trained to tend to animals way before the sun was up or suffer the consequences from his father. Born of parents who studied until elementary level and dreamed of having a son who would complete a college degree, Marlon was able to enrol in two courses before totally leaving Central Mindanao University. He attempted to take up

automotive engineering and information technology. Unfortunately, he said, “*Dili jud mi magkasinabot sa akong kurso* (My course and I never really understood each other).” What else can a young boy who was afraid to speak and sell vegetables to his neighbors do?

Finding passion in agriculture

A mother’s love however will always find a way for her son. This is true for Marlon, who was able to enrol at St. Peter Vocational School and finished Horticulture and Broiler Production, both with NC II certification. It was his first breakthrough. There were challenges, but these helped him realize that farming was his passion.

As a trainee, Marlon was always eager to learn and apply everything in his farm. The TOT on Rice Production offered him the chance to learn more about producing organically grown rice, especially black rice. This gave him his first large income of PhP94,000. Through a bit of luck, the owner of the land where his family was working offered to sell the five hectare lot at PhP100,000 per hectare. With his





income and some savings from his mother, Marlon grabbed the offer. His father gave him put him in charge of tilling the land.

Challenges

Challenges often come unexpectedly. Marlon was not prepared when this happened to him.

He represented Malaybalay City in the rice technology category contest during the 1st Regional 4-H Youth Camp in 2014, and came out as the regional winner. However, being the representative of the region in a national competition scared Marlon out of his wits. His fear and insecurities over his slurry words overpowered him. "I did not want my *barangay*, the province of Bukidnon, the 4-Hers, and the region to be ashamed of me," he said. Not even his 4-H Club City Coordinator Richard Leono and the lure of free travel could convince him to participate in the 4-H national convention in General Santos City. Regret came last. He was remorseful of his decision.

The triumph

Determined to change himself, Marlon never missed any more calls for training programs by the Agricultural Training Institute-Regional Training Center

(ATI-RTC) X. He was able to visit several farms in Mindanao and Luzon. The training on Climate Smart Agriculture taught him how to understand the weather and properly program his farming systems. Gradually, chemical farming was phased out in his farm.

In addition, through the Farm Business School, he realized the value of product processing. "For years we have been selling our palay to the National Food Authority (NFA). However, processing rice into various by-products gives us more market opportunities and higher income."

As a member of the ATI-RTC X Learning Site Operators' group, Marlon was trained to be a resource person. This is where he honed himself to speak in front of a crowd. After the training, he took the opportunity to share his life's experiences every Sunday. This served as his training ground for talking and expressing his thoughts in front of people.

Marlon did not waste a single learning experience that came his way. He thought, "I am the one producing my vegetables, my rice, and my tilapia. I know my products very well. Why should I be ashamed to tell people that my products are healthy and good?"

Gaining confidence to talk and explore, he tried marketing his



products to neighboring families and at the City Agriculture Office. And voila! People are now coming to his farm to buy his produce. The easy access to communication makes orders for delivery easy—customers need to just call or text. Today, with chemical-free products, the market is not his problem, it's the supply.

His quick transformation became an inspiration to his fellow 4-Hers. He then encouraged them to engage in vegetable gardening and other farm activities. This strategy helped him meet the demand of his products.

During the 2nd 4-H Regional Youth Camp in 2015, Marlon went back not as participant but as one of the resource persons who talked about his farming experience. That opened the door to his speaking engagements with ATI-RTC X and the Agriculture Office of Malaybalay City, Bukidnon. Ask him about rice, corn, vegetables, tilapia or *hito*, and Marlon would be happy to talk and share his experiences. His recent engagements and future commitments as a resource person include talking about vegetable and in-land fish culture for the 50 training courses for 2,000 out-of-school young farmers in the BINHI ng Pag-asa Program of the ATI. One can

only imagine how much he is and will be earning at a PhP1,000.00 per hour.

The Abot-kamay Ambition

People in his *barangay* go as far as the Pulangi River in Maramag town for picnics, swimming, and fun. Looking at his small farm, Marlon realized that a small water impounding area can be made into a swimming pool. He knows that putting up a small resort in his area with a swimming pool, a catch-and-cook fresh water fish service offered with root crops, fruits, and vegetables is a possibility.

“This is my dream. This time, I will be the proprietor. I will be my marketing agent and my host. No more slurry words. I have confidence at my best.”

For the next generation

“As a farmer, never stop finding solutions to any problem. I regretted not attending the 4-H national convention contest the first time it was offered to me. For the youth, never stop dreaming and work for it.”

“If only the youth can see what my eyes can see now, nobody will ever go hungry.” Such are the words of the now confident young farmer and very credible resource person. No more slur this time.

Kap Aday's Cup of Triumph in Diversification

BY CLARIS ALASKA

“Success, for me, is not only measured by how much I gain, but also how many persons I motivate to follow my practices,” Barangay Captain Leomar Aday, or “Kap Aday,” says as he defines success. “You don’t need to be a farmer-leader or a farmer-extensionist for you to grow as a farmer or to share technologies or good practices with your fellow farmers,” he adds.

Being a public servant in Anagguan, Rizal, Cagayan, and a full-time farmer at the age of 50, Kap Aday enjoys discovering practices that help him manage his farming venture.

It was in 2016 when his good practices in rice farming were discovered, especially on the diversification he employed in his farm. Recognizing his capacity and potential as a model farmer, the Agricultural Training Institute – Regional Training Center II (ATI-RTC II) selected him as Learning Site (LS) cooperator for rice. His farm now serves as venue for trainings conducted by ATI-RTC II and other agencies.

From December 2016 to April 2017, his farm hosted the ATI-RTC II-funded Climate Smart Farm Business School (CSFBS) conducted by the Office of the Provincial Agriculturist of Cagayan and the local government unit of Rizal.

The onset of triumph

In his childhood days, Kap Aday used to help his parents in the farm. He finished a vocational course as diesel

mechanic and practiced it for a year. As his parents were getting older, he had no choice but to go back and manage their 5.3-hectare farm.

With little knowledge in farming, he ventured into rice production. It was not easy for Kap Aday to make the farm productive. He practiced monocropping for some years, which was just a cycle—rice after rice after rice. At that time, he only harvested an average of 100 cavans per hectare, with high production cost.

Facing the challenges

Kap Aday did not give up, though.

In 2006, he decided to construct a small house at the heart of his farm and moved there with his wife Rosie and their four children. Having the farm right at his doorstep, Kap Aday had all the time to continue envisioning how it will look like for the next few years. “I imagine it to be an agro-eco tourism site where farmers from Rizal and other municipalities will find some good ideas to bring home and replicate in their farms,” Kap Aday proudly states.

From the total land area he was tilling, he has passed on the management of two hectares to his son-in-law. He now maintains the 3.3 hectares left and started diversifying it to be more enterprising. At the same time, he wanted to showcase that maximum utilization of the land, through diversified farming, and increase profitability and income. He maintains 2.7

ADAY'S FARM HOUSE

A UNITED
FAMILY
LIVES HERE

hectares for rice production as his main crop, using hybrid rice, which increases his yield up to an average of 200 cavans per hectare.

He then started planting coconut along dikes without considering that it may trap the sunlight needed by the rice plant. A researcher in his own way, he says that sunlight can still pass through the leaves of the coconut. “Coconuts are not robust and when they grow tall, they do not disrupt the sunlight that the rice plant needs to manufacture food,” Kap Aday explains. He also cuts older leaves to warrant proper sunlight needed by the rice plant. He uses the cut leaves for mulching of vegetables and the midribs for hard brooms.

Maximizing the abundance of spring water from the Alsong cave that traverses his farm, Kap Aday constructed an irrigation canal that diverts water to the rice paddies. He likewise established a fishpond applying the right technology he learned from the training on tilapia and prawn culture of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. After having good income in his first trial, he expanded his fishpond to four holes with an area of around 1,000 square meters.

He gradually improves his farm by attending various training activities. Kap Aday established a 2,500-square-meter vegetable garden, applying the lessons he learned from the training on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) he once attended. He also planted peanut as cover crop to prevent dikes and other spaces from erosion; as well as to provide a good source of nitrogen.

He has bananas alongside the vegetable garden as additional source of income and as a shield for the newly transplanted vegetables to preserve moisture of the soil. He also established a small area for dragon fruit. He planted cacao, rambutan, and *guyabano* in the slightly rolling part of the farm. The training on cacao production and pests and diseases management that he had attended helped him improve the

management of his cacao orchard.

Concerned about the welfare of his family and the community as his market, he cultivated organically grown vegetables. He has likewise implemented vermicomposting as a source of his organic fertilizer for his vegetables and rice.

Kap Aday raises native pigs, which he feeds with low-cost feed mixture composed of rice bran, sweet potato, and water spinach leaves. He has ducks and chickens for home consumption and even for people who visit him for *barangay*-captain-related matters.

Significant success

The agripreneur that he is, Kap Aday humbly says that he earns an average of PhP311,000 per season from all the enterprises in his 3.3-hectare diversified farm. Again, he says he feels more rewarded because of the people with whom he shares his technology and harvests.

He has a ready market since traders from Tuguegarao City come to his farm to buy bananas and rice grains. Residents from nearby *barangays* also enjoy the pick-and-pay feature for his vegetables. “Letting them experience picking on their own is one way of motivating them to establish their own vegetable garden, even in their backyards,” Kap Aday relates.

One of his great achievements is winning the regional Gawad Saka Search as Outstanding Rice Farmer in 2016. This is because of his high rice yield and the diversification he made in his farm.

Extending more

As he initially said, Kap Aday attributes part of his success to sharing his practices with his fellow farmers. He has been a resource person on cacao production in training activities conducted right on his farm. He likewise shares all his discoveries from cultural management of crops, pest management, and constant monitoring of crops to walk-in farmers. His neighboring farmers are now his adopters, but he still

“My cup of triumph is not only for my personal achievements but also for my community—for the municipality of Rizal, for the province of Cagayan, for the region, and for the whole country.”

LEOMAR “KAP ADAY” ADAY



wants to share and reach more farmers.

He motivates farmers to join training programs that will improve their conventional practices. He encourages them to go back to natural farming and plant fruit trees to counter the effects of climate change. “It is predicted that global temperature will increase by one degree celsius. If every individual plants trees, it would be of great help,” Kap Aday advocates. As such, his *barangay* was awarded as the cleanest and greenest in the municipality in 2016.

It has become the commitment of Kap Aday to share his discoveries, good practices, and technologies to his fellow farmers, not as a farmer-leader extensionist, nor a local farmer technician, but simply as a farmer himself.

Now and forward

The farm is indeed diverse, but it also has a good plan, which makes it look like an agro-eco tourism site. His house is located at the center of the farm, surrounded by the rice area with a hut across the fishpond, vegetable garden in front, a multi-purpose hall for meetings and trainings, and an orchard in the hilly back portion.

A *talipapa* house near his vegetable area was constructed to display his products. Materials for the establishment of a greenhouse were provided to him as a support of ATI-RTC II as LS cooperator. He also plans to put up a pressure tank for the irrigation of his vegetables.

To complete the facilities needed as an LS, he likewise plans to construct a small dormitory for live-in training. His wife has already started catering to the training activities conducted in their multi-purpose hall.

Also, to be competitive in the market, Kap Aday wants to undergo the certification process for Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). “I am looking forward to becoming GAP-certified and continue being an LS cooperator to extend more, not only within my jurisdiction but to other areas,” he denotes.

“My cup of triumph is not only for my personal achievements but also for my community—for the municipality of Rizal, for the province of Cagayan, for the region, and for the whole country,” he happily ends.

The Progressive Municipality of Bayog, a Rice Achiever

BY BELLY JOY T. ARPAY



“Isip usa ka *recipient* sa *Rice Achiever Award* para sa 2016, magpasalamaton kaayo mi nga dili lang kay tungod sa *award* nga among gidawat apan tungod sad sa kaayohan nga naabot sa mga mag-uuma. Isip naka *income* ug dako sa maayong pamaagi sa milabay nga tuig. Atong hinumduman nga ato ning nahimo dili lamang tungod sa tsamba, dili lamang tungod sa inato nga pamaagi, pero tungod ni sa mga *program* nga pirmi natong ge implementar sa lungsod (*As one of the recipients of Rice Achievers Award for 2016, we are thankful not just because of the award that we have received but because of the blessings that our farmers achieved. Their income increased in a good way. We should recall that we were able to make it not just because of luck, not because we did it in our own ways, but because of the programs that we implemented in the municipality.*)”
—Hon. Leonardo Babasa, Jr., mayor of Bayog, Zamboanga del Sur.

The municipality of Bayog is located 72 km away from Pagadian City. It has 1,487 hectares irrigated rice area, 486 hectares rainfed area, and 249 hectares upland rice area.

In 1993, their average yield was four tons per hectare. When the Department of Agriculture (DA) introduced Know-How, their yield increased to 6.3 tons per hectare. They were also chosen as one of the Outstanding Agri-Pinoy Rice Achievers last 2012, with the average yield of 5.7 tons per hectare.

With the vision of dynamic and competitive rice production, the municipality organized a Rice Road Map. From 2012 to 2017, the program guaranteed that staple food will be available and accessible at all times. It is envisioned that the farmers will become producers and entrepreneurs.

Mayor Babasa, Jr. added, “*Ato gyud gipahingosgan ang programa sa agrikultura tungod kay gusto nato matabangan atong mga katawhan nga dili magsalig sa uban. Kinahanglan mahimo silang self-sufficient* (We strongly promote the programs in agriculture, since we want to help our farmers not to depend on other farmers. They should be self-sufficient).”

Being achievers

However, during the implementation of their programs and activities, they

MUNICIPALITY OF BAYOG



Be RiCEPONSIBLE



They faced different challenges. These include high cost of farmer inputs, fluctuating buying price of palay, crop conversion from rice to other crops in irrigated areas, slow adoption of small farmers on recommended technologies, and susceptibility of the crop to pest and diseases brought about by climate change.

The municipality still continued to achieve their goals despite these challenges. They implemented activities like Farmers Field School on Palaycheck, hybridization, and using high-yielding varieties of palay. The farmers followed the technologies given by the DA of the local government unit (LGU) and eventually increased their yield.

“Ang among ginahimo dane sa among area, una, aduna mi mga trainings nga giapilan nga ginahatag gikan sa agriculture sa lungsod sa Bayog. Dayon paghuman sa mga trainings, amo dayon gipanghimo (What we did here in our area is that we attended trainings that were provided by the agriculture office in Bayog. After the training, we immediately implemented them),” according to Fernando Lumido, a farmer from Brgy. Lawagan, Bayog, Zamboanga del Sur.

Aside from the trainings, the municipality also organized different strategies in overcoming the challenges. They provided organic fertilizer to the farmers, irrigation support, pre- and post-harvest support, and agriculture extension services.

Payback to the farmers

As a result, they were able to produce 6.3 metric tons per hectare of hybrid seeds and 5.1 metric tons per hectare of inbred seeds. Most of the farmers have already adapted the Palaycheck System and the proper application of fertilizer. Recently, the rice produced in Bayog were sold to neighboring municipalities and cities like Pagadian City and Zamboanga City.

The municipality is so grateful for the support that was provided to them. They thank their farmers who gave all their support and cooperation to the LGU. With the prize money they have earned, they plan to continue the establishment of their learning center so they can continue helping their farmers become more successful.



Obet Arahan

THE FARMER'S INSPIRATION

BY JANINE L. CAILO

Nowadays, as land conversion is widespread in our country and farmers opt to change professions—as tricycle drivers, fishermen, *barangay kagawads*, and sometimes, overseas workers—it is quite amazing to know that there are still those who choose to live the life of a farmer.

“*Sa amin, itong [Barangay] Santol saka [Barangay] Bunga, nabili na lahat at kakaunti na lang kaming merong taniman ng palay* (Here in Barangay Santol and Barangay Bunga, all the lands have been bought and there are only a few of us left with land to plant on,” Robert Arahan says.

Despite this challenging situation, Robert, a dedicated farmer, confidently believes that even with the continuing industrialization and urbanization in the country, farming is still a profitable business.

The farmer's son

Robert, more notably known as Obet, is the third of eight children of Santiago and Librada Arahan. Born and raised in the historic town of Tanza, Cavite, his parents have emphasized the importance of farming ever since Obet and his siblings were young.

“*Elementary pa lang ako nagsasaka na kami—katulong kami ng tatay ko. Kahit nang nag-aral na kami, tuwing Sabado't Linggo kami tumutulong* (We started farming when we were in elementary school—we were our father's helpers. Even if we were studying, on Saturdays and Sundays, we helped him),” Obet recalls, adding that he looked up to his father as his role model. “*Maliit pa kami tinuruan niya na kami gumawa,*

magtanim, at kung paano pauunlarin ang isang sakahan (We were very young when my father started teaching us to make, plant, and improve a farm).”

At present, all his siblings have their own careers. Meanwhile, Obet and a younger brother took over management of the farm after their father decided to retire. “*Kasama ng kapatid ko, ako na ang nagpatuloy ng pagsasaka sa lupa namin* (My brother and I are now the ones who tend to the farm).”

The call of the land

Obet earned a degree in electrical technology from Guzman Institute of Technology in 1987. Afterwards, he sought for opportunities abroad and went to Saudi Arabia to work as a building electrician. After seven years, he returned home. “*Nang nasa abroad ako, yung kinikita ko kaunti lang at malayo pa ako sa pamilya ko* (I didn't earn a lot when I worked in Saudi Arabia. I was also far from my family),” he says.

Upon his return, he worked at a fast-food chain as a full-time electrician and in his family's farm for extra income. When he realized that he was earning more by farming, he decided to resign and become a full-fledged farmer. “*Mas malaki ang kinikita ko sa pag fa-farm, wala pa akong amo* (I earn more at the farm, and I am my own boss),” he chuckles.

A family farm

Situated in Brgy. Punta II, Tanza, Cavite with a total of 2.7 hectares, how does Obet manage to run his farm? He proudly reveals that each family member has their own share of tasks.

His wife Marites, for instance, is the one responsible for harvesting their crops,



record-keeping, and finding possible markets for their produce. “*Malaki ang tulong ng asawa ko. Ang trabaho ko kasi sa production, siya ang sa harvest tsaka sales (My wife helps a lot. While I focus on production, she focuses on the harvest and sales),*” he says.

His children have also been a great help to him. “*Malaki [din] ang naitutulong sa akin ng mga anak ko (My children also help a lot),*” he beams. “*Tinutulungan nila ako sa mga trabaho ko. Sa halip na kumuha pa ako ng gagawa na tao, sila na [ang gumagawa] (They assist me in whatever I do. So I don’t have to hire someone else because they work with me).*”

Even his retired father has his share of work on the farm. He raises ducks and processes the eggs into salted eggs.

Obet is practicing a rice-based integrated farming system. His farm is allocated to different commodities: 1 hectare for rice; 0.5 hectare for vegetables; 0.2 hectare for a fishpond; 0.25 hectare for ducks; and 0.25 hectare for fruit trees. He also practices multi-cropping and crop rotation to break the life cycle of pests. He plants rice first, then after harvesting in October, he plants his vegetables. “*Tuluy-tuloy pero iba-iba ang tanim, hindi ko inuulit. Hindi nasisira ng hayop. Malusog ang lupa. Kapag nagtatanim kasi ako ng gulay, nalalagyan siya ng vermicompost (I plant regularly and use different varieties; I don’t replant what I’ve already planted. They aren’t destroyed by animals and the soil is healthy. When I plant vegetables, I practice vermicomposting).*”

He also raises organic tilapia and prawn. He uses duckweed to feed them. Likewise, he utilizes natural/organic fertilizer such as fish amino acid, fermented plant juice, fermented fruit juice, and lactic acid basic solutions, indigenous microorganisms, and vermitea for his vegetables.

On his success and hardships

“*Wala naman akong sikreto sa pagsasaka. Konting sipag lang, konting tiyaga. Saka kailangan ay um-attend ka ng mga seminar at mga training para matuto ka ng mga makabagong paraan ng pagsasaka (I don’t have any farming secrets. It’s just a combination of hard work and determination. And it’s also important to attend seminars and trainings so you’ll continue learning, especially about new farming methods and technologies),*” Obet says. While most of the farmers start work in the morning, Obet would start at around 2 AM so as not to catch the scorching sun.

Obet was able to give his children proper education with his farm. In fact, two of them have already finished college. Aside from the recognition of his hard work and innovation by different organizations, he also takes pride in knowing that his farm produces organic products.

But it’s not always rainbows and butterflies for Obet. His rice was once infested by black bug and he experienced a huge loss. Undeterred, he ceased rice production and turned to planting vegetables: *upo*, tomatoes, and *pechay*. Obet shares, “*Ako, halimbawang nagtanim ako ng 500 square meters, at sumala’yon, bumagsak ako; ang ginagawa ko sa susunod na tanim, gagawin kong 1000 square meters para masalo yung una (If, for example, I planted 500 square meters and this failed, what I do is, the next time I plant, I’ll double it to 1000 square meters to make up for the one that I lost).*”

Obet also believes that problems like the black bug that infested his plants are effects of bigger threats to farming: land conversion and climate change. Tanza is one of the towns of Cavite greatly affected by land conversion, ranking 6th in terms of converted agricultural land in 1994.¹

Obet tells us that the changing climate has affected the way they plant. They

have to adjust their planting period to adapt. The crops that they usually plant during November are now being planted a month earlier. This is so the crops to avoid the heat of the summer season.

Like what he always says, Obet believes in farming as a profitable business. One just has to persevere and find effective ways to counter problems like climate change.

As for land conversion, he believes that it depends on the farmers. He says that even if given a big offer, he will never sell his farm. Some farmers, however, are not as lucky as he is and do not have a lot of choices. *“Kasi yung ibang farmers naman, kahit ayaw nila ibenta ang lupa, wala silang magawa kasi mga tenant lang sila* (There are some farmers who are forced to sell their land because they are only tenants).”

Obet as a Magsasaka Siyentista

In 1999, Obet was awarded as an Outstanding Farmer of Tanza. He was also recognized as a Model Farmer in 2015. As a farmer leader in his community who is receptive to new technology, Obet’s farm was chosen by Agricultural Training Institute Region IV-A as a School for Practical Agriculture (SPA). It serves as a venue for Farmer’s Field School (FFS) and farm visits.

Obet was also the ATI IV-A Natatanging Masasakang Siyentista awardee for 2015. He admits that he doubted his chances of getting the award. *“Akala ko noon, yung mga malalaking magsasaka lang ang pwedeng manalo, mga mayayaman lang* (I never thought I’d win because I thought only rich and big-name farmers were the only ones who could win).”

Being a Magsasaka Siyentista, Obet has been attending trainings and is able to exchange practices with other farmers. He says that this way, they are helping each other improve their farms by applying the methods that they think can help with their livelihood.

Obet also gives back to his community.

“May mga magsasakang pumapasyal dito humihingi at nagbibigay ng tulong. Gaya ng saging ko, galing itong CvSU (Cavite State University). Maganda binubunga nito dahil ito ay tissue cultured. Sa ngayon, namigay na ako sa mga ibang magsasaka (There are farmers who come here and ask for and offer help. Like my bananas, these come from CvSU. This is tissue-cultured so it has really good produce. I gave some to the other farmers).”

Future plans and words of advice

Obet looks forward to getting his farm GAP-certified in the near future. He is also aiming to further develop his farm for agri-tourism. In line with this, he hopes to dig a deep well where they can get clean water to irrigate the farm. All of this will be done with the help of his children. *“May pangarap din ang mga anak ko para sa farm na ito* (My children also have plans for this farm),” he says.

When asked for advice, Obet tells aspiring farmers to take things slowly. *“Dapat umpisahan nila sa maliliit lang muna. ‘Wag nilang bibiglain. Kasi kapag mataas agad ang lipad, masakit ang bagsak* (Start small. Don’t be in a rush. Because if you do everything in a rush, it will hurt you badly when you fail),” he shares. In addition, he advises his fellow farmers, including aspiring farmers, to attend seminars and trainings, and to keep on learning and improving.

Despite the many challenges that continue to hound the farming industry—urbanization, industrialization, land conversion, and climate change—Obet remains steadfast in his goal of making his farm a profitable business. In the process, he inspires other farmers to work hard and persevere like him, so that they, too, will soon achieve their goals.

1. Danilo C. Cardenas, *Effects of Land-Use Conversion on Local Agriculture: The Case of Cavite, Philippines* (1994), 5.

Young Filipino Farmers are Not a Dying Breed

BY JEREME JON M. DUMARAOS

It's nothing new for Denmark Centeno, 19 years old, to see the reality of the farmers in Barangay Taguntungan, Baggao, Cagayan. Though the *barangays* have vast access to agriculture land, most of the farmers gain an income that hardly meets their everyday needs. With this, it is a common idea for old farmers to send their sons and daughters, like Denmark, to get a quality education and seek greener pastures in the city.

When the going gets tough

Denmark dreams of becoming an agriculturist so he can help his parents. But due to their economic situation, he cannot continue his studies. He thought it was impossible to become an agriculturist while obtaining a college degree. He also acknowledged that he had no farming skills and he knew nothing about handling a farm. The only formal education he had was when he graduated from Baggao National Agricultural High School. However, as he admitted that his dream was no closer to reality, he also realized two things: His parents were getting older each day, and all of the farmers in his area were getting old, too.

Another realization that hit Denmark was the possibility of food in their area becoming scarce. In a community

where the common belief was that they were poor because they were farmers, this was a possibility. He wanted to do something about the situation.

So even without assurance of his success, Denmark decided to become an agriculturist. He saw this as an opportunity to help his parents and to prove that farming can provide a stable income like any other job in the city.

Armed with basic knowledge in farming that he learned from his parents, he looked for ways to improve their family farm by attending various trainings, farmers' classes, and technical briefings conducted by the municipal agriculturist of Baggao and other agencies. Here, he learned many farming techniques, including Integrated Agri-Forestry and natural farming methods.

The integrated agri-forestry enterprise

Blessed with an agriculture land, Denmark used a resource management system called integrated agri-forestry. This increased his income and maximized every portion of land his family had. What he did was integrate the trees in the farms in an agricultural landscape to diversify, and sustain production. He placed vegetables



near the dikes in his rice fields and fishpond. He also used vegetables for animal consumption to minimize cost in buying feeds. Furthermore, the chickens' and pigs' manure were used as fertilizer for the crops, while fishes were either sold or consumed.

Denmark also planted 500 square meters of fruit-bearing trees that produced an abundant supply of fruits for selling. The fruits that weren't sold were turned into fermented fruit juice: a liquid that increases nutrients in the soil and helps plant growth by increasing the soil's potassium level.

Aside from utilizing manure as a fertilizer, Denmark used other by-products such as rice straws to create a vermicompost: a mixture of decomposing waste rich in nutrients. The vermicompost further minimized his fertilizer expenses.

**From student to teacher;
from dreamer to leader**

While managing the farm from 2013 to 2015, he obtained a net income average of PhP348,209 per year from his two-hectare rice field. He also profited from selling vegetables, fruits, and livestock, with an average net income amounting to PhP43,500 from 2014 to 2015. Lastly,

he earned about PhP60,004 in 2015. Clearly, Denmark received a significant amount of return in investment from learning farming techniques and as a result of his hard work.

With his perseverance, dedication, and obtained knowledge, he was able to increase his family's income—enough to build a new house for them. Moreover, as a 4-H Club president, he was able to lead members in actively participating in community development activities such as tree planting and clean and green programs. He also uses his farm as a learning site to promote organic agriculture, farm safety, and environmental protection awareness. He is proof that one can become an agriculturist even without a college degree. He is proof that farming success can be achieved through hard work, commitment, and passion in the industry.

They say that dreams die in the long run, but not for Denmark. All the limitations he encountered in life were merely challenges. He has now achieved success—success that proves farming is not a dying occupation, especially among the young like him.

Arise with Rice

PUTTING THE VALUE IN ENGALLADO'S VALUE-ADDED RICE PRODUCTS

BY VIC THOR A. PALARCA



While most people are migrating to the cities to go after their dream jobs, a growing number of metropolitans are taking up farming. Nicasio Engallado leads by example as he once sought, worked on, and enjoyed a good farming life in Valencia City, Bukidnon.

Meeting the man

At 57, Nicasio—Nick to family and friends—is still strong and healthy. In fact, with his stocky build and shoulder length silvery hair, you would see him as intimidating. But Nick is actually warm and welcoming. He interacts with a lot of people as he runs a pastry business in Bukidnon.

But Nick is more than just an ordinary pastry owner—he is also a farmer. Thus, you are guaranteed that the ingredients used in his products, especially the rice-based flour, are clean, pure, and tasty.

There is a good reason why Nick's oven-fresh goodies are becoming popular and getting well-deserved attention and why local patrons are starting to order by bulk. According to him, his confidence in selling pure unadulterated pastry products stems from the fact that the rice-based ingredients used all come from his farm.

“When I started farming back in the day, rice was the staple commodity planted and

harvested in our farm. Then it crossed my mind that this tried-and-tested way of farming will not bring me far nor do me any good income-wise. Producing rice and selling it alone has its highs and lows and I thought that banking on the idea of value-adding would do the trick,” he said.

According to Nick, his occupation is “more than work” because it carries on the tradition of caring for the land. His ethics govern his choices as a farmer, but he is also a pragmatist who approaches his vocation with the precision of, well, a scientist. Although Nick was born and raised in Negros Oriental, where he obtained his BS Agriculture from the University of Negros Occidental Recoletos, it was in Valencia, Bukidnon that he found his fortune.

Steady gains

The diversified Engallado's Farm in Tungan-Tungan, Bukidnon is as scenic as commercial souvenir postcards. Lush vegetation and hordes of livestock surround the 3.10-hectare farm, 1.30 hectares of which is a rice field planted with inbred farmer's selection of brown rice, Nicken Red (his own rice variety), and black rice. Nick owes the efficiency and steady operation of the farm to his past.



Raised in Bacolod City, his parents happened to be the pioneers in making *barquillos* under the popular brand Sugarlandia Barquillos in the early '80s. (*Barquillos*, when eaten alone, can be compared to a Superstix wafer—a favorite Filipino snack—sans the stripes. They are best paired with a generous helping of ice cream.)

Nick's firsthand experience in helping his parents manage the family's bakery business enabled him to come up with the idea of establishing a pastry shop of his own, with the ingredients coming directly from his farm. Rice, he said, is his saving grace after he deliberately decided that it is this crop that can boost his income.

"I chose rice as my top commodity because many by-products can be derived from it. If rice farmers like me know how to process it, then a higher income and return is not far-fetched. We can earn ten times the normal income by value-adding," he exclaimed.

His previous involvement with the Agricultural Training Institute, Department of Trade and Industry, and Department of Science and Technology was of big help as he put to good use the knowledge he gained from the training activities on product enhancement to product packaging.

Thinking ahead

As an entrepreneur, Nick knows that a lot can be done in his farm—things that can boost his income and way of life. It was therefore a logical move to include and integrate other high value crops and livestock.

"For me, a farmer's mantra should be 'to eat and earn.' I don't buy the idea of producing then selling it as is," he said. Whatever bounty his organic farm yields, his loyal patrons in the food business are sure buyers. After all, his farm is known for generating produce that are organically grown. He said that he does not use any kind of chemicals in

his farm and that he only uses whatever is available.

"I was once a traditional rice farmer myself in 1985, but experience taught me that the chemicals I apply are detrimental to my health and to the soil I have grown up tilling. So, when I had the chance to go for organic farming by 1989, I made it a point to sustain it and share its benefits to my co-farmers. Although some, if not most of them, don't believe me, I don't blame them. However, I am grateful that my efforts have also paid off because there is now a growing need for organic products. People nowadays pay attention and are conscious about their health and keeping a healthy lifestyle," he shared.

At present, Nick also sells organic rice seeds, one of which is his breakthrough rice variety, Nicken Red. In addition, he sells carbonized rice hull. Interestingly, this farmer and pastry shop owner is also venturing into wood carving.

His plans include establishing a permanent processing area in Tungan-Tungan and a display center/snack hub in Valencia. This vision is already an achievement and serves as an avenue for advocacy and the promotion of healthy living and mindful eating.

Challenge accepted

His first 10 years were met with skepticism and criticism from his neighborhood, to the point of labeling him insane for coming up with new and off-beat ideas. However, Nick's decisiveness to go with his plan and passion worked and paid off.

He came up with a new rice variety as a reference to his hard work and persistence. The Philippine Rice Research Institute even acknowledged his breakthrough as a contribution in the development of rice culture and furthering the agriculture sector.

Whatever success he now enjoys and savors can be attributed to his passion



for farming and for having an inquisitive mind. In my candid conversation with him, he said that he did not find contentment and felt there was no thrill in just producing rice alone. He also felt that value-adding would continue the legacy of Sugarlandia Barquillos.

Today, 13 products have been developed including *barquirice*, *pulvorice*, rice café, rice buttons, rice cake, *cuacoy*, rice brownies, *piaya*, *hopiaya*, *buko* pie, rice wheat bread, rice *cocho*, and *otap* in his career as a rice farmer entrepreneur. His farm also offers other products like *meringue*.

During our conversation, he admitted that his rice farming experience has also been met with difficulties since his rice field is not exempt from the onslaught of pests and other plant diseases. The presence of pests in his field, according to him, is manageable though, since he employs timing of planting, bio-dynamics, and he practices varietal trial before planting.

For now, his concern is the lack of manpower and the fact that the consignment basis of his rice-based products, which is taking a toll on his business.

Overcoming difficulties

Proving that he is undeterred, Nick welcomes new farming technologies and innovations without reservations, just like when he made up his mind to explore the possibility of expanding his venture to rice production. His experience in making rice-based products like *barquillos* came in handy.

Demand for his rice-based products come from popular patrons such as Robinson's, Sanitarium Adventist Hospital, House of Suman in Clarin, Negosyo Center of Malaybalay and Valencia, NVM Mall, and the local government of Valencia.

His innovation in his rice production is that he plants three to four varieties of

rice so should two or more varieties fail, the rest can survive.

Coupled with his farm experience and takeaways from various training programs regarding production and agribusiness, Nick is also a sought-after resource person. Some of the topics he discusses are organic farming, product processing, and integrated farming.

Destiny fulfilled

If there are nuggets of wisdom Nick would like to impart to his colleagues and those who want to venture into farming, it is that chemical farming contributes to climate change and should be discouraged. He feels that farmers should adopt natural farming and not rely on chemical farming since it is detrimental to the environment. He strongly promotes diversified farming as well as value-adding.

"I strongly advise anyone who would like to venture into farming that the conventional way is not only harmful to the soil but also damaging to the environment on a large scale. The damage we do is irreversible and it would probably take many years for our soil to recuperate and go back to its original fertile state," he said with conviction.

At its core, Engallado's Farm is slowly becoming a farm tourist destination as it is frequented by students, teachers, co-farmers, and other civic groups, aside from being a demo field where visitors can learn the best farming practices.

"My farm is both a business school and a field laboratory. It is where I do trial and error and lots of product testing. I strive to come up with other ways to maximize product development aside from the ones I have developed before. I am constantly challenged in coming up with something better and out of the ordinary," Nick concluded.



All Good Things

BY MELINDA P. PETALCORIN

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small...the Lord God made them all.

So goes the all-too-familiar words of Cecil Frances Alexander's "All Things Bright and Beautiful" from *Hymns for Little Children*. We may have learned this in nursery school, but its wisdom may very well be the anchor behind RIDUKU and the other technologies of MS (Magsasaka Siyentista) Olegario "Jun" Paredes, Jr.

MS Jun fondly recalls accompanying his grandfather Juanito during trips to the farm. These trips, according to him, are responsible for instilling in him a love for farming.

At an early age, he was taught the value of hard work and entrepreneurship. If he wanted something, he had to work for it to earn the money. This "training" is responsible for molding MS Jun to the person he has become and has greatly helped in his farming journey.

A grandfather's legacy

MS Jun is a native of Ormoc City. His farm, Juanito Eco-Farm School for Practical Agriculture (JEFSPA), is situated in Brgy. Montebello, Kananga, Leyte. It is 3 kilometers away from the national highway and was formerly known as Fernandez

Farm, from the name of its owner Juanito Barte Fernandez. Its original land area was 12 hectares. When Juanito died, he bequeathed the farm to his children at equal shares of two hectares each. MS Jun's mother, Helen, one of Juanito's heirs, acquired the marshland.

Juanito enjoyed bringing his grandchildren to the farm, exposing them to the rigors and beauty of agriculture. However, it was MS Jun who would slowly build the farm to what it is now. The then-young MS Jun would visit the farm even without his grandfather. That meant crossing the three rivers that run through the area going to the farm.

In 1995, upon graduation from Visayas State College of Agriculture with a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, MS Jun took it upon himself to develop his mother's share. From marshland, the area became a pond that grew goldfish, koi, tilapia, and mudfish. Initially only 0.3 hectare of the marshland was used for rice. This was eventually increased to one hectare as the farm started venturing into livestock raising: goats, swine, ducks, horses, and native chicken.

RIDUKU

Duck integrated into rice farming is no longer news. It is being practiced by



many farmers as ducks provide added income. However, integrating golden apple snail or golden *kuhol* into the picture makes one do a double take. RIDUKU stands for Rice-Duck-Kuhol, a technology practiced at JEFSPA and promoted by MS Jun in the region.

The International Rice Research Institute identifies two species of snails (*kuhol*) as highly invasive and destructive: *Pomacea canaliculata* and *Pomacea maculata*. The snails were introduced from South America in the '80s as a food source. However, it ended up becoming a pest as it feasts on young and emerging rice plants. It can incur a 1m² damage overnight or about 50% yield loss.

Despite the notorious image of the golden *kuhol* in rice farming, MS Jun believes that there is more to the snails than just being a pest. He said that, “*Tanan nga gihimo sa ato Creator, dili makadaot. Kita lay naghimo og makadaot. So kanang giingon nga problema sa kuhol, gihimo na nato nga gamit ang kuhol* (All the things made by our Creator are not harmful. We are the ones who make them harmful. So for those who said that snail is a problem, we have now made snails into something useful).”

In the rice-duck-*kuhol* (RIDUKU) integration, a *kuhol* breeding site is established by constructing dikes around an area. This is then fenced off to keep the snails from going out. Taro is planted as food source for the *kuhol*. MS Jun determined through study that *kuhol* is not damaging once released to the field at the right time. IRRI confirms that *kuhol* feeds on rice plants 30–40 days old. Beyond that, the rice plant is thick enough to resist the *kuhol*. After the transplanting of rice, *kuhol* is released into the field. When ducks are released into the fields as well, they feed on the *kuhol*.

Aside from feeds, *kuhol* can also be processed to become a component in

making organic fertilizer. The ducks lay eggs, which MS Jun sells raw or makes into salted eggs.

MS Jun sees RIDUKU as a way to reduce environmental degradation due to pesticide, which is the usual control used for *kuhol*. What’s more, RIDUKU allows the integration of rice, duck, and *kuhol* in a sustainable system that increases income for the farmer.

The OA shift

In 2005, the farm initiated its conversion to organic farming. At this time, it was already practicing RIDUKU. By 2012, the farm ventured into vermicomposting and was only using 20% chemical fertilizers in its production. The Paredes siblings all helped in establishing the farm’s vermicomposting facility by providing the needed manual labor.

After Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, no chemical fertilizer was used in all of the farm’s production. The farm grew vegetables, rice, and livestock the organic way. With its vermicast production, the farm sold OF+, an organic fertilizer.

Giving back

A born leader and a staunch supporter of the organic agriculture movement, MS Jun is also active in his community. He helped in organizing several associations such as the IAL Farmers-Employees Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Leyte Organic Producers Organization, and Ormoc City Hybrid Rice Seed Producers Organization. Most notable in the field of OA in the region is his hard work for the establishment of the Organikong Magsasaka ng Rehiyon Otso (OMRO).

OMRO is an organization that aims to promote OA agriculture in Eastern Visayas. It teams up with ATI-RTC 8’s Knowledge, Information, and Technology Sharing, giving fruition to “Lakbay-Alay,” modifying the usual *lakbay-aral* or learning journey. With every Lakbay-Alay,

different farms are blessed with inputs from the farms of OMRO members.

MS Jun sees the joint OMRO and ATI-RTC 8 Lakbay-Alay as a way to share the gift of OA with other farmers, especially those who are just starting or are interested to convert into organic farming. He remembers how hard it was to start out not knowing anything about farming. He shares, “Just as the ATI has helped us, it is now our duty to help our brothers as well.”

Having been accredited as an ATI School for Practical Agriculture on March 22, 2017, JEFSPA continuously welcomes more farmers who want to learn to about the farm’s technologies.

Creating opportunities

There is no end to the business agri-ventures MS Jun can think of. As JEFSPA showcases rice-based crop-livestock farming system using organic farming technologies, most of its produce are also used in Lola Helen’s, a family-owned restaurant and catering service. The farm sells different varieties of colored rice, duck eggs, vermicast, African night crawler worms for vermicomposting, and vegetables. It really seems that MS Jun does not wait for opportunities to come. Rather, he makes them not just for himself but also for others.

MS Jun’s astute business sense aptly earned him the Ugmad Award for Outstanding Farmer-Entrepreneur in August 2013 from the Visayas State University in Baybay City, Leyte. The award cited his hard work, innovativeness, resourcefulness, high productivity, active community involvement, and concern for the environment as his edge over other farmers.

Aside from marketing the farm’s own harvests, MS Jun’s enterprising skills also paves the way for products from fellow OMRO members to be showcased in the farm whenever there are special events. He tells farmers during OMRO visits to inform

Tanan nga gihimo sa ato Creator, dili makadaot. Kita lay naghimo og makadaot (All the things made by our Creator are not harmful. We are the ones who make them harmful).”

OLEGARIO “JUN” PAREDES, JR.

him if they have problems marketing their products due to oversupply so that he can help. He encourages them to make use of the OMRO network.

It is often said that this generation has produced a new breed of Filipino farmers. They are farmers who are not afraid to try new things and are vocal enough to fight for causes they believe in. MS Jun is definitely one of them. He possesses the qualities of a farmer who never gives up despite the setbacks in life. He believes in the power of research. But what is most noticeable about MS Jun is his being thankful for the opportunities presented before him by his Creator.

With every opportunity he gets to share what he knows, he makes it a point to remind others of the bounty available for everyone to harvest, if they only work hard. With everything that he has in life, he acknowledges the fact that everything is simply borrowed and must be used well. Nothing in this world was created to bring harm.

With his grateful heart and hardworking hands, it is no wonder all things remain bright and beautiful for MS Jun.

Building a Brighter Future through Women Empowerment

BY ALICE B. REBUelta

“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.” —Kofi Annan

It was in 2009 when Rural Based Organizations (RBOs) were reorganized in Kalibo, Aklan. RBOs are informal organizations that play a vital role in sustaining the development of the rural sector, aimed at improving the lives of these communities. The Rural Improvement Club (RIC), as an RBO, aims to promote the interest and welfare of families. It promotes unity, peace, love, and camaraderie among women in the community and country. The RIC helps implement the rural development programs and projects of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and other government agencies.

Rural women are given the chance to lead and show their potentials towards the attainment of their goal, to be empowered, and to succeed.

“If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.”

—Margaret Thatcher

Women are often thought of as the





weaker sex; they have to submit to their counterparts. Some still harbor the mindset instilled in them as children, when boys were elected president and vice president positions and girls held secretary or treasurer positions.

The women of today, given the chance to lead, are effective and efficient partners in development. With their motherly nature, they painstakingly render services beyond time and compensation. Equipped with useful trainings and experiences, they can make impossible tasks attainable through perseverance and dedication.

“A woman is like a tea bag –you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water.” —Eleanor Roosevelt

Our empowered rural women, Amie, Margie, and Adee gain recognition not only in their respective barangays but also through the local government unit (LGU) of Kalibo.

They are active members of the Local Council for Women and Technical

Working Groups in various programs. They serve as resource persons in Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) trainings. The institute honed their potentials and capabilities. These women were able to balance their varied roles both in their homes and communities and for this they are recipients of awards and recognition for jobs well done.

Amie, Margie, and Adee are your empowered women destined to lead and inspire other rural women.

“There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish.” —Michelle Obama

Ms. Amelyn Fernandez, or Amie, was elected President of the Rural Improvement Club (RIC) in Brgy. Estancia, Kalibo. She was also elected as municipal and provincial RIC Federation President of Kalibo and Aklan, respectively.

With her good leadership, the club donates various projects to the *barangay*. The club actively participates



ADELFA BALTAZAR



MARGELINE DELA ROSA

in the cleanliness and beautification projects of the *barangay*. A yearly supplemental feeding programs in schools, *barangays*, and the provincial jail are being conducted. The RIC maintains a plant nursery, conducts tree planting activities, and gives gifts to indigents. They also assist in the programs conducted by the Department of Education like Brigada Eskwela and the Alternative Learning System (ALS). They conduct skills training on food processing for neighboring RIC clubs.

In 2013, RIC Estancia was recognized as a Regional Gawad Saka Winner by the DA's Regional Field Office 6 and received PhP50,000. They used the amount to start their swine fattening project, which served as an additional source of income to their families.

When asked about what she feels as an active woman leader, "*Nagkaroon po ako ng self-confidence at masaya po ako na naibabahagi ko ang mga nalalaman ko sa ibang women's groups. Malaki po ang pasasalamat ko sa pagkakataong naibigay sa akin* (I developed self-confidence and I am happy that I was able to impart what I know to other women's groups. I am grateful for the opportunity given to me)," Amie shares.

Ms. Margeline "Margie" dela Rosa was also elected president of the Pambansang Mannelon, Magbabaul, Mag-uuma, Magsasaka ng Pilipinas

(P4MP) in Brgy. Pook and became the municipal P4MP Federation president of Kalibo. P4MP is the national federation of farmers' associations in the Philippines. It is an organization with great productive potential and is an active partner of the ATI. It takes care of the empowerment and welfare of farmers' associations. Farmers and fishers play a vital role in the implementation of programs in rural areas.

When the Organic Farmers Association of Aklan (OFAA) was organized, Margie was elected vice president. She became active in the advocacy of organic farming. OFAA became one of the ATI's Learning Sites. They produced various Natural Farming System (NFS) concoctions, herbs, organic vegetables, and organic rice. They were also granted 25 heads of swine by the ATI, to be raised organically after attending the experience-based training on organic swine production.

Margie likewise serves as resource speaker in trainings on NFS preparations and uses. Being a graduate of civil engineering is not a hindrance for Margie to become a farmer leader. "*Lahat ng natutunan ko sa trainings ay ina-apply ko sa aming sakahan. Bilang isa ring Local Farmer Technician (LFT), naituturo ko ang mga ito sa aking kapwa magsasaka. Naging active*



AMELYN FERNANDEZ

farmer leader *ako dahil sa aking mga natutunan. Maraming salamat po sa mga ahensya ng pamahalaang gumabay at humubog sa aking kaalaman* (Everything that I learn in the trainings, I apply them to our farm. As a Local Farmer Technician (LFT), I also teach what I learn to my fellow farmers. I became an active farmer leader because of all the learnings I received. Thank you to all the government agencies that helped guide and mold my knowledge and experience),” Margie said.

Margie won third place for her presentation during the National Search for Outstanding Women Farmer in Davao City last March 2015, conducted by the ATI.

Ms. Adelfa Baltazar, or Adee, was elected president of Pook, Estancia, Caano, Andagao (PECA) Irrigators Association. She is also an LFT, Barangay Health Worker (BHW), General Parent Teacher Community Association (PTCA) and OFAA Treasurer. She is a hands-on farmer, a trainer-facilitator to various season-long trainings on rice and Bantay Peste Project.

As president of PECA, she actively participated in the Institutional Development Program of the National Irrigation Administration and helped facilitate the granting of the Aklan River Irrigation System Improvement Project last June 2016. Her exceptional public

“Nagkaroon po ako ng self-confidence at masaya po ako na naibabahagi ko ang mga nalalaman ko sa ibang women’s group.”

AMELYN P. FERNANDEZ

service as LFT was acknowledged by the DA when she was awarded as Outstanding LFT in 2016 during the LFT National Convention in Cagayan de Oro City.

Furthermore, the Pest Management Council of the Philippines, Inc. and Crop Protection Association of the Philippines, Inc. bestowed upon her the Outstanding Farmer Award of the Philippines during the 49th Anniversary and Scientific Conference of Pest Management Council of the Philippines in May 2017.

Amie, Margie, and Adee are truly exceptional, as they are wives, mothers, public servants, and, most of all, empowered women.

“I raise up my voice, not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard... we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.” —Malala Yousafzai

The Rise of a Rice Raiser

BY ISAGANI C. VALENZUELA, JR.

There are rice farmers and then there is Romeo Pidoc.

In 2008, Mr. Pidoc considered going full-time in rice farming. Five years later, he was named an Organic Farming Practitioner in the Bicol region.

The next year, he was named one of the outstanding farmers in the entire country.

A year later, he was named national winner as a Local Farmer Technician (LFT). And he is not yet done.

The humble man from humble beginnings

Mr. Pidoc, or Romy, was born to a poor family in Talisay, Camarines Norte. His family was so poor that they could hardly purchase rice for their daily sustenance. Despite the odds, he was able to attain a Bachelor's Degree in Agricultural Education. He attributed this achievement to his hardworking father.

Later on, Romy met Elisa Espiritu, a private school teacher. They got married and were soon blessed with three children.

To support his family, he worked in a copra trading firm for 15 years. But he realized that being an employee was not financially rewarding. His three children were growing and so were their needs.

Going full time in farming

So he resigned from work. His wife followed suit to support him.

He started by planting *palay* in a three-hectare land that he had acquired. His wife, on the other hand, engaged in rice and *palay* trading.

To further hone his knowledge and skills, he attended various trainings, workshops, and conferences. Some of these were sponsored by the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI).

ATI in the picture

Romy is a regular participant of the ATI's trainings, but the most memorable of his involvements is the season-long School-on-the-Air (SOA) program on Rice Production Technology. Because of his exemplary performance, he was named the class salutatorian.

He also took part in ATI's training in organic agriculture.

"Habang nagti-training ako, naging maluwag ang aking isip. Nag-accept ako ng bagong technology upang mapaganda ang aking palayan, at makatulong ako sa aking kapwa farmers (The training enlightened me and I readily accepted new technology as a means of improving my rice field. I also realized that I could help my fellow farmers)."

Among the technologies he learned were integrated farming system, modified rapid composting, organic beneficial indigenous microorganisms, vermiculture, hybrid rice technology, and integrated pest management.

The technologies he applied, coupled with his perseverance, brought him higher harvest and added income. This encouraged him to acquire machineries and additional farm lots; his farm expanded to ten hectares.

His achievements earned him

accolades from the Department of Agriculture and Jaycees International, which named him one of the winners of The Outstanding Farmers of the Philippines (TOFARM).

From farmer to local farmer technician and farmer-Scientist

What Romy learned, he shared with his fellow farmers. His efforts got the attention of the local government, which appointed him as a Local Farmer Technician and eventually, a Farmer-Scientist.

He allotted portions of his farms as techno-demo farms. A half-hectare serves as a showcase for inbred and hybrid rice. Another hectare is devoted to organic rice.

But it is organic rice farming that he is enthusiastic about. He has personally experienced the decrease in cost and the increase in harvest compared to traditional farming. For one, his three-year average expenses on organic rice milled production totals to around PhP34,000; but his net income is PhP247,000. That makes his return on investment (ROI) 717%!

Romy's harvest rose to 174 bags per hectare. Prior to this, his harvest was only around 150 bags.

As he wants to help his fellow farmers, he provides technical assistance to them and monitors their technological adoption.

“Sa mga training na ibinigay sa kinang ATI, hindi ako naging maramot sa kapwa ko. Katuwang ng aming [agriculture] technician, akotumutulong sa pagti-training sa mga farmer, pagpa-

facilitate ng meeting, pagpupunta sa mga barangay, nagbibigay ng inputs para makatulong sa mga magsasaka na gumanda ang kanilang buhay (I happily share all the things I learned from the ATI. With the guidance of our agriculture technician, I help train farmers, facilitate meetings, go to barangays and give inputs that can help farmers improve their lives).”

His expertise and generosity did not go unnoticed. The DA declared him the National Winner of Rice Achiever Awards.

The quest continues

According to him, the challenge is to increase the production to 200 bags. He is hopeful that with continued government intervention through training and funding, this can be achieved. He also exhorted his fellow farmers to continue planting rice.

“Sa aking kapwa magsasaka, ipagpatuloy po natin ang ating pagpapalay. Ipagpatuloy natin ang ating pagtuklas ng bagong teknolohiya. Ating labanan ang kakapusan ng bigas sa Pilipinas (My fellow farmers, let us continue farming. Let us continue discovering and learning new technology. Let's find a way to fight the country's rice shortage).”

Recently, his native province bestowed upon him the Natatanging Camnorteno Rice Farmer Award. The feathers on his cap are burgeoning. And he is not yet done.



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