

## Taking a step further for Sitio Bato schoolchildren

They say one will only understand another person's situation when he himself goes through it.

This was true for less than 50 people who trekked to the mountainous area of Sitio Bato in Barangay Aga, Nasugbu, Batangas early morning last Saturday.



The group was composed of teachers from Aga Elementary School (AES) in Nasugbu, Batangas led by Principal II Luisa Fenol and School Property Custodian Ernest Maullon; volunteer employees from Roxas Holdings, Inc. (RHI) led by Corporate Social Responsibility Head Angeline Bondad and Environment/QA Manager Roselle Recreo, Central Azucarera Don Pedro, Inc. (CADPI) led by Human Resources Head Carlota V. Inumerable, Kiwanis Club of CADPI led by its President and CADPI Cane Supply and Operations Department (CSOD) Head Felix Moreno, and the Security Agency of CADPI; and *kagawads* from Barangay Aga.



Our group cautiously treaded the narrow, dusty, slippery and treacherous roads that zigzag through several kilometers of uphill climbs and downhill treks, punctuated with the rustling waters of a river that marks the second half of the trail on the way up to the community of Sitio Bato.

As we traversed the trails that snake through the mountains, the everyday grueling reality in this far-flung and almost neglected area, especially for kids who persevere through rain and sun just to gain some education, was a humbling eye-opener.



It is against this backdrop that the boxes of school supplies, given by generous donors across the RHI Group and Kiwanis Club of CADPI, and prepared by RHI CSR Officer Jaynee Lyn Manicad [Seated on the right, in black shirt] and CADPI CSR Officer Anna Lorraine Relevo [Bent, on the left, in white and black shirt], serve as a wonderful expression of support to the dream of Sitio Bato residents for a better life for their children.

Immediately after the volunteers convened at the entry point to the mountains, a handful of young boys from Sitio Bato saddled on their horses and showed up – ready to carry the school supplies and packs of Jollibee spaghetti and drinks for the children.



As horses carrying the school supplies and packed foods passed through the narrow trails, volunteers had to give way or they risk falling into the deep ravines.

Volunteers could not help but express joy as everyone reflected on the humility of the people living in Sitio Bato despite the tough conditions they have. They treat others with such respect and welcome people with generosity even though their circumstances are extremely challenging, as they have to trek through endless kilometers of sharp terrains each day.

As such, everyone – even the man who had Jollibee’s heavy costume lugged on his shoulders – was filled with awe as we reflected on how tough the life of the young Bato kids is, just to have a chance of a better life in the future and yet, nary a murmur or complaint can be heard from them.

But what was most humbling was how the children, their parents and the elderly people express their overflowing gratitude for the time and the gifts extended to them by RHI, CADPI, Kiwanis Club of CADPI and AES.

Ms. Lorie Socorro, the mother of Mark Anthony – the boy who was instrumental in paving the opportunity for a visit to Sitio Bato through the endorsement of Ms. Fenol and Mr. Maullon, was overwhelmed by the visit.

*“Sa mga guro po ng AES at sa RHI, CADPI, Kiwanis, malugod po kaming nagpapasalamat sa mga nagsipag-alay ng panahon at nagsumikap dumating para dalawin kami kahit mahirap ang daan [To the teachers of AES and those from RHI, CADPI, Kiwanis, thank you for visiting us despite the tough roads],”* said Ms. Socorro.

Twelve-year-old Mark Anthony thanked everyone for the help given to the children and for the visit. *“Salamat po nang marami sa pagdalaw ninyo at sa mga dinala ninyo, [Thank you everyone for visiting us and for the presents you brought],”* he said.



The festive mood continued till afternoon as children played games with the teachers of AES and Jollibee came out to surprise the children – most of whom were speechless as they are not familiar with the character.

When the children finally felt at ease with the mascot, they began to dance naturally and jostle for the well-loved spaghetti and drinks. Their energy could not be contained especially when Mr Maullon started calling their names for the school supplies and other items that Ms. Bondad and Mr Moreno handed out.

The gratitude that the residents of Sitio Bato felt for the gifts and time given to them overflows from the time they got up early to prepare for the day, to how the young boys earnestly rode their horses to pick up the items, and to the distinct warmth that they exuded to the visitors.

Even the people we encountered along the way to and from the sitio all flashed sweet smiles, and greeted us with such warmth as though we have been acquaintances for some time.

Little did we know too that the elderly, led by 64-year-old *Aling Zenaida* and 67-year-old *Aling Ayang*, who was a former barangay councilor, together with their children and grandchildren, were already busy as early as 3am to prepare a feast for their visitors. They boiled sweet potatoes and bananas, and harvested coconuts to serve as refreshments as we reached the top of the mountain. As if that was not enough, they also brought out a roasted wild boar or "*litsong baboy ramo*" made tender by tamarind twigs that the old men added as they began roasting at dawn while the women cooked banana blossom and *tinolang manok*.



In picture are *Aling Zenaida* (left) and CADPI's *Millette Apolonia*, wife of Barangay Aga Captain *Norberto Apolonia*.

"Nagsimula po kaming maghanda ng mga alas tres ng umaga. Kanya kanya po kami ng dala ng bigas at nag-ani ng mga maihahanda dahil natutuwa kami tuwing may bumibisita sa amin [We started preparing at 3am. Each of us brought rice and harvested whatever we could bring to the table because we are glad each time people visit us]," said *Aling Zenaida*, who shared that the

situation was tougher decades ago when she was sending her eight children to the elementary school.

*Aling Ayang*, also known as Anatalia Macalalad, recalled how she had to wrap the daily packed lunch of her seven children in banana leaves. *"Mahirap po ang buhay noon. Buti po at naipaglaban namin na magkaroon ng kuryente dito ng mga 20 years na* [Life here in the past was hard. We are thankful that we were able to fight for our right to be given electricity in this area 20 years ago,]” she said.

Their hard work had started to pay off as the elders who then patiently sent their young children to study now experience new things that their schooled children share with them. The years marked with darkness and overflowing river water are now a thing of the past. *Aling Ayang's* eldest daughter, 43-year-old Beth Martinez, is now a teacher at Kaylaway High School and is married to Mr. Noel Martinez, who works as a tricycle driver in Balayan, Batangas.



From left to right: *Aling Ayang*; her eldest daughter, Teacher Beth; her grandson; and her son-in-law, Noel.

Now with five children, Ms. Martinez said they are grateful that RHI, CADPI and Kiwanis came to bring school supplies. *“Noon pong panahon namin, binabalot namin ng plastic ang mga bag namin para di mabasa. May mga panahon pa pong nakahawak kami sa tali habang nakasakay sa likod ng nakakatanda para makatawid sa ilog papuntang eskuwelahan [We used to cover our bags with plastic to avoid getting the supplies wet. There were even times we held on to ropes while piggybacking on our elders just to cross the river and reach the school],”* she said.

Aling Ayang said they are grateful to Barangay Captain Norberto Apolonia, the husband of CADPI employee Milette Apolonia, who was with the volunteers last Saturday, for replacing the bamboo steps in the mountains with paved steps in 2013.



Meanwhile, speaking to the community and volunteers, Ms Bondad [First row, second from left, with orange cap] said the everyday challenges that the children take in order to reach school is an inspiration.

*“Nakaka-inspire kung paano masipag na pumapasok ang mga bata dito kahit na mahirap ang daan. Mataba po ang puso namin dahil nabiyayaan ninyo kami nang marami. Panghawakan ninyo ang mga pangarap ninyo at mga magulang, gabayan ninyo sila [It is inspiring to see how these children endeavor to go to school everyday despite the tough roads. You enlarged our hearts because of how you have blessed us with your life. Hold on to your dreams, kids, and parents, guide them],” Ms Bondad said.*

Mr Moreno [Second row, fourth from left, in blue shirt] also rallied the kids to keep their aspirations. He urged the Sitio Bato kids to focus on studying, noting that education will bring them a better life, and underscored that difficulties have a way of preparing people for life.

*“Noong nasa BSU [Batangas State University] ako, naglalakad din ako mula sa Barangay Wawa hanggang eskuwelahan. Ang mahirap doon, pag-umulan, basa ako pero pasok pa rin ako ng pasok kasi ang ganoong karanasan ang nagpatibay sa akin [When I was at BSU, I used to walk as well from Barangay Wawa to the university. It was tough during the rainy period as I used to get wet but that did not stop me from coming to school and that experience had toughened me and made me prepared for life],” Mr Moreno said. He also told the children to thank their parents for the sacrifices they selflessly put in to send them to school.*



For her part, Ms Inumerable [*Fifth from left*] commended the parents at Sitio Bato for raising the children well because they had inculcated in them the value of education despite the tough terrains children had to pass through each day.

*“First time ko pong maglakad ng ganito kalayo. Masakit pero masarap ang pakiramdam* [This is my first time to walk this far. My legs ache but the feeling is amazing],” Ms Inumerable shared, reiterating just how proud she is of the schoolchildren and their parents.

Ms Fenol [*First from left*], the head of the school where Mark Anthony and other Sitio Bato kids go to study, expressed joy at how a simple conversation on the plight of children in the farthest sitio of Aga culminated into an overwhelming gift-giving activity that warmed the hearts of children as young as one year old to early teens.

*“Thank you. Iniisip ko po kanina kung gaano kahirap ang dinadaan ng mga bata para makapag-aral. Ito nga po ay isang* [I was thinking earlier how difficult the journey is for the children just to go to school. This is indeed a] long but satisfying journey. This is a first time experience here,” Ms Fenol said, advising children not to waver in their studies and to work harder to make their dreams a reality.



The campaign to reach out to schoolchildren of Sitio Bato was introduced by Mr Maullon [*First from left*], who shared how Mark and other kids in the area, struggle for a better life. Mr Maullon and his wife, Ms Dulce [*Second row,*

*second from right*], a Grade 1 Teacher at AES, have been helping kids in Sitio Bato and in another community for about six years already through their Foundation.

During the games, Mr Maullon, urged children to continue their march to a better future. He said: "*Susuka pero di susuko* [Will vomit but will not surrender]."

Indeed, the gifts of time and resources that sponsors and donors have shared for the children at Sitio Bato created a powerful impact in the lives of the resilient residents in that far-flung area. More than anything, the act of taking a step to further support the dream of Sitio Bato schoolchildren has sparked a new and lasting hope for the community's young generation.

As Mark once shared when asked how he looks at his daily journey to school: "*Di na po ako nalalayuan. Sa tinagal tagal nang aking paglalakad, ang malayo ay palapit nang palapit.* [I no longer find the journey long. Through the long time that I have been walking, I believe that what used to be far is easily becoming nearer]." – RJFC/SRCC