

The long but meaningful trek to a better life through education

While most of us may still be dreaming or hugging our pillows in the comfort of our beds at 4am, the scenario is completely different for 70 young children burning with ambition to make their livsugar newes better.

Among this group of school kids living with a population of 500 at the heart of Bato, a sitio in Barangay Aga, Nasugbu, Batangas – an area which is located in a remarkable distance from Central Azucarera Don Pedro, Inc. (CADPI), is 12-year-old Mark Anthony Socono.

Mark dreams of becoming a Civil Engineer one day in hopes of building a house for his family in the future. *“Nais ko pong maging Civil Engineer para makapagpatayo ako ng bahay para sa pamilya ko,”* Mark shared.

During a visit by RHI’s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Stakeholder Relations and Corporate Communications (SRCC) at Aga Elementary School (AES) on March 27 after RHI donated computers to this school and at Cogonan Elementary School – both located in Nasugbu, Mark shared the joy of completing his elementary education after six long years of daily four-kilometer trek from his home to school.

“Gumigising po kami ng alas kuwatro ng umaga at umaalis ng alas kuwatro y medya pagkakain ng kanin. May mga isang daang bata po kami. Di po kami sabay-sabay umaalis. Dumadaan po kami sa matarik at madulas na daan na palaging maalikabok. Tumatawid din po kami ng ilog. Nakakarating po kami sa paaralan ng mga 6:09am,” Mark told the RHI group, AES Principal II Luisa P. Fenol and AES Property Custodian Ernesto Maullon.

He added: *“Noong unang mga taon po, nakakatamad po na gumising nang maaga lalo na at masakit ang likod namin sa kakalakad at sa lagnat pero palagi pong sinasabi ng Nanay ko na pumasok pa rin kami kahit na umuulan. Nakatulong din po iyong mga taga-DAR [Department of Agrarian Reform] na pumupunta noon tuwing Huwebes para turuan kami kasi noong kinder ako, parang ayaw ko nang pumasok. Pero ngayon po, pinagmamalaki ng mga magulang namin na nakagraduate na ang mga ate ko at ako din ay makakagraduate sa kabila ng mga paghihirap.”*

The third in a brood of four, Mark is an epitome of a boy ready for life, unrestrained by difficulties and all set to achieve a better life through education – driven to succeed out of his love for his parents: his mother wakes up at 3am everyday to prepare his packed meals of vegetables and hotdogs, and his father works at a construction firm in town and stays with them only on Sundays just to provide for them.

Mark has everything planned out from the time he wakes up to the time he hits the bed.

“Naglilinis po ako sa eskuwelahan pagdating ko ng 6:09am. Ang flag ceremony po namin ay 8am. Umaalis po kami ng eskuwelahan ng mga 3:30pm dahil naglilinis muna kami pagkatapos ng klase naming ng mga alas-tres,” Mark narrated.

Proud of his pupil, Mr Maullon said: “Mark is one of the most industrious kids in school.” Mr. Maullon shared that together with Mrs. Fenol and other AES teachers, they continually encourage school kids to work hard in achieving their dreams.

During a light chat before Mark joined the group, Mr. Maullon said he was deeply moved by the Facebook post of the boy, sharing how he wants so much to become a civil engineer and that if he fails, he may just work as a laborer.

“Sabi po niya na gusto niyang maging Civil Engineer at ‘kung di pinalad, eh laborer’. Kaya po sinasabi namin sa kanila na tiwala lang,” Mr. Maullon said.

As if his four-kilometer early morning trek is not enough, Mark again tackles another four-kilometer and hours-long journey back home without a complaint, empowered even more by the lessons he learned from his eight subjects each day.

Immediately after reaching home at 5pm, he feeds his chickens, doves and goats, and waters the plants in their backyard.

“Tapos na po ako sa mga gawaing bahay ng mga alas sais ng gabi. Naghahapunan po kami ng mga alas siyete y medya at natutulog po ako ng mga alas otso,” the young boy shared as RHI CSR Head Angeline Bondad asked him questions.

With an exacting sense of discipline, the boy skips television and instead chooses to hit the bed early in order to be ready for another long walk to and from his home to school the next day.

Together with his friend who also finished Grade 6 last April, Mark reminisced how the six years passed with their daily struggles.

“Ang hirap po talaga kapag gumuguho ang mga dinadaanan namin. Di po kami pinapayagan na dumaan kasi nga po nakatsinelas lang kami. Di kami nag-uniporme sa daan dahil sa alikabok. Yung iba nagta-tricycle pero lahat kami nag-iiwan ng mga gamit sa mga bahay sa isang lugar malapit sa ilog,” Mark recalled, noting that they leave their wet clothes from the river at the houses that opened their doors for the kids in an area near the river.

Although he has a horse named Diego, Mark hardly rides on his animal to get to school. *“Sinasakyan lang po namin si Diego para mag-ani ng mga patani at mais, at tumawid sa bukal,”* he said, describing the serene and simple life they have at the sitio. *“Maganda pong manirahan dito dahil makakakain ka kung may tanim ka.”*

Firmly rooted in the values his parents inculcated in him, empowered by the education that his teachers impart, disciplined and industrious as he treks his life journey, Mark serves as an inspiration to children around him.

“Yun pong ibang mga bata sa amin ay gusto na ring mag-aral,” he said, noting that some of his friends used to complain that the daily walk is tiring. *“Pag tinatanong po kami ng mga guro namin kung bakit pa rin kami pumapasok, sabi po namin ay masaya na mag-aral.”*

Comparing his daily long walk to life, Mark said: *“Di na po ako nalalayuan. Sa tinagal tagal ng aking paglalakad, ang malayo ay palapit na nang palapit.”*

With the multiplier effect of Mark’s optimism, we can be assured of a better society with responsible citizens like him.

As Mark and the other children in his sitio begin another phase in their educational journey to a better future, let us extend our help to ensure no one is left behind. Let us all make a difference. In collaboration with CSR, we can

provide the schoolchildren with uniforms, school bags, footwear, notebooks and pens.

Attached is a poster prepared by CSR, for your reference. Alternatively, you may get in touch with Ms Angeline Bondad (Head), and Ms Jaynee Lyn Manicad (CSR Officer) and with the respective CSR officers at the plants.

Donations will be pooled between today and June 6 across the Group in time for the visit to Sitio Bato on June 8.

Donors/sponsors from Luzon Operations, can send in their assistance in kind through Ms Jaynee Lyn Manicad at RHI or Ms Lorraine Relevo at CADPI while donors/sponsors from Negros can send in cash gifts through the respective plant CSR Officers.