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Punlaan School: transforming lives of underprivileged Filipinas

Punlaan graduates have pursued their careers as far as London, Canada, and Dubai. Punlaan is a project of some women of the Prelature of Opus Dei in the Philippines. These are excerpts from a feature story of Rhia Diomampo Grana published in ANCX (Philippines) in December 2019.

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Life was not easy for Amy Mesias.

“Alam ko yung hirap ng nauulanan at naarawan sa dagat. Kahit po hinihika si Papa, hindi po siya tumitigil sa pangangisda para lang po may makain kami,” *(I know the hardship of being exposed to rain and sun out at sea. Even if Dad has asthma, he continues fishing in the open sea so we have food to eat.)* said the 21 year old from Sorsogon City, Bicol (Philippines), tearful as she recalled her family’s struggle.

Amy had to discontinue her education because her father, a fisherman, and her mother, a laundrywoman, didn’t have the means to support her studies.

“Pangarap ko po talagang maiahon ang pamilya ko sa kahirapan. Sabi ko kay Papa, balang-araw gagawin ko itong mansyon para sa iyo,” *(It was my ardent wish to lift my family out of poverty. I told Daddy that "someday I will transform this house into a*

mansion for you.") she said about their home's hapless condition.

The answer to Amy's prayer came in the form of an ABS-CBN Television Station ID that aired in November 2016 featuring an institution called Punlaan School. When her aunt in Manila, Emerlita Enfiesta, saw the video, she immediately thought of her niece. "Naisip ko na paaralin si Amy," (*I thought that Amy should study there*) said Emerlita.

Amy applied for a slot in Punlaan. She got a scholarship. Last October, Amy was one of the first 35 ABS-CBN scholars who graduated in Punlaan. Today, Amy works at Café Mary Grace.

Amy learned about work in the service industry, about food, beverage and housekeeping. "Tinuruan kami ng Punlaan na maging responsable para maging leaders in the future. Katulad ng

pagpapagawa namin ni Papa ng aming bahay, unti-unti ko po ulit binubuo ang pangarap ko,” (*Punlaan taught us to be responsible in order to be leaders in the future. My father and I are now rebuilding our house, and little by little I am fulfilling my dream.*) the young Bicolana happily shared.

Planting seeds of hope

Punlaan School was started in the early 1970s by a group of women who heeded the teachings of Opus Dei founder Saint Josemaria Escriva—that love for family, fellowmen and God **“is deeds, not sweet words.”** With the goal of uplifting the lives of poor young women, they held informal classes in English, cooking, sewing, flower arrangement, while honing their values. They offered these classes to household helpers, who wanted to learn new skills and improve themselves.

Their course offering slowly evolved to become a two-year technical-vocational course as the Home Arts Program was launched in 1984. In 1993, the group adopted a German-inspired model, the Dual Training Scholarship Program in Food & Beverage, in collaboration with the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

“The Dual Training Scholarship Program is a delivery mode of training wherein you integrate the theory in school lessons with on-the-job training in prestigious hotels and restaurants,” explains Anne Marie Jacinto, the school’s director. “Here, we put premium on hard work, discipline and punctuality. Anybody can learn the skills but good work attitudes have to be deeply ingrained. That is why our tagline is *Transforming Lives*.”

Reaping fruits

Punlaan School has transformed many lives over the years. Many graduates have landed good positions in companies here and abroad.

Mary Ann S. Torres took a Technical Course in Home Arts for a couple of years, and did her OJT (on-the-job training) at Annabel's restaurant. She eventually took up Law at the University of the Philippines and now works as an assistant provincial prosecutor at the Department of Justice.

Bernadette Pillen, daughter of a tricycle driver and a housewife, had her OJT at The Peninsula Manila, where she was absorbed after graduation. Pillen is now a chef in a hotel in London, grateful for the lessons on self-reliance, self-esteem, work ethics, and faith in God, which she said continue to be most valuable to her.

Jojean Ebba's formation in values served her well in work experiences at the Sofitel Philippine Plaza, the Mabini Mansion Hotel, and the Kanuhura Maldives. She worked in the HR department of known resort companies in Maldives for nearly seven years. Ebba now works at the Connaught Hotel in London as a Human Resource Manager.

Building a bigger, better Punlaan

“Our industry partners are requesting us to provide more students, but we don’t have any more space to accommodate scholars. We don’t have any land. So we demolished the old building and are now building one which is seven stories high,” Jacinto explains.

The new building will house a baking kitchen for 45 students, a cooking kitchen for 45 students, 10 to 11 classrooms that can accommodate up

to 500 students. They are targeting to open by December 2020.

For more information and to help support Punlaan School, visit their website <https://punlaanschool.edu.ph/>

Video by ABS-CBN Entertainment

Photographs by Daniel Soriano

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ANCX Philippines <https://news.abs-cbn.com/ancx/culture/spotlight/12/07/19/this-hospitality-and-culinary-school-is-transforming-the-lives-of-underprivileged-filipinas>

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