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Small Beginnings: A community library for kids in Cebu (Philippines)

A technical vocational teacher's mini library at her home continues to gather children and improve their reading, language and social skills.

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Countries are emerging from the socio-economic crisis caused by the pandemic with deep development

scars, and the Philippines is no exception.

In fact, the latest annual Human Development Index (HDI) published by the UN Development Program in September 2022 saw the Philippines drop to 116th in a list of 191 countries, below its Southeast Asian peers. The index tracks three areas of human development, namely: 1) a long, healthy life; 2) access to knowledge; and 3) a decent standard of living.

Hence, the need to have all hands on deck in addressing development weaknesses. In the knowledge sphere, for instance, the smallest effort at the grassroots can go a long way.

Take Evelyn Oncines — a senior high school teacher specializing in technical-vocational skills training at a well-known national high school in Cebu City. In August 2020, she

gathered the kids in her hometown, *Purok Lomboy* in Liloan, Cebu for catechism class, after seeing how restless they had been since the March 2020 pandemic lockdown. Those catechism classes eventually became reading and storytelling sessions rolled into one. To this day, energetic kids -- boys and girls, aged 4 to 13 years old -- gather at Evelyn's house to read and listen to her catechism stories.

A fellow teacher gladly accepted Evelyn's invitation to assist in the weekend classes. From 10 kids, the number of attendees grew to 20-25. The sessions served to reinforce the knowledge and reading skills that the kids were receiving through the modular classes in their respective elementary schools.

Something wonderful happened for Evelyn in May 2021. The library of the high school where she works had

to upgrade its collection of books and printed materials. They were looking for a way to dispose of some reading materials. Evelyn took the opportunity to get as many books as she could, thinking of the kids in her hometown.

With a teacher's heart, eager to develop children intellectually, she began a mini-library in her place. With encyclopaedias, textbooks and cultural magazines, Evelyn's "Project Library" slowly took shape. She managed to find a medium-sized bookshelf to properly store and display the books collected from her school.

The mini-library now occupies Evelyn's front yard. The books are in a corner room furnished with mono bloc tables and some chairs. It is open to kids on weekends (whole day) and on weekdays (5:00 to 7:00 pm). There is a simple system and a

list of reminders for borrowing the reading materials. Thus, the kids develop sense of responsibility and concern for the good of others by taking care of the materials that they use.

It is Evelyn's joy, as a career educator, to see that borrowing and reading books from the mini-library has become routine for the kids in her community.

Purok Lomboy's barangay captain, Gloria Arcelo Sanchez, shares her joy and is grateful to Evelyn. In *Cebuano*, she told her: "*Very important gyud these days ang library kay nawala na ang culture of reading. Mao ni reason sa ubos nga literacy rating nato karon.*" (Having a library is very important these days because we have lost the culture of reading. This is the main reason why our literacy has eroded.)

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One of the kids who frequents the library said she prefers to read books there instead of e-books because the latter give her eye strain. Most of the kids say that they are motivated to read because Evelyn's selected books are easy to understand, and they love the feel of flipping the pages. Reading books helps them form ideas and enhances their imagination.

Since the informal reading and catechism classes began, Evelyn has observed changes also in the behavior of the kids. Those who used to be quarrelsome have become respectful of the others. They have stopped using vulgar language. She noticed that they are now more caring.

A Grade 8 student, Ritch Jalle, said that by reading the books at the mini-library her vocabulary has improved. She found the library useful for her research work and

assignments. She prefers doing this rather than using the Internet, which for people like her is an added expense.

The same venue has become a place where the kids learn to socialize — a crucial skill which time spent online and staying home during the pandemic, has stymied. Kids enjoy the opportunity to play indoor games and interact with each other on Saturdays.

When Typhoon Odette hit Cebu in December 2021, the mini-library was spared from serious damage. The regulars at the library came to put things back in order. In addition, they helped pack relief goods like rice, bottled water and clothes for typhoon victims. They demonstrated maturity, community spirit and social consciousness.

Hence, the “Project Library” is making St. Josemaria Escriva’s words

in point no. 1 of The Way come alive in Evelyn's young readers: *"Don't let your life be barren. Be useful. Make yourself felt. Shine forth with the torch of your faith and your love."*

The story of this grassroots effort shows what good will, initiative and commitment can achieve very concretely for those who have less in life.

Evelyn Oncines is a Master Teacher Level 1 teaching Food and Beverage Services and Bread and Pastry Production at Abellana National High School in Cebu City. She holds TESDA certificates for Cookery, Commercial Cooking and Trainers Methodology.

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