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The "Covid Backliners"

A husband and wife team coordinate an emergency supply chain of food and medical supplies to support their local hospitals and essential services. It all began with a simple question: what can we do to help?

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A building is only as good as its foundation. And a happy family can be a foundation for a lot of things, especially in a crisis. The Balbieran

family has become the foundation for an emergency initiative currently underway in the Philippines. They call the project "Covid Backliners" because it provides basic support to those on the frontlines of the battle against the coronavirus.

When the pandemic started to spread in the Philippines, Richelle and her husband Ronnie decided they could not simply wait for things to unfold. From the family home where they recently settled with their young children, they pondered what they could do to help.

It took a simple phone call to galvanize them into action. With his work as an economic consultant to many government agencies, Ronnie decided to call the Department of Transportation to ask if they could do anything to help. The reply? A food supply was needed for transport volunteers who would ferry the

"frontliners" to hospitals and other establishments that provide essential services. Since the Enhanced Community Quarantine was declared for Luzon in mid-March, no public transport has been available and many health workers and those in groceries and other stores have had to walk or wait for a lift to get to their posts.

This request led to more phone calls: this time to ask family and friends for help to source money and services to provide the food.

In no time at all, they had collected money, arranged a caterer and organized a delivery network. Soon afterward, they were feeding up to 245 transport volunteers at least one meal a day. "For that alone," says Richelle, "we needed Php 20k (about 400 USD) daily. But amazingly enough, the money just kept coming

and the food kept on being delivered. People were just too eager to help."

As proof to the power of social media, two hospitals – Philippine Heart Center and Pasay General Hospital – got wind of the project and contacted Richelle and Ronnie, this time asking for help not only with food but with acquiring medical supplies like masks, face shields and alcohol.

The quick response of the couple was to post another call for donations and to tap into their contacts. No sooner had they done so than the financial support started pouring in.

"From food, which continued to be produced thanks to the help of friends, I started to venture into looking for sources of medical supplies. It was not easy due to high demand. I had to dig deep until I discovered suppliers who offered a fair price," said Richelle. It did not

take long before deliveries were on their way to both hospitals.

But just then, another hospital – the Lung Center of the Philippines – was designated as a referral hospital for COVID patients, and they too needed supplies.

"The Lung Center is close to my heart because I worked on a project for them and so I could not say no to their request," Richelle added.

Another cycle of phone calls and Facebook posts began for more donations and more services.

"The rest is history," Richelle says.

"Now our services reach up to provinces like Cavite, Bataan, Bulacan, and even Palawan! I am not sure how we do it but God simply provides!"

A Family Affair

5 kids: one baby, one toddler and one special-needs child. No domestic help. Richelle and Ronnie run a tight ship.

"These times are in fact good teaching moments," says Richelle. "I tell my older kids: look, if you help mom, we will be able to help a lot of people. So they volunteer to wash the dishes, to water the plants, to take care of the younger ones. Then I show them the pictures of our success stories and they feel good that, in their own way, they are helping."

"As for my husband, what can I say? From his office at home, he plays a crucial role as consultant for the Inter Agency Task Force put up for this crisis. What's happening is that the produce from the north is spoiling while many people are suffering from lack of supply here in the Capital. All because of

technicalities in deliveries and faulty coordination of Local Government Units. So he decided to broker meetings with representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Cooperatives in the North, people in the supply chain to think of ways to transport the much needed goods. The result has been an App by which people can order vegetables online and they have everything within three days."

"My parents and siblings are on board too. Both my brothers help with promotion, online posts, logistics and dealing with suppliers and beneficiaries. My parents have been generous in providing both supplies and funds. And of course, a very close friend of mine - she is practically part of the family - has been my reliable co-worker throughout everything. None of it would have been possible without this team."

Healing as One

"My personal take on the matter is that the world needs healing and we have been, so to speak, forced into it by the circumstances," says Richelle. "Part of that is rediscovering the value of family life like we have. Praying together, helping each other to help others."

"People are generous. That's my conclusion. All it takes is for someone to start and you will be amazed at the results. Right now, two of my friends have started their own initiatives."

"For me, this is a good way to do apostolate: bringing people close to God because I talk to them about helping, I update them and they feel fulfilled as well."

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