



THE BEGINNING: A CHILDREN'S SCHOOL, A COMMUNITY'S HUB



Students of the learning centre

IN January 1972, Canada did not yet have an embassy in the Philippines. Rather, it had a consulate, then headed by Consul General Frank B. Clark who, in a letter to the vice-president of operations of the Canadian International Development Agency, raised the possibility of being provided with a Small Projects Fund similar to that available to embassies in other developing countries. He said:

The Canadian Consulate General in the Philippines, while not yet an embassy, has total responsibility for Canadian interests here.... Local groups are constantly sending requests for assistance which we are unable to provide. I believe such a fund, judiciously used, would be of considerable benefit to both Canadian and Philippine interests.

By August of the same year, the consulate became an embassy, and Ambassador Clark had this to report:

Our first disbursement was made in July to the Salvation Army in Manila. With limited manpower and resources, this organization assists the poor of all faiths in the worst sections of Manila. In Tondo, a

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district that was almost destroyed by fire last year, they maintain a centre [for] kindergarten classes, courses in nutrition for mothers, a library and recreation area for children from the streets. In crowded quarters, about sixty children attend kindergarten and thirty to forty mothers with their babies appear daily for practical guidance in nutrition.

For the sum of P1,236.70 (Cdn\$181), we have financed the purchase of a gas flame stove with oven (to replace a two-burner table model) and some bookshelves, tables and chairs for the library room....

So started the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives' enduring relationship with development organizations in the Philippines.

The Learning Center of the Salvation Army that Ambassador Clark wrote about still stands, thirty years since, albeit in a decrepit state. A large red gate opens to a courtyard and an L-shaped, two-story wooden building. To the right are the administrative offices, and in the foyer hangs a bronze marker indicating that the building was improved and expanded in 1975 courtesy of the Canadian Embassy.

Nearby is a nursery class. The teacher prods the children to greet the visitor. “Good morning!” they say in sing-song. The little girls and boys then fall into a hush, prompting the teacher to tease them fondly, “Why are you all very quiet? So this is what should happen all the time – we should always have visitors!”

Across the courtyard are two preparatory classes. Two of the boys are rowdy. On the second floor are two kindergarten classes. It is recess time and the children are quietly having their snacks at their desks.

The children are chirpy. The usual colourful alphabet and number posters, and cutouts of animals, fruits and vegetables hang on the classroom walls. But the chairs and tables of students and teachers both, all made from wood, are faded and misshaped. The backrests of some of the seats are totally awry.

No More Dole-outs

The Learning Center is headed by Major Inocencio Datuin, who occupied the post only beginning 2002. Major Datuin also worries about the physical infrastructure of the Learning Center. The need to improve this is an onus that should soon be resolved because at stake is the centre's pending application for accreditation from the Department of Education as a full-fledged primary school offering Grade 1 to Grade 6 education. (The plan is to increase the grade levels

Captain Susan Tandayag and Major Inocencio Datuin show the marker of the Canadian Embassy's assistance in building the learning centre.



offered incrementally, starting with Grade 1 on the first year the school obtains its accreditation.)

Among the department's accreditation requirements is a safe, secure schoolhouse. The rest of the requirements – quality of instruction, credentials of teachers, pedagogy and materials, will be easy, the Learning Center having turned out generation upon generation of pre-school and kindergarten children for the last three decades! Some of them are now teachers, nurses, business leaders, social workers and community leaders.

The Learning Center holds five classes in the morning, and another five in the afternoon.

Sourcing the funds to renovate the building will be difficult. The tuition that the school collects, P300 per student per month, is just enough to cover daily expenses and wages. “From being a free learning centre, we have been strict about the tuition, which is very, very modest compared with private kindergartens that charge P10,000 to P15,000 a year,” says Major Datuin.



Future teachers, nurses, social workers and community leaders

Changes All Around

In the beginning, the parents minded the change. But the school was eventually successful in convincing the parents. “A feeding program with assistance from a Germany-based group used to fund the learning centre. Everything was free, even the snacks we would sometimes give the children. Or pyjama sets from a donor. They got used to dole-outs,” Major Datuin says.

Today, the parents are vigorous in their fund-raising activities to help raise the funds to renovate the building and convert this into a real primary school. They

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launched a popularity contest among the students, and push family, neighbours and friends to buy tickets to the contest. Food bazaars have also been held.

“We have signified our need for assistance with the Salvation Army headquarters in London. But even donations to the HQ have declined substantially,” says Major Datuin.

“In most of the territories where we have a presence, the financial contributions are not as they used to be,” adds Captain Susan Tandayağ of the Philippine Salvation Army head office in Manila.

“Lifelong Learning”

The entire community has been mobilized to help win for the school a higher classification precisely because the entire community has, at one time or another, in one way or another, benefited from the school. In addition to the classes, the Learning Center is also the site of skills training for adults in cosmetology, sewing and handicrafts for women; a feeding centre for streetchildren and the elderly, which paved the way for the formation of a “Golden Agers Band” that in turn inspired children to join the church choir; and education sessions on HIV/AIDS. For ten years, a portion of the building served as a clinic and resource library for health.

In addition, the Salvation Army operates a microcredit program for women. At the moment, 15 have used the loans for their small-scale enterprises such as sari-sari stores, fruit and vegetable stands, sidewalk eateries and various buy-and-sell activities.

Over three decades, in Tondo, the Learning Center has played a vital role in the community, teaching children, bringing together the adults, and reinvigorating the senior. From the basic skills of reading and writing, to “livelihood skills,” the Learning Center is, as it was 30 years ago, an intersection of education and exchange to improve the welfare of a community.