



STOP

## TENDER TALES OF RAVAGE AND SURVIVAL: THE JOURNEY OF ILOILO'S STREET CHILDREN



Yolanda Sanogal  
Santocera, executive  
director of Stop Trafficking  
of Pilipinos

Romano started to earn his own money when he was eight. “Our home was a short distance from the dumpsite. Every night we stayed up until midnight to wait for the garbage trucks and do our daily picking. Sometimes we even took trash food in order to feed our hungry stomachs. In worse times, we had to scrounge through the mountain of garbage the whole day under the terrible heat of the sun. Many times I just wanted to give up. But what could I do? We were poor.”

Romano is now in his 20s, an apprentice sales representative trying to meet his first quota to qualify as a regular employee of a private company. He is one among several street children that the Stop Trafficking of Pilipinos Foundation (STOP) in Iloilo City has met and helped through the years.

The problem of street children – mostly working street children – in the Philippines will easily jar the expectations of a visitor looking forward to an idyllic vacation in one of its famous white-sand beaches. In 2001, there were at least 1.5 million street children in

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the Philippines, according to the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

The children are mostly beggars, pickpockets, drug traffickers and prostitutes. (Of the 1.5 million street children, 600,000 are prostituted, says the international network ECPAT, making the Philippines the fourth country with the most number of prostituted children.)

In Iloilo City in the island of Panay, the fifth largest city of the country, the street children – more than 10,000 of them – are found in the markets, shopping centres, jeepney and bus terminals, parks and plazas. Not all of the children are originally from Iloilo; some are children of parents lured from the provinces of Aklan and even Negros by the promise of urbanization, only to end up in illegal settlements.

In many of the city's districts – Molo, Lapuz, Lapaz, Jaro, Mandurriao – two-thirds of the street children are students engaged after their classes in *trisykad* (pedicab) driving, vending, car washing and car watching, and even the cleaning of shells used for souvenir items. The parents of these children are in unskilled, temporary jobs such as construction labourers. Based on a 1990 survey of Iloilo's street children conducted by STOP, nearly half have parents who are jobless or housekeepers. The children act as the families' coping mechanism against poverty, their earnings augmenting the meagre and seasonal income of their parents, or buying the family's food for the day.

According to the STOP survey, the boys outnumber the girls significantly (67 percent and 33 percent, respectively), except in downtown area and in the district of Arevalo where the number of boys is only slightly higher. The children usually come from large families – an average eight children per family – and are generally malnourished and anaemic. Many of them are



A visit to the zoo – the street children's first – organized by STOP



Robert Borromeo, a former street child and now the spokesperson of STOP's youth sector

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physically stunted, and stop attending school after the first two or three primary grade levels to help their parents full-time. Yolanda “Yolly” Sanogal Santocera, executive director of STOP has also heard stories about some of these children being employed by a pyrotechnics factory, though she has yet to find out where this factory is in the city.

The children work from six to 16 hours, often combining “occupations,” such as car washing in the parking lot in the morning, and driving the pedicab in the afternoon. They are always at high risk, prone to street fights and bullying from bigger children, harassment from policemen, and suspicion and arrest for petty crimes. The girls are especially vulnerable to the traffickers operating in the Visayas and Mindanao regions. The parents are promised that the girls will be employed in decent private homes as househelp, or in restaurants, but are instead brought to brothels in Manila.

The situation called the attention of STOP to the welfare of street children. With the local government and UNICEF, it rehabilitated and resettled abused children. The group also facilitated the return of some 100 street children to school through subsidies for the children's uniform and school supplies, and rice donations to the families (to deter the children from having to work). In 1993, assistance from Canada Fund facilitated STOP's attempt to mobilize the street children, the barangays and community leaders, and the parents.

The project conducted “Effective Parenting” sessions with 94 mothers and six fathers of street children, as well as follow-up “Family Enrichment” seminars. The consultation and regular meetings with the parents eventually led to the establishment of a credit facility to support the parents' small-scale enterprises. “The support from Canada Fund was what got us started with our livelihood assistance to the families, not just the children,” Yolly said.

In coordination with the local government, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Commission on Human Rights, and Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, the STOP project also held a three-module training in juvenile justice with Iloilo's police department. Immediately after the training, the police department assigned child and youth welfare officers in all the district police stations while the local Bureau of Jail Management and Penology committed to providing a separate detention cell for juvenile offenders.

STOP was also able to organize Barangay Committees for the Protection of Children in ten barangays. The barangay officials, particularly the

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barangay captains, took pride in spearheading the development of the committees' plan of action for the street children. Most of these local officials now know exactly which government agency or which private organization to approach for the many different needs – legal and paralegal, shelter, psycho social rehabilitation and counselling, and livelihood and education assistance – of abused children.

### From Street Kids to Street Educators

Robert Borromeo, now 23, was among the beneficiaries of STOP's work with street children back then when he did car washing and car watching, sold newspapers, and portered passengers' luggage at the pier. There were times when he basically just hung around the parking lot, opening doors of cars and cabs for incoming passengers in the hope of a small tip. He used what he earned as daily "baon," and the rest he used to feed his siblings. STOP's assistance put him back to school, although he continued working in his free time. His father was a drunkard who had basically abdicated his responsibilities as a parent; his mother was a laundrywoman who left for Manila to become a domestic helper. Though not the eldest (he is fourth of 11<sup>th</sup> children), the older siblings had gone to the cities to become casual workers in construction, while the older sister followed in the mother's footsteps and left for Manila to find her luck in the big city.

Today, Robert is hoping to become a programmer/encoder when he finishes his associate degree. "I wanted to take a full four-year degree in computer science," Robert admits, but he did not make it to the cut-off grade for the qualifying exams. Robert is also the president of the youth section of STOP, representing the organization in youth conferences and gatherings.

Although no longer as active in STOP's activities because he now works as a student assistant in school and has to concentrate on his studies, this being his last year, Robert makes time to help out in the tutorial sessions of the street children that STOP continues to hold every



Yolly and the children in a leadership training session

STOP president  
Atty. Evelyn C. Jiz  
provides legal assistance  
through a free legal  
aid clinic.



Saturday during summer. Teaching the children their basic reading and arithmetic skills is the part he likes best.

A friend of Robert's and a colleague in tutoring street children is Rodelyn Gabitan, who turns 24 this year. Rodelyn is a billing clerk in a canteen concession at a large ice plant in Iloilo City. She got the job by virtue of a two-year hotel and restaurant management diploma course that she completed at great cost.

Since she was nine, Rodelyn has been helping her mother prepare the food she sold door-to-door in the neighbourhood. Her family was poor, and while there were only four children – a small brood compared with the families of other street children – life was so hard that two siblings had to be lodged with relatives. “But they were comfortable,” Rodelyn says, with a tinge of envy. She sometimes asks herself why she was not the one given to the custody of the aunt or the grandmother.

A typical day started at 5 in the morning when she would have to clean the house, cook the rice, and prepare the utensils and vegetables and stock left over from the previous day. Her mother would arrive from the market at 8, and Rodelyn would begin the interminable paring, slicing, cooking and broiling of food for lunch that her mother would sell. Her work stopped at about 9:30, and after an hour and a half's respite, she would prepare the snack foods her mother would sell in the afternoons. “I was always tired,” Rodelyn said, but she preferred the work at home compared with setting up the makeshift store (a small table) at the street corner and attending to this all day, under the scorching sun.

Only after she had finished her end of the bargain could she take off to school. “I was absent more times than I was present,” she recalls. Some of the teachers understood, and never took her absences against her;

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but others were catty. "I could barely breathe," Rodelyn said of the daily juggling act between school and work. There was hardly any time for play. The few times she was allowed to play with the other children in the neighbourhood, Rodelyn knew this was something short of a miracle, and that her mother would come out any moment soon to call her back in for some more work.

"Oh yes, I would come right back in," she said. "Mother can be... she can be a nag." The mother never hesitated to use her colourful language with Rodelyn, even in the presence of others.

The difficult routine continued until high school. After graduation, because she was determined to go to college, Rodelyn became a domestic worker for a middle-class household in the city. She would cry every night from lonesomeness, from a refusal to accept that domestic work was her permanent lot. She thought she would be able to save for her tuition from her salary of PhP700 (Cdn\$20) a month, but after seven months, she begged her mother to take her back from her employer. The mother somehow raised the money for Rodelyn's tuition for a diploma course in hotel and restaurant management. But Rodelyn continues to pay for that until now. It will be some time, admits Rodelyn, before she even thinks of leaving home and building a life of her own.

"I see myself in so many of the kids we tutor," she said. "They really want to study, but there's just no money for this."

Francisco Recote, now 21 and a college junior studying to be a computer systems analyst, collected and delivered water to neighbours in his shanty community when he was in Grade 6. He would make three to five trips within a day to raise food money to go to school. In high school, he was still a "working student," driving the tricycle in the afternoon, and the whole day during weekends. "We were really poor, and



STOP volunteers in a skills-training exercise

(From left to right):  
Rodelyn Gabitan,  
Francisco Recote, and  
Roland Reopa



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I needed to take care of myself” he said. Francisco, who is of small built, as with most street children, earned PhP1.50 (4 Cdn cents) per adult passenger.

Like Roberto and Rodelyn, he works with the street children as a sports facilitator, teaching them the rudiments of volleyball and basketball. He attributes the increasing numbers of street children to “overpopulation” and poverty. “Family planning should really be taught to parents,” he said.

Roland Reopa, 19 years old, also a street child that STOP had assisted before, has set ideas of what constitutes good education and a good teacher. A scholar of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) at Western Visayas State University, Roland is studying to be a high school teacher. Under the terms of his scholarship contract, Roland has to maintain an average of 85 percent, and serve in Region VI for at least four years. He also has to obtain prior approval should he decide to shift to another course.

But Roland does not worry about these conditions, for he is bent on being a science teacher, an ambition he credits to his Physics teacher in high school. The teacher was both knowledgeable and patient, making sure the class understood the lesson. “He was unlike other teachers, he didn’t just speak to the blackboard,” Roland said. “Other children also have beautiful dreams of becoming something or someone, y’know, but they lack the support,” he added.

Roland is at once pained when he sees the high-risk behaviour of some of the street children he teaches – Rugby sniffing, smoking, drugs, alcohol, gambling – and relieved that he had a role model in his Physics teacher to prod him on.

These four young adults, expectant of the future before them, are happy to extend their tutoring services to STOP’s partner communities. The organization had been a key player in their formation, giving them a window to a better future, and this is exactly what they hope to do with their encounters with the children not unlike them every summer. Roberto sums it up: “STOP took me in, STOP was my second parent.”

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