



Women's Transformative Leadership Stories

Transformations

*Women's Stories of
Resilience and Challenges
in the Time of Ondoy*



Oxfam

TRANSFORMATIONS

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Acronyms

ASI	Asian Social Institute
BCPC	Barangay Council for the Protection of Children
BDCC	Barangay Disaster Coordinating Council
BHW	Barangay Health Worker
BUSILAK	Bigkis Ugnayan ng Samahan na Itataguyod ang Lawa ng Kababaihan
CALABARZON	Cavite, Laguna Batangas, Rizal at Quezon
CARD	Center for Agricultural and Rural Development
CFCA	Christian Foundation for Children and Aging
COM	Community Organizers Multiversity
COPE	Community Organization of the Philippines Enterprise
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
DRRMC	Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
FEDMMASC	Federasyon ng Magsasaka at Mangingisda ng Sta Cruz, Inc.
FGD	Focus group discussion
GCI	Group crisis intervention
GK	Gawad Kalinga
GBV	Gender-based violence
IJM	International Justice Mission
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KAILA	Kababaihan Lingatan ang Lawa

KAMMMPI	Kapatiran ng Malayang Maliliit na Mangingisda sa Pilipinas, Inc.
LGU	Local government unit
MAKIBALITA	Mga Nagkakaisang Barangay Lider ng Tanay, Inc.
MAPAGPALA	Mamamayan para sa Pagpapaunlad at Pangangalaga ng Lawa
MSWDO	Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office
MVERT	Morong Volunteer Emergency Response Team
NHA	National Housing Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSCB	National Statistics Coordination Board
PAGASA	Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration
PINAGPALA	Pinag-isang Pamayanan ng Laguna, Inc.
PHILSSA	Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies, Inc.
QRT	Quick Response Team
SKSS	Samahan ng Kababaihan ng Sitio Sapa (SKSS)
UGMMARIZ	Ugnayan ng Samahan ng mga Mamamayan at Mangingisda ng Rizal
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

PREFACE

Natural disasters are part of our lives. Experts suggest that climate change is going to increase the intensity and frequency of these disasters. These events impact the community that has to be involved in rescue, recovery and rehabilitation work.

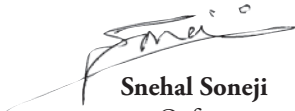
Because of women's weaker socio-economic status, the impact of these disasters is worse on them compared to men. For instance, women manage, control and own fewer resources than men. They tend to be primary borrowers because they have greater access to micro-credit. They also tend to be under greater pressure to stretch limited resources. It is also a known fact that women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence in instances of temporary evacuation during disasters. In addition, women are consistently underrepresented in policy and decision-making processes at local and national levels.

Despite these challenges, a closer look reveals that women are at the forefront of every aspect related to disaster from risk reduction to recovery and rehabilitation.

Presented in this volume are inspiring stories of ordinary women taking on transformative and innovative leadership roles following typhoon Ondoy, particularly in the areas of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). This is just a small collection of countless such experiences that brought forth the critical leadership role that women play during and after a calamity. These are instances resulting in saved lives and the formation of resilient families and communities.

There are many lessons that can be learned from these stories in planning long-term and durable solutions to water, hygiene and sanitation in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). I sincerely hope that this anthology will serve as an inspiration to us all.

Lastly, our thanks goes to the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) for supporting this project from its development up to this publication.



Snehal Soneji
Oxfam
Country Director



MESSAGE

The Australian Government is very pleased to support Oxfam in publishing this important book on the transformative and leadership role women play in the aftermath of disasters.

The impacts of natural disasters, aggravated by the changing climate, cause untold human tragedy for Filipinos, particularly the poor. A single disaster can set back the Philippines' economic prospects and its progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. Perhaps less understood are the consequences for gender equality and empowerment of women.

Disasters affect women and men in different ways, with additional vulnerabilities and burdens for women. The breakdown of services after a disaster can increase women's workload, cause them to eat less to save food for their family, cause girls to withdraw from school, and make women and girls more vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual abuse. A disaster situation is often even worse for women and girls with disability.

This book captures the stories of women who triumphed over tragedy and emerged as leaders in their various capacities: a single mother who not only looked after her three children but volunteered tirelessly to provide emergency care for many other children who fell sick in the evacuation centres; a nurse who became an active member of the quick response team in her area and is now an advocate for continuing education of community members on disaster preparedness; a grandmother who became the voice and force of the community in ensuring that assistance is given to them by the local government and other donors; and a young mother who emerged as a community leader and who drew strength and courage from the death of her eldest child from the floods.

The Australian Government Aid Programme's disaster risk reduction policy seeks to ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups, such as women and girls and people with disability, are included in disaster risk reduction strategies and programmes. It recognizes that women, as managers of natural and environmental resources, economic providers, caregivers and agents of community development, are key actors in shaping and sustaining disaster-resilient communities.

I am sure that from this collection of stories, men and women alike will learn and draw inspiration in building disaster resilience among Filipinos.

Mabuhay!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Titon Mitra".
Titon Mitra

Minister Counsellor, AusAID

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This book is the product of the combined contributions and talent of many individuals and sectors who shared coffee and chips (and sometimes instant noodles) in different towns around Laguna Lake. This work is a collaboration of Oxfam and our local partners—the Community Organizer Multiversity (COM) and the MAPAGPALA (Mamamayan para sa Pagpapaunlad at Pangangalaga ng Lawa) coalition. The collation of these life stories was also supported by the provincial governments of Rizal and Laguna.

Dick Balderrama and Vivian Escoton led the selection and training of local women leaders whose life stories in relation to the effects of typhoon Ondoy are featured here. At the same time, Filemon Buena, Melchor Magano, Gina Jimenes, Jaime Evangelista, Ferdie Escoton and Ningning Calongcalong, provincial coordinators of COM at MAPAGPALA took charge of the orientation and formation of new women-leaders in the selected areas to enable them to be long-term participants of the organizing, advocacy, and development of the communities.

Many thanks to the Editorial Board of Oxfam, including Snehal Soneji and Kalayaan Constantino.

Oxfam's Post Ketsana Programme, which included the printing of this book, is wholly supported by the Australian Aid Agency (AusAID). Their complete support in promoting effective disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the country and providing spaces for women's participation in planning and preparing for calamities serves as a huge inspiration in the publication of this book. To the members of our Post Ketsana Team—Jermaine Bayas, Elizabeth Paguio, Marilou Divina and Nayco Yap, with the leadership of Janice Ian Manlutac—for their wholehearted and ardent implementation of this DRR project—thanks!

Most especially, to the women who became the primary part of this book—for your courage and openness—thank you very much for the inspiration.

Paul G. Del Rosario

Humanitarian Programme Coordinator

Narratives as Catharsis, Testimony and Celebration

The image of a bamboo as a symbol of resilience may have become a cliché. This trait is said to describe Filipinos or, in this book, the women who suffered yet repeatedly rose to the challenges brought on by typhoon Ondoy. Columnist Conrad de Quiros criticized this comparison since it seemed to go hand in hand with the citizens' prudence and flexibility in the face of any distress—if only to survive—instead of raging or acting against the structures or leaders that caused the suffering in the first place.

But in this collection of life stories by the women of Rizal and Laguna, their responses to the damage wrought by Ondoy surpass that of a solitary bamboo shoot. As the readers delve into these stories, what will emerge is the vibrant image of a bamboo raft sailing toward a common direction — symbolizing the women's empowerment as community leaders.

I became part of this project in its latter phases after the women underwent many creative and healing activities. It was challenging to prepare this book for publication – to do justice to the women's stories by bringing out their voices in all their breadth and depth through the details in their narratives, acknowledging not just their travails and sacrifices in the wake of Ondoy's wrath, and most especially faithfully depicting their journeys as women-leaders with due respect to their origins, perspectives, transformative processes and pace of change.

Again and again, I went through these twenty stories for the past month. Replete with details and imbued with strong emotions, these tales of can leave one with a very heavy heart. At times, I would mix up some names because of the similarities of the events, especially their initial reaction during the first few hours of the calamity. Re-readings would surface the uniqueness of the voices and responses to the situation. Like slivers of light shimmering on the lake's surface, these details would illumine the particulars of the writers' experiences, journeys and aspirations.

These stories are grouped into two provinces, while its sequence can be compared to the flowing of streams, rivers and lakes into the sea. From the writers' first awakening to the horrors and contradictions in their surroundings when the calamity struck, to their creative adaptation to the challenges of evacuation and recovering from the devastation, to the more reflective and collaborative initiatives as women leaders in their communities.

Many of them live near the Laguna Lake shoreline and come from families of fisher folk, peddlers, wage workers, manicurists and other low-income sectors who are more vulnerable to the typhoon because of poverty. They are women performing traditional roles inside the home and thus have added vulnerability arising from numerous children (Leny of Cardona), of having recently given birth (Jingky of Morong), of being the caregiver of an elderly mother (Divinia of Bay) or a disabled mother-in-law (Evelyn of Calamba) or, like all of them, being primarily responsible for the homes that were damaged, swept away, or destroyed.

The tone of many stories reveals the painful experiences seared into their hearts and minds. In the following pages, the narrators have allowed themselves to tell of the fears they experienced, the helplessness, prostration, self-pity, resentments, anger and rage. A few stories are emotional as a result of criticisms without bases leveled at the women as they performed their duties as Quick Reaction Team (QRT) volunteers, or as barangay health workers (BHWs) delivering relief assistance together with non-government organizations (NGOs). Traces of grief echo in some stories, resulting from the loss of children, mothers and other loved ones due to the calamity. The stories shared served as major channels for catharsis, release of the self and repressed pain and suffering.

I immersed myself on the significance of the anecdotes shared as well as on the self-descriptions as “a mere woman,” “wailing,” “living simply,” or “a quiet person.” Despite these, one can glean from their narratives that Ondoy was able to bring forth hidden or unacknowledged strengths. These became weapons in the arsenal of self-transformation as women. These enabled the women to work collectively beyond their comfort zones, enabling them to embrace the whole community as a wider family needing protection and nurturing.

Take the blossoming of Divine—she, who couldn’t even cross the bridge because of illness-- later became one of the leaders in her Angono community. There are the creative and much-admired skills of Anneth of Binangonan and Melinda of Cabuyao in rebuilding and eventual flourishing of their livelihoods from the initial capital provided by NGOs such as Oxfam. There is the broadening of Ka Lourdes’ world from caring for her family within the four corners of her Tanay home, to caring for her wider community, to campaigning about national issues right at the door step of the President of the Philippines.

Worth mentioning are the women’s strong faith in God, which became their source of strength to courageously and resolutely face obstacles to their resurgence and empowerment as women and as individuals. If Ondoy’s destructive waters became their baptism of fire, the sharing of their stories became part of their resurrection.

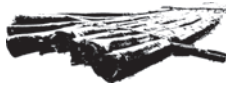
Their narratives can also be compared to the testimonies of women from Latin America, like Rigoberta Menchu, the indigenous leader from Peru or the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, ordinary mothers of thousands of the disappeared in Argentina, who brought to the world's attention the existence of injustice and widespread human rights violations in their respective countries.

Most importantly, this documentation is a celebration of empowerment. It gives importance to the voices and experiences of women, their uniqueness and strengths, their right to acknowledge and share their feelings and aspirations to others so that we may in turn all glean lessons about facing and surviving storms – whether brought on by nature or by life.

In the process, not just the welts from typhoon Ondoy but centuries-old wounds from society strictures that maintain the unequal state of women are healed. In every word, line and paragraph, the assertion of “I,” the self is strong—the courageous ownership of their experiences. This later becomes a united, intertwined “us” in their recognition that as a committed woman and citizen she is “not alone, has many comrades/colleagues in promoting (their) rights.” Let us set sail into their exceptional stories.

Mari M. Santiago

March 2011



TRANSFORMATIONS

*Women's Stories of Resilience and
Challenges in the Time of Ondoy*

Women in the Eye of the Storm and DRR

Two provinces. Twenty life stories.

These are stories about typhoon Ondoy that were held closely, gathered and, later, shared; experiences that took almost fourteen months to coax out through a difficult yet liberating process of story-telling and writing. These are stories of struggle and continuing recovery of women of Laguna and Rizal from the various challenges born out of extreme devastation. Because of Ondoy's wrath wounding their collective consciousness and lives, disaster risk reduction (DRR) became a central theme during their journeys and experience sharing.

The realization that men and women experience disasters differently again comes to the fore. Extreme poverty also surfaces as a root factor leading to weaknesses in DRR. Because of their poverty, women have no safety nets or source of protection for themselves, their meager belongings and their families.

Perhaps this is the reason why many who became victims of Ondoy were living in unsafe places—near Laguna Lake—despite the fact that such areas have been declared danger zones. The absence of safe alternative resources is a bitter reality of their poverty.

What are the effects of disaster on women? Why is the belief that they are more vulnerable to its effects very commonplace in any discourse? In studies of humanitarian responses conducted by Oxfam and other agencies, these are the commonly identified impediments affecting women during times of disaster:

1. Lack of opportunity to benefit from early warning systems, if these are existent;
2. Lack of opportunity to earn a substantial living to alleviate acute poverty, especially outside the informal economy;
3. Lack of interventions responsive to women's special needs, such as pregnancy, disabilities and caregiving for small children, resulting in their being left behind or being the last ones to evacuate;
4. Absence of sources of clean water and sanitation in times of calamity; and,
5. Lack of guaranteed safety during times of disaster, especially in evacuation centers, where gender-related rights of women are usually set aside.

Oxfam directly experienced these realities when we undertook humanitarian response to typhoon Ondoy from September 2009 to April 2010. During this time—from the drafting of our typhoon response assessment, to several consultations and interviews with members of different Rizal and Laguna barangays, to our direct observation on the policy implementation related to disaster response by the local and national governments—the need to put women in the center of DRR became imperative.

Oxfam's central response to Ondoy is ensuring the existence of clean and safe water supply and sanitation in the affected communities. This falls under the realm of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, more popularly known as WASH. This also became the basis for our framework for the Post Ketsana Project, a DRR project supported by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). From January 2010 to March 2011, this project aimed to strengthen the capabilities of the communities to prepare for the threats of disaster.

Cooperating with our local counterparts COM and MAPAGPALA, the QRT and WASH Committees were organized in the sitios (household clusters) assisted by Oxfam. These committees were composed of women's organization members and volunteers, who despite being themselves victims of Ondoy, led in promoting immediate solutions for their communities' rehabilitation. These women were ordinary barangay residents —mothers, elder sisters, wives, aunts—who were suddenly awakened to bigger problems beyond themselves and strove to find solutions in cooperation with the whole community. Majority of them were barangay health workers (BHWs) and women-leaders. They are Oxfam's helpmates, diligently conducting house-to-house visits and organizing their fellow barangay residents.

Many lessons in deepening and strengthening DRR can be learned from their stories. For instance, these narratives will show the insufficiency and inappropriate infrastructures such as evacuation centers, institutional support and policies during times of disaster to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable citizens such as women. Deficiencies in collective preparedness to protect the community against the effects of disaster are also underscored.

While the biggest portion of budgets and relief response is allocated to preparedness, women are most often frequently not part of the process of planning emergency response programmes and DRR, even though this will greatly affect them. Women are frequently considered as mere beneficiaries and not active citizens with the capacities to plan for their safety and strengthening.

Women are at the center of Oxfam's work. In living out this principle, Oxfam commits to strengthening gender justice, especially in upholding women's rights. These rights are underpinned and embedded in all our advocacies, projects and programmes.

Summing up the collective experiences of these women, it can be said that there are three major challenges that should be addressed by every institution on the issue of DRR. May these be included in the plans and programmes of existing formations and the incoming Disaster Risk Reduction Management Councils (DRRMC) from the barangay, municipality, city and province to the national level:

1. Lack of gender perspective in planning effective DRR programmes for the impoverished and vulnerable sectors of society
2. Minimizing the importance of women's issues in infrastructure planning
3. Lack of channels / venues where women can share their intelligence, talent and power towards strengthening their communities to avoid disaster.

“Banyuhay” is a shortened Filipino neologism for “bagong anyo ng buhay” (new face of life). In the stories that you will read, may you find new forms of DRR, where women bravely and skillfully prepare and assist in strengthening their communities.

Janice Ian C. Manlutac
Post Ketsana Programme Manager

LAGUNA



Ondoy's Lash at Laguna

Laguna is a former agricultural province that has seen a rapid change in economy and agriculture in the past three decades. Today, it is an industrial hub and a choice location for manufacturing firms, particularly in the Laguna Science and Techno Park. Close to Metro Manila, the province has modern transportation, communication and other facilities. Here, urban meets rural.

Forked Waters. Life in Laguna revolves around Laguna de Bay - which has a coastline of 295 kilometers, an expanse of 91,138 hectare expanse, and an average depth of 2.5 meters – making it the biggest lake in the Philippines and the second largest inland fresh water system in Southeast Asia. The “W” shaped lake drains into the Manila Bay via Pasig River. It is located between the provinces of Laguna to the south and Rizal to the north, while the west coast faces Metro Manila.

Thus, when typhoon Ondoy (international name Ketsana) unleashed its fury followed by typhoon Peping (international name Parma) in 2009, Region IV-A, primarily Laguna, was one of the most devastated by the lake's flooding.

Ondoy's Destructive Swath. When the water level reached 14-14.5 m from a normal of 10.5, 6,409,207 people who were living around its waters were most affected. This is nearly 7.5% of the country's total population [NSCB 2008]. It was also estimated that Ondoy caused some P276.5-M damage to public infrastructure. Power was also cut during and after the typhoon.

Damage to agriculture was placed at P271.5-M, and P264.3-M to poultry and fisheries. Fish cages were destroyed. According to MAPAGPALA, the livelihood built by some 100,000 fisher folk and their families over the years and around the lake ended in an instant.

Shared Plights. Thousands of families that lost their homes and fled the floods were crammed in a few hundred evacuation centers in Laguna. Because floodwaters receded slowly, these centers proved inadequate. The widespread lack of resources and facilities due to the lack of preparedness of the local government units (LGUs) and communities resulted in a series of evacuation, loss of livelihood, hunger, and disease.

ONDOY’S EFFECTS IN LAGUNA

TOTAL DAMAGES (Partial)	Ondoy (Ketsana) 26 September 2009
Affected Individuals	984,730
Affected Families	196,946
Damage to Houses:	
1. Partial	16,519
2. Fully damaged	4,148
TOTAL	20,667
No. of Evacuation Centers	221
Individuals in Evacuation Centers	126,835
Families in Evacuation Centers	25,367
Effects to Individuals	
Dead	31
Missing	10
Injured	37

SOURCE: Hagupit ng Kalamidad sa Lawa ng Laguna, a paper prepared by Melchor Magano, Jaime Evangelista and Ferdinand Escoton for the Laguna de Bay Rehabilitation Project Dialogue between DENR and MAPAGPALA last August 22, 2010

In the midst of these events are the women, who, in their traditional and domestic role as mothers, wives and daughters, ensured the safety, welfare, and well-being of the members of their family as they strove to rebuild their homes, lives and livelihoods.

Common Travails. Many stories of anguish and suffering arose from the experiences of women in Laguna and its neighboring province, Rizal. There were similarities because of their common geography and socio-economic conditions; if one looks more closely, the causes of the floods in these two provinces were likewise similar.

In a study conducted by COM and MAPAGPALA, the main cause identified was the denudation of the Marikina-Antipolo-Montalban Watershed in Rizal, resulting in the rapid saturation and overflow of the tributaries of Laguna Lake.

Flooding was also caused by the continued issuance of permits for quarrying, landfills, land conversion from agricultural to residential use, logging, and slash-and-burn farming. These factors, with their socio-political roots served to unite the affected residents toward the creation of resilient communities with the preparedness and capability to face worse calamities.

Memories of the Storm

BENEDICT BALDERRAMA

When Ka Melchor Magano first approached me in August 2010, I thought at first that it was just a simple project where I'd help plan and implement a training program for women leaders of MAPAGPALA in Laguna. I quickly said yes. I helped complete the concept and a project proposal anchored on Oxfam's plan of gathering life stories of women in Laguna and Rizal.

Ka Melchor and Gina Jimenez of MAPAGPALA, Ningning Calongcalong of COM and me became part of the Laguna Team. They covered 15 barangays (villages) in five Laguna cities and municipalities (Cabuyao, Calamba, Los Baños, Bay, and Sta. Cruz) to interview women who were part of Oxfam's relief efforts for typhoon Ondoy victims. They picked five from each barangay for preliminary training and a writeshop. Other leaders from MAPAGPALA in Laguna, like Rod Gipit, Annaliza Sante, Dado Balgua, and Lara Mangilinan, also assisted.

November 15, 2010. With MAPAGPALA leaders and representatives from Oxfam, we clarified the workflow, project areas, individual tasks, budget and schedule, and, most important, the criteria by which women leader participants were to be selected for the preliminary training and writeshop, and for the 20 participants whose life stories (case studies) would be featured for the provinces of Laguna and Rizal.

November 27 and 29, 2010. The preliminary training and writeshop were conducted and attended by 65 participants from the project areas. The project was explained to the participants; pointers were provided on how to recall their experiences; and they were assisted in preliminary writeups of their experiences related to typhoon Ondoy.

November 30, 2010. The Overall Project Coordination Team approved the recommended 10 local writers for Laguna. From the 65 life stories written by the participants, 20 were included in a shortlist, out of which 10 writers

from Laguna were picked. The selection process was difficult because the stories were many, time was short and each story was special in its own right. In the end, the selection criteria guided the final choices.

December 4-5, 2010. The Creative Case Study Writing Workshop was conducted and attended by the 20 local writers from Laguna and Rizal. There were additional inputs during the activity and the stories were further developed and enhanced. Each participant was given pointers and suggestions on how to further improve her story, after which the stories were computer-encoded and sent via email after a week.

December 12, 2010. We met with the local writers to further discuss their stories and to prepare for a provincial presentation to the other women leaders in Laguna.

December 13, 2010. The provincial presentation was held in the City of Springs Resort in Los Baños and attended by 73 women leaders from Laguna. The local writers presented their stories as well as their impressions and lessons as women leaders.

December 20, 2010. For the last time, we met with the local writers and agreed upon the final version of their stories, which were submitted to COM and Oxfam.

At first glance, the flow and work involved is simple; but the richness of the experience lies with the fact that I became part of the recollection, reflection, and processing of their experiences as Ondoy victims who rose and helped other victims. I was part of the process of forming, writing, and developing their stories from their experiences, and deriving reflections and lessons from the same.

I was surprised by the transformation of the erstwhile silent and shy types, like Ka Rene, Myra, and Ofelia who gained more confidence during the process. I witnessed the deepening of conviction and leadership of women leaders like Nancy, Evelyn, Divinia, and Taciana M. I discovered the strength forged by the challenges and experiences in the characters of Nerisa, Tacing, and Melinda.

Overall, I am glad and thankful that I got to know and befriended these ten special people: women leaders in their family, organization, and community who have deepened their understanding of their experiences and are advancing transformative leadership.

Dick was the coach for the women writers in Laguna. He is the National Coordinator of PHILSSA with 25 years of experience as community organizer, researcher, trainer, writer, and NGO worker.



LIFE STORIES
OF THE WOMEN OF
LAGUNA

The Challenge of Ondoy and I

OFELIA ACUÑA

Bgy. Tadlac, Los Baños

It was a Saturday when Ondoy began its onslaught. The rain was torrential. The wind was furious. At first, my family was relaxed, watching TV as usual, thinking it was just “the usual storm.” But when I went to the kitchen and saw water on the floor, I began to worry.

When floodwaters continued pouring into the house, I became surprised and upset. My first thoughts were of my two children who were perched on a low cot that may soon be underwater. I dragged the high table into the relatively elevated living room. I placed the children on the table, along with some dry clothes and important documents, which I wrapped in plastic. With the water already thigh-high, I was busy trying to save our other belongings, like the TV and DVD, which were newly bought from money we scrimped from our food budget.

As the water continued to rise, I finally brought my children to higher ground. A number of families also crowded in that place to weather the storm. We let the children lie down, as the adults spent the night without sleep.

The next day, each family tried to find shelter because we could not go back to our houses. The water was still rising. We really needed to evacuate, but not to the nearby school building because it was also flooded. We decided to go to the railroad tracks, which was relatively elevated and had not yet been reached by the flood.

Life in Tents

In the early morning, I waded in the chilly water to gather pieces of wood. Together and unmindful of the downpour, my husband and I built a tent frame in our spot on the railroad tracks. We used bed sheets for walls and linoleum flooring which I salvaged from our house for roofing. With floodwaters neck-high, I felt and snagged the linoleum with my feet. My children had to have a roof over their heads.

As the wind slammed into our shelter, our “roof” was blown away and we were soaked just the same. I pitied the children so I held on to the posts very firmly so that the entire tent might not be blown away. It was hard. We were miserable in our makeshift dwelling. It took a few more weeks before we were able to receive some tarpaulin material to make a real tent. Only then did our tent become livable. We eventually got used to living in a tent.

Many people sent donations—basic needs like food, clothing, and household items. But to get these items, we had to patiently wait in long lines. Sometimes, you had to jostle through the lines. If you're slow, you'll end up with nothing. Sometimes, tempers flare up. But it's okay—that was expected. I understood that everybody was in dire need.

A Succession of Illnesses

My children began getting ill. The eldest was the first, with bouts of cough and fever, which would cause convulsions, so I always made sure she takes her medicines on time. When she recovered, my youngest child followed suit with diarrhea and vomiting. I know that her condition was serious since she could become dehydrated. I immediately brought her to the hospital. My problem was money for the medicines. My husband earned very little each day and with a lot of expenses, I needed to borrow money to make ends meet.

My youngest got well, but because of the damp and cold in the tent, she began coughing, especially in the early morning hours when it was really cold. When I had her x-rayed, the doctor said that my youngest contracted pneumonia.

When both of my children finally got well, my mother-in-law had to undergo an operation. I accompanied and took care of her for four days, since she was a widow and had nobody to look after her. I entrusted my children to the care of my sister-in-law. We couldn't help my mother-in-law financially, so we could only devote our time for care-giving.

I could not define how I felt at the time. I always cried. Just thinking about how to get money to buy medicines, I would have a headache. But I steeled myself, knowing that I had to live a day at a time, every step of the way. I really thank God and the many people who helped my family with our needs, like our kind doctor. Despite everything, we survived each day, especially when the children got sick.

Homecoming

After three long months, the waters finally subsided. We hastily fixed our house and cleaned the surroundings so we won't be spending Christmas in the tent. Joyfully, we worked together to speed up our homecoming. The saying "There is no place like home" is true indeed.

I am okay now. We're back to living like we used to before Ondoy, but our family learned a lot. Now, we are vigilant with each storm warning. We do not take it for granted anymore. We always have an emergency kit. We do not want to repeat our sorry past experience. We are also currently active in the community. We cooperate with our Barangay Chairperson in his projects, such as Operation Linis (cleaning) in our streets and surroundings.

I will not forget Ondoy, the storm that brought us down, but also brought important lessons. It also made me stronger as the woman of the house. I pray that God would never allow that to happen again—in our lives, and in others' as well.

Ofelia is a simple homemaker. The crisis stretched her resilience and resources to the limit to be able to respond to the needs of her sick children. During Ondoy's onslaught, she became aware about being prepared for future calamities.



From Victims of Fate to Masters of Fate

MYRA NANO MARTINEZ

Bgy. Tagumpay, Bay

Disasters are not moments for weaknesses. This is what I learned from my experience. As a woman with a family, you need to be strong and strong-willed. To survive, the family needs every one's cooperation.

Even before Ondoy, our area was already flood-prone. We are used to knee-high floodwaters inside the house. Despite this, we lived content. We never missed a meal because my husband found enough work. When I heard on the radio that Ondoy was coming, I left my market stall and headed for home to prepare belongings for evacuation.

We evacuated our house in the early morning hours of September 26, leaving for the elementary school in Barangay Tagumpay. We left behind our other belongings. We saw our boat and fishing net being carried away by the rampaging waters. Our crops were submerged. As in the past, the floodwaters washed away our dream of improving our life. We almost lost all hope. Despite this, we struggled to remain strong amidst the fury that came our way.

As the waters kept rising, I persuaded my husband to leave for the Central Elementary School. The next day, we tried sleeping on makeshift beds of clustered benches. My husband wrapped his clothes around our one-year old child to stave off the cold.

The next morning, we braved chest-deep waters in the streets, with my husband carrying our child on his shoulders. “Ne, let’s go faster before the rain catches up with us,” my husband reminded me as we waded through the flood waters of Bgy. Tagumpay until we reached the town of Bae. When we reached the school building, we begged the guard to let us in. After an hour’s wait, he finally let us in. We were very happy that we finally had a temporary shelter.

I learned how to get along with lots of strangers in the evacuation center. I also learned how to hustle just to get our share of the relief goods – canned goods, rice, clothing, and other things. It came to a point when a town mate reprimanded me for pushing and shoving. “Neng, don’t cheat in the lines. I was here first.” I knew I shouldn’t have done that.

Mayor Bruno Ramos came with a gas tank, a heavy duty gas range, and noodles for cooking. I felt that we shouldn’t lose hope since there were still those willing to help people like us. Almost daily, people from the municipal government came with loads of relief goods. After some weeks, Oxfam came with some blessings for the evacuation center. I got ₱1,000 and used this to have my husband checked by a doctor for severe fatigue.

In December 2009, the municipal government and school administrators decided to transfer us to another evacuation center because the children had to go back to school. We were transferred to Marianville. There, we had to suffer through very hot mid-days and very cold evenings. Because of this, my husband suffered from shortness of breath. Relief goods became scarce, and we had days without any meal. We came to a point where we needed to beg for help from the authorities and even from campaigning politicians. I know that was a shameful thing to do, but we needed to do it to survive each day and to be able to buy medicine for my husband.

We were so miserable until Oxfam came again with another blessing. I had no knowledge that they had interviewed my husband. We were very happy when they gave us ₱5,000, which we used to put up some livelihood. At first, we went into selling ihaw-ihaw (grilled street food), halo-halo (fruit dessert with shaved ice), and other native delicacies. When people from the municipal government encouraged us to go back to our respective barangays, we decided to sell fish as an alternative. We are very thankful because up to now, we still have our capital and continue to sell fish.

I was enlivened and strengthened when my husband and I had to closely assist each other during the evacuation. Even if we are poor, we need to be unshakably strong for our family, especially our kids. I learned that we need to be prepared for calamities, and always be ready with things needed for an evacuation, so we won’t experience such misery again. We also need to strengthen ourselves to face the challenges ahead.

As a woman leader, I learned that we need to be able to get along with different people. It is not always true that only those with formal education can be leaders. Trainings and workshops are important. Cooperation is also needed for the projects of the barangay and the community. Most importantly, we need to trust ourselves.

Myra married and had children at a young age. She showed strength in times of need, especially during the onslaught of Ondoy. She is still struggling to rebuild their ravaged home and livelihood.



Single Motherhood in the Time of Ondoy

TACIANA PERALTA

Bgy. Butong, Cabuyao

I am a survivor of the storms and tempests that have passed through my life.

Call me Tacing, a mother, very early on separated from her husband, and raising three children on her own. Working on the side as a laundrywoman, I am also a volunteer barangay (village) health worker (BHW) in Barangay Butong in the municipality of Cabuyao. I serve my community with all my heart and without regard for anything in return. One of my devotions is to become a good example to my children. In our daily lives, I am just like other mothers who face the storms ranging from financial woes to emotional torment. Never did I imagine that a literal storm would come my way, and it was the challenge called Ondoy.

It was just like any other day. We caught on television the warning that in 12 hours, the brewing storm will get stronger. But because we were used to super typhoons, nobody thought it would not simply be gusts of wind but will come with torrential rains. It resulted in the rapid rise of the waters of Laguna Lake.

Alone during the Deluge

As the rains fell all night, we were wakened by a horrifying incident: our house is submerged! I knew at that moment that time was not on my side, but that I should not lose heart. I felt a twinge of longing. If only my husband was here right now, we would be facing this storm together. I felt rage at the recollection that he was taken by another woman. This feeling was my storm, the inner tempest.

Ironically, Ondoy was the tempest that made me stronger. I checked the rising waters, and to see if my children were safe as well as the belongings that I had packed. Only then did I allow myself to rest.

The next day, when I saw the damage sustained by our community, I had no second thoughts about volunteering.

Becoming a Volunteer

I assisted in the preparation of the relief goods and informed people when they are ready for distribution. As a volunteer health worker, we took care of sick children. My “family” included those who came to the health center because my entire day revolved there. I came home usually in the evening because of the many people we have to look after.

I know that everybody was affected during those times. I was not able to do the laundry for others and I had no other source of income. Relief goods given to us became our lifeline. In return, I helped my fellow residents. I felt happy knowing that helping others can never be measured by monetary remuneration. You can help in a lot of things even if you are just a poor, ordinary individual. That’s why when our midwife Lucy requested us to survey the people’s condition, I didn’t lose time reaching out to them and asking about their other needs. In our community, I listed the names of the beneficiaries; the NGO donors used this list.

Along with other volunteers, I worked hard to inform people about what these NGOs brought. This included Oxfam. At first, we really didn’t know what their purpose was. But we were happy when their assistance came which, to our surprise, was quite substantial. That wasn’t the only thing that Oxfam did for us: they also gave us livelihood projects and conducted training. I attended one of their seminars to increase my knowledge about livelihood. I became aware of the need for clean surroundings when I joined the WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) committee. I became a leader in our community and the things I learned from Oxfam were a big help.

“Ondoy, Look at What You’ve Done!”

In volunteer work, one cannot please everybody. Despite efforts to get help from the municipal government and other organizations, people would throw derisive and judgmental comments our way.

Some chided us when help didn’t reach them, especially when the help came with some cash. Some threatened to have us recalled since, they said, we were mere volunteers anyway. Some accused us of having favorites in the distribution of relief stubs.

Whatever our explanations, some people tried to hoard attention without regard for others. Even though I earned my keep by doing others' laundry, it never crossed my mind to use the money some people badly coveted. This is one of the most painful things I have experienced: to be accused of something you never did. It was very hard for us volunteers because we absorbed their anger about something they knew nothing about.

In these instances, I kept my composure. Sometimes I bring out the leader in me to remind the recalcitrant ones to think not only of themselves. A smile from them would have lightened our load considerably. As volunteers, we sacrificed our time for public service when this could have been spent with our own family.

Sometimes, I would feel I neglected my own children. So each time I got home, I made sure that they feel my deep love for them. I took care of them even more. I would cradle my youngest in my arms and sing her a lullaby until she fell asleep. As a mother, I strove to keep our life in order even if Ondoy changed it in many ways. My children understood the situation well and I was able to continue my volunteer work amidst the continuous challenges in our barangay.

My personal life continued to be buffeted by tempests, like when I learned nobody wanted to hire me for laundry work. Because I spent more time doing volunteer work, another person took over laundry duties for my employer's family. I thought of other ways to earn, and God never abandoned us. Amid abject poverty, my family remained my source of strength during these hard times.

Our area remained submerged for many more months, bringing more hardships. The number of sick people increased; more evacuees trooped to the church and school. Each time help arrived, especially medicines, I made sure my fellow barangay residents would receive their share. When we conducted an immunization campaign for the children, I could barely hold back my tears, seeing these little angels fighting for their lives. These experiences strengthened our resolve to serve them even more.

Another problem we faced was the children who were unable to go back to school because of the evacuation. We were forced to relocate the evacuees. With the consent of Mrs. Abu, president of the homeowners association in Saint Joseph 6-Phase 1, we transferred the evacuees from the school to vacant units in their subdivision.

When the water subsided, I began cleaning our house with the help of my children. The feeling of starting all over again because of Ondoy was bittersweet.

There were people who extended me their helping hand as I struggled to survive these challenges, and I also know that I became a part of this support system as I served my fellow citizens in our barangay. I drew strength from this and it has replaced the loneliness I felt in those dark hours. When I look back, I'd say I'm still lucky. This is what the experience taught me: to be always ready for any disaster, not only for ourselves, but also for others. Although other families are intact, they were not able to "extend their helping hand" for others. My family may not be intact, but I managed to do my duty for everybody. It may be called sacrifice, but it was in fact my family's struggle.

Even if my marriage had been unhappy with my former husband, I feel whole because of my children. Even if I am hit with several Ondoyos, I would be more steadfast because my life has meaning, not only for my family, but for other people in our community as well.



When her husband left her for another woman, Tacing (or Taciana P. for her colleagues in this project) raised her children on her own. An active BHW, she's a merry friend and a congenial colleague.

The All-Around BHW

RENE WILLIAMS

Bgy. Bambang, Los Baños

I am a barangay health worker from Purok 6-B of Bgy. Bambang. As BHW and member of the barangay council, I help manage the facilities and services in the evacuation center for the displaced families. One of my tasks was to accompany Oxfam in house visitations for the Ondoy victims, because it was my mandate and my desire to help my fellow barangay residents. Although physically hard for me because of a stroke I suffered previously that left half my body paralyzed, I continued to work. I almost slipped on the pathways, but this never bothered me. It was fortunate that nothing happened to me along the way.

Some, however, never understood my work. They said hurtful things. They said I played favorites, as if I was in control of everything. I simply accompanied Oxfam and other NGOs on barangay rounds, which I did upon orders of the barangay leadership.

“What kind of barangay (official) is that?” some said, accompanied by cussing. I couldn’t forget Christmas Eve 2009 when someone showered me with profanities early in the day. She asked why she didn’t get anything from the Foundation. “You’re good-for-nothing! I hope you die!” she spat. I could not help but cry because I was hurt. In many years of service to the community, that was the first time somebody humiliated me in public. This, in the wake of Ondoy.

Ondoy was a big blow for us because it damaged our house. But this is trifle compared to such indignities and disparagement. A damaged house can be easily repaired, but not a tarnished reputation and hurt feelings. For the people so very hard to please, I wrote this poem:

*For the good that you do to another
Others never try to understand or even bother
Constant streams from their mouth
Hurtful words always spout
If one has committed a mistake worthy of blame
One wishes for discreet rebuke, not public shame*

This is the reason there were times I simply did not want to join the rounds. The thought of quitting crossed my mind, but I just couldn't because it was my sworn duty as a BHW and as a barangay official. I carried on. Above all, I know that what I'm doing is right, despite the opinions of a noisy minority. I continued doing good work for the community.

It did not cross my mind to hold a grudge against anyone. My own family members were disaster victims and there were times when we didn't get any help at all; still, we never held it against anybody because we believed God will never abandon us and we are able to survive. For me, good health is the greatest gift ever given us.

That's why we should never lose hope. Instead, these challenges should give us more strength and fervor for public service. Moreover, there are many who are appreciative and thankful, like the beneficiaries, the barangay captain and council members, among others.

I recall the time we heard of the impending arrival of typhoon Ondoy. At that time, my family and I were bantering and light-hearted. It rained hard the whole night and the wind blew wild. In the morning, I saw that we were surrounded by floodwaters. My children and I quickly left our house left. Later at the evacuation center, I thought of returning to the house, but the Mayor dissuaded us because of the flooding.

As a BHW leader, I was part of the team that kept order in the evacuation center: teaching the proper use of tables, chairs, and toilet; segregation of waste and proper disposal; and, conserving electricity. I was also trained in First Aid courtesy of the Red Cross. I helped refer the sick to the Barangay Health Center and coordinated with the midwife about the doctor's visits to the families in the evacuation center. As a volunteer in the WASH Committee, I continuously helped in testing the water from the deep wells, as well as in promoting cleanliness in the homes, among families, their surroundings and in the use of toilets.

Reflecting on my being a woman-leader, I believe set myself as a good example for my own family and community in terms of good manners and right conduct, particularly with respect to my behavior to the elderly and in being a good citizen. In relation to my children, I put a high premium on their finishing their studies so they can have a better life. Their experiences and emotional caring as mothers are major assets of women-leaders.

Being hopeful amid hardship is part of being a leader. Painful as it may be, there would always be people who think negatively. Regardless of the good one does, they will always have something negative to say. It takes humility and a genuine love for people to be able to continue serving.

As part of my lessons in life, I continued and will continue to fulfill my duties as a woman leader who serves voluntarily without seeking compensation, to help my fellow barangay residents.



Rene, a diligent BHW, has a child and a grandchild. Her rather peaceful life was upset when some evacuees became angry at her for not being selected for relief and livelihood assistance. Despite hurt feelings, she continued her volunteer work with Oxfam and in barangay projects for her community.

Greater Integrity amid Great Devastation

NERISSA CABALUNA

Bgy. San Pablo Norte, Santa Cruz

When a storm approaches, I brace the house by conducting repairs. House repair is a part of my life. It would be difficult if disaster strikes and your house is weak. This house is the only treasure my husband left behind. He always said, “It’s okay if we have to eat salt with our rice everyday for as long we have a house of our own.”

I’m a widow raising six children as well as a grandchild on my own. I have no other source of income except selling fish. What I earn is barely enough for the baby’s milk and our food.

At first glance, I look like a woman of 60, a senior citizen. In reality, I am only 43 years old. A hard life does that to you.

Our life has been a very difficult one. It is easy for others to say I can solve my problems and hurdle all challenges. But I’m only human, a woman with weaknesses, fears, and doubts, especially when it comes to my children. All of them never finished school and had married early. My eldest is also a widow and her family lives with me. Two of my other children help me sell fish. To survive, my children have had to be creative.

Left Behind at the Basketball Court

As if our hardships were not enough, Ondoy hit. Our house was already inundated by previous typhoons so we were already living in the evacuation site even before Ondoy arrived. We thought we were on safe ground because the site is higher than the barangay’s basketball court.

It was about three in the afternoon when Ondoy hit land, and the Barangay Captain advised us to leave our hut since this typhoon was said to be a very strong one. I gathered my children and grandchild and told them, “Don’t panic. Let’s just pray that the typhoon will quickly go away.” We didn’t leave immediately and stayed in our hut.

Not much later, I saw the water rise, almost up to the beds where my children and grandchild slept. When I opened the door, I realized that we were the only ones left in the basketball court so I decided to finally leave.

The water was chest-deep and we had no boat for evacuation, so we used the deep plastic basin I use to sell fish in as crude flotation devices for the children. Hand-in-hand, we waded through the streets. The barangay patrol saw and brought us to Pedro Guevara Memorial High School. But it was already crowded so we went to the house of my sibling in Patimbao.

The next day, my father told me that our house was already gone, swept away by the strong current. Our belongings in the basketball court were also destroyed and washed away. My mind went blank. Sometimes, I cried and talked to myself. I remembered what my husband said about having a house of your own. It is really difficult to lose one.

We stayed at my sibling’s house for almost a month, until we were forced to go back to the waterfront when the waters subsided. Those who evacuated to the different schools of Duhat, Bagumbayan, and Guevara returned to their homes.

Evacuation Center Politics

At that time, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) sent a volunteer coordinator to our area. He met with us and said that evacuees staying at the basketball court should form an association. I was elected secretary and did what I could to perform my duties to both the association and my family. When visitors from NGOs came, I met with them nervously, especially the foreigners, because I might run out of English sentences. The coordination between our association and DSWD was good at that time.

I became a member of the local Quick Reaction Team (QRT) composed of Oxfam, COM, and MAPAGPALA. I attended trainings and meetings that touched on the rights of evacuees and the process of getting support and benefits. A lot of questions formed in our minds, which we wanted to ask DSWD and other agencies. We planned how we could best present these questions to the authorities and get some answers.

This was, however, preempted when the volunteer, along with his relative-evacuees, reported our plans to the DSWD officials. It was obvious that he was out to discredit us and make a name for himself. Sometimes, his reports were exaggerated; he reported that we were planning a rally and to attack the municipal building. Because of this, our erstwhile good ties with the DSWD and the municipal government were severed.

Politics entered the scene. Politicians dipped their hands into the evacuation center and into the relief goods meant for the evacuees, which had to pass through the municipal government. Because of the controversy, help that was supposedly for us was blocked. Even if our homes were totally damaged and our livelihood significantly affected, we didn't get any help from DSWD and the municipal government.

In an ironic turn of events, we were able to build a new house after a child of mine was mauled by a drunken man and his nephew. We filed charges of child abuse against them and they paid damages amounting to P15,000. Unfortunately, the house was damaged by a subsequent typhoon (Basyang).

Being Strong for Family and Community

Because of our experiences, I learned to be strong. I continuously show my children that as their Mother and Father, I can and will do anything for them and hurdle everything for the sake of my family.

As part of the Association/Community, on the other hand, I learned to fight for our rights, not only mine, but also for the majority— the victims of the typhoon who have been denied rightful assistance. Experience with the QRT also toughened me. I learned a lot, especially on how to deal with people in the higher rungs of government. My being a woman and not having completed formal education does not give such people in government the right to belittle or disregard you.

The experience with Ondoy should have already taught us a lesson in preparing for future calamities. We should prepare for approaching typhoons – foodstuff, candles, and items that are indispensable in times of need. We should also be resolute in things we need to accomplish.

I also learned how to fight for my right as an evacuee and as a human being. I realized that being a woman is no obstacle to facing people and confronting those who intend to trample our rights, even if they are the rich and powerful in our community. I am no longer afraid of facing and fixing problems, whether in the family or in the community.



~~~~~  
*A widow and a veteran  
of many challenges in life,  
Nerisa raised her six children  
all by herself by selling fish  
in the market. She said that  
even if she lacks material  
wealth, her family serves as  
the fountain of her joy and  
meaning in life.*  
~~~~~

Evacuations Hither and Yon

TACIANA MARAVILLA

Bgy. Sampiruhan, Calamba City

Before Typhoon Ondoy, my three children and I were happily living in our coastal village. I single-handedly took the responsibility of raising them after my husband and I separated. Our life was fairly stable. I was able to buy a boat and two bales of fish nets from the money paid out to me as a sewer / seamstress by a Cabuyao-based company. We made a decent living from fishing, together with my eldest sibling. We had also acquired household appliances and furnishings with the help of my child (also a single parent), a factory worker at the Yazaki Torres manufacturing plant.

We first evacuated to the church in Sampiruhan, spending two days there. When the water rose, we stacked the pews atop each other so we could lie down. I brought along my mother when we were again relocated, this time to the covered court of Sampiruhan.

But because of the huge number of evacuees, the court quickly became overcrowded so we were temporarily relocated to the school in Central II at the town proper. Nine families were forced to fit in one room. I was designated Room Coordinator. From September 28, relief goods like foodstuff, clothing, and medicines, poured in. As agreed upon, I was the only one allowed to receive the goods in behalf of all the families in the room. I did that every day. Aside from being able to help others, I was also able to ensure that my family never went hungry.

We left Central II when children returned to hold classes at the school. Our barangay councilor advised people from Sampiruhan to return to their houses, if they were still standing; for those who lost their homes, they were

advised to go to the covered court. We went to the latter, where I built a small retail store.

When homeowners complained about the continued presence of evacuees in their subdivision, we moved again with no particular place in mind. Of course, there were houses for rent, but we didn't have money. Other families were forced to go back to their former houses even though they were still wet and damp. Our barangay captain was able to find a temporary place for ten families including ours in the Lanzanas Compound of Barangay Sampiruhan.

Timely Support

From January 12, 2010, when Oxfam came and when we transferred to the evacuation site, we were grateful for their unceasing assistance. Almost 100 families benefited in the Lanzanas Compound, along with other families from the Sampiruhan covered court.

Their support helped greatly - mats for beddings; bed sheets to keep us warm; ten meters of tarpaulin that served as roofing for our makeshift huts in the evacuation site; pails, water drums, water jugs, tubs, dippers, basins, Zonrox (bleach), soap, Colgate (toothpaste), toothbrushes, towels, underwear, step-ins, pots and pans, teapots, complete sets of dishes with bins, twine; and, P1,000 cash, which I used as capital for my retail store.

I negotiated with the compound's caretaker and convinced him to allow Oxfam build six toilets and six bathrooms. Oxfam also helped us salvage wood and roofing materials in Tadalac to build houses for five families. I was also able to help make a bed for two elderly people who had to share a folding bed. We used the extra toilet doors for our houses. Oxfam also helped us get tools—a wheelbarrow, pick, rake, shovel, and brooms—to fix the surroundings.

Questions and Lessons

Additional help arrived from other groups like the Red Cross, International Organization on Migration (IOM) and DSWD. When news reached us that the Food-for-Work program was about to begin, I rejoiced. I thought the evacuees in the area would be the ones included in this program. I was terribly wrong. Only a select few were included, and most were from other areas. They were to work for equity for the housing program of Gawad Kalinga (GK) in Majada. But I had questions about this. Was it right that people from other areas were the ones included in the Food-for-Work program although the place of work was just a stone's throw from our place? Was it right that more than two family members were taken in while there were many more evacuees who were out of work?

When we were in the covered court, I met Terry, a BHW who helped supervise the evacuees. When she was about to leave, she talked me into replacing her. At first, I refused because I was busy with my small store. But she still

enlisted me with MAPAGPALA as one of five who were to attend a training in Los Baños. That was the time we got to know MAPAGPALA and COM. In the training, we learned about our rights as women, as evacuees, and as human beings—and how to fight for these rights.

Reflections on Being a Leader

I was invigorated and energized when I became actively engaged as a member of the QRT, the WASH Committee, and a leader of the evacuees—from receiving our rations, to supervising their systematic distribution, and bringing the sick to the hospital, among others.

In the trainings that I attended, I learned that it is important to know who to approach in times of need, including the appropriate way of negotiating and coordinating with them. I was able to apply this when I asked for help from MAPAGPALA and COM on behalf of a colleague who was nearly raped in the evacuation site. This was immediately handled by the International Justice Mission (IJM).

As a result of being affected by the disaster, being an evacuee and leader, my view of life radically changed. I saw many changes in myself. In the past, I was aloof and indifferent to others. I learned how to be humble, and how to relate with co-evacuees. Leaders should really spend time with colleagues. While it can be difficult, one must be able to adjust to other people. One also has to be quick in making correct decisions.

I also learned how to be kind and helpful to others, especially in their time of need; how to give way to others like during the time I gave up the right to a house and lot that was supposed to be awarded to me by the mayor and the DSWD in favor of an old woman and her family. The government promised that we, along with the other families, will be transferred anyway to a relocation site in Kay-Anlog in Calamba. I hope the paperwork will be finished to assure us that we could soon transfer.

I also shared my new learnings with my companions—how to maintain cleanliness in the surroundings, as well as how to assert the rights and welfare of evacuees. I was able to use these learnings and the changes in me while I performed my duties as an evacuee-leader.

Taciana M. is a former seamstress and the solo parent of three children. With her family, she relocated frequently, and became an active member of the QRT and the WASH Committee that supported and helped many people. She and her family are still staying at a temporary relocation site in Lanzanas.



Mother's Legacy

DIVINIA ORTILLA

Bgy. San Antonio, Bay

Before Ondoy, I was just a wife of Mr. Florencio C. Ortilla, hardworking husband and fisherman. While I sold native delicacies, we raised our three children together. We lived with my sickly 84-year old mother, who in turn raised me and my siblings virtually by herself. She still looked after me even though I already have a family of my own, and I am deeply indebted to her. She became a living example of strength amidst the many trials in life.

In our town called Pook Pinagsimbahanan, our family is known for being active in the community. I myself had been active in civic affairs and in women and community associations. Last year, I became secretary of the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), but I had to quit to look after my mother. At present, I am a member of the Lupong Tagapamayapa (peacekeeping council) of our barangay. I could say that my life then was very colorful, especially because we made many children very happy through our projects. I didn't expect that the joy would be cut short by the calamity.

Even before Ondoy's onslaught, there was a week of continuous rains. I saw how the waters rose and how our place became like the sea, submerging our rice crop which was ready for harvesting. In an instant, all the work and money we invested vanished in a flash. My children and I tried bailing the surging water out of our house. Another family asked to stay with us because their house was already submerged. The trees were creaking and I was frightened by the very heavy downpour and gusty winds. My mother never stopped praying.

The next morning, we saw the damage wrought by Ondoy. While the water inside the house had already subsided, we were surrounded by floodwaters. A number of cows took shelter in my sibling's house. We were seemingly stranded on an island. The evacuation center at the barangay hall was already full; in the next town, there was also a dearth of rooms to rent. The thought of bringing my mother to the evacuation center made me hesitate. I was also worried about my family's health as there was news that many people were getting sick there. So despite our fear that of the still rising waters because of incessant rains, we decided not to evacuate anymore. There was also talk that the dam in Caliraya Lake would release some water.

When the rains stopped, my husband went out to catch fish. I wasn't able to get rations because the water in our street was above our heads and our barangay is at the far end of Purok 6. I also could not leave my mother by herself. We only got relief goods from church people who were doing the distribution from boats that went house-to-house.

When I first lined up for rations, I felt like the lowest of the low in the eyes of the relief workers. I just couldn't swallow their words. "Line up, line up! Line up good or we'll end it right here. You're all so impatient." It was painful. As volunteers, they should not talk that way. These people in queue, who were already downtrodden, shouldn't be deprived of help. They have the right to live. Sometimes, even if you are in line with a supplies stub, if they fail to see your name, they will give you nothing. Why do they do that? Maybe because they feel they have power. I was saddened to see government employees lording it over poor people like us. Because of these experiences, I was roused to become active again.

When I was able to talk to a friend who works at the municipal hall, I voiced out the complaints of my neighbors who rarely got rations. I was made to list their names, and after two days, we got our supplies.

From then on, each time I heard news that relief goods were coming, I made the rounds to inform my neighbors. Sometimes, I got their stubs and claimed the goods for them. Sometimes the supplies were limited so we ended up going home empty-handed. Because we were far from the evacuation center, we did not always receive relief assistance. That's how hard it was during Ondoy.

An aggravating factor was the month-long power loss. Mother's blood pressure rose frequently; she grew weaker and almost couldn't get up. Because of a wound from a fall in the bathroom, she had to be brought to the hospital by boat. She appeared to be traumatized even by the sight of water. Later, she was terrified and even cried during baths. She was like a child who would squeeze my arms and dodge the dipper when she sees me holding it. I would cry out of sheer compassion. I can only say, "My God, give me more strength to weather all these."

But life is so complex and filled with surprises. I kept reminding myself that as long as there's life, there is hope, so I must not give up. With what I had witnessed during Ondoy, I need to be strong for my family as well as for others. Maybe this is the reason why Oxfam picked me—so I can continue what I had begun.

As days went by, I felt so alive because of what I went through. Although some were born well off, I believe we are all equals. As a woman, I know I need to fight for our rights. I am encouraged, knowing that I am not alone and that many stand by me in the struggle. As a woman, I learned how to work harder for my family. Oxfam gave me livelihood assistance, because of which I continue to earn by selling native delicacies or grass brooms.

Before, it was my husband who objected for my being active in civic organizations. But because of my patient explanations, he finally understood. I also told him that I wasn't doing it for myself, but for the people who look up to me. When he offered to accompany me to a seminar, I knew it was a sign that he was beginning to understand. I hope he would be my partner in the struggle because he knew what happened during Ondoy and Peping.

I am still active in meetings and seminars for my continuing education and in organizations. I also want to keep myself busy because I don't want to be alone in the house. I recall my mother who suffered a stroke, became bedridden, and died three months ago. I am still grieving. If not for Ondoy, maybe she'd still be alive. But I believe everything has a reason because if she's still alive, maybe I wouldn't be able to help and lead other people. Now, I am more than ready for this mission.

Many have not yet recovered from the damage caused by Ondoy. One of the most important lessons for all of us is to prepare for disasters. Be alert with warnings. Prepare the basic things needed by the family. Act with dispatch. I myself am preparing for the challenges ahead.

As a woman leader, I want to help not only my family, but my fellow citizens, too. Learn to place the good of the many before personal interests. I will try my best to enlighten them of their rights, and like me, for them to be always ready for anything that could happen. I hope to be a light along their path.

Having lost her father at a young age, Divinia became very close to her mother who died in the aftermath of typhoon Ondoy. She raised her three children along with her husband and is an active leader in barangay projects and services for the community.



An Evacuee-Leader as a Model of Productivity

MELINDA ARBAN

Bgy. Marinig, Cabuyao

I am a simple home maker, married, with seven children, and working as a street sweeper. After my work and a brief rest, I would bulk-buy fish for selling. If there's no more fish, I look for something else to sell. This way, our family is able to survive each happy day.

Typhoon Ondoy was a big test for us. On September 26, 2009, everything happened so fast. We weren't prepared and we couldn't prevent what happened. I was shocked but steeled myself. My children and I removed our belongings from the waters' path. My husband wasn't of much help because he became overwhelmed. We couldn't sleep the whole night; we just sat out on stacked-up benches.

Pitching Tent

The next day, despite the horror of being surrounded by water, I decided to pitch a small tent on higher ground. I was anxious that my small children would get sick for lack of shelter. When my husband saw the tent, he did the final touches. I was pleased with my own resolve. We stayed in the tent while the water was high. This situation lasted more than two months. At first it was difficult, but we got used to it. We didn't have a choice.

We didn't have food, so when I learned of rations being distributed, I went and asked. Had I not done so, we would have perished at that barangay relocation site in Junk Shop at Purok 6. That was how we and my neighbors dealt with the situation.

I learned many things on what to do during calamities. As an individual, I gained a deeper and wider understanding of our situation and I was able to stay calm at all times. As a woman, I became more alert and friendlier. As a mother, I grew stronger and steadfast.

At first, it looked like Ondoy brought nothing but suffering. The flood destroyed what little we had. I was always on the verge of tears with our predicament. It was hard getting back on our feet. But amid all these, I learned how to prepare for a disaster. I became tougher and prayerful, always thanking God for the assistance and gifts we received.

One afternoon, an Oxfam team came to our relocation site and interviewed us about our conditions. Shortly, they began their assistance: food, cleaning aids, toiletries, and livelihood. We used the money for various businesses. Some became successful enough with operations continuing up to now, while some failed.

Leading the Group

I was strengthened by experience. I was able to organize a group and I believe I became an effective president who is sincere and with genuine concern for the people.

I led our group consisting of 15 families. At first, they were slow to attend meetings but quick to receive rations. It was hard to get people to comply. When the situation became clearer to them, the task became easier. Really! It's very difficult to be a leader, but with perseverance, we could overcome everything and build an organization. I am not saying that I'm that good, but in my opinion, I have performed my duties as leader at the Junk Shop relocation site.

A Livelihood to Get us Back on our Feet

At first, I sold garlic. When garlic became scarce, I put my capital into ukay-ukay (used clothing) from which I partly derive my income up to now. After sweeping the streets, I go to Southville to sell ukay-ukay. When I'm not at my stall, I put up my wares on hangers and peddle them on the road. When my children are free, they help me with selling.

I befriend other vendors so they too become my ukay-ukay customers. I put in effort to increase my business using what I have learned from the women's organization. At present, I am also starting to raise ducks. In a few months, I expect to get into selling balut (boiled duck eggs) and salted eggs. My new neighbors here in Southville say that I am very hardworking and persistent. I tell them, "You can also do it. You just need to be aware of what is happening around you to see opportunities for development."

Because of my progress, other people are encouraged to attend seminars and to become members of the women's organization. I used to tell them, "Trainings and meetings are important. You will learn a great deal. Aside from spending time wisely, you will also earn."

I dream that my projects would prosper. I hope that my ukay-ukay business flourishes and soon include brand new merchandise. I hope my duck farm yields enough eggs so I can get into the balut and salted egg business. I think my colleagues are also hardworking, that's why we are moving on in life. We all just need to work hard and persevere, and always ask for God's grace. With life, there's hope. With hope, dreams become reality.

I was awarded a lot in the government's Southville Cabuyao relocation site, which stands on high ground and is flood-free. I built a small house on this lot with the help of, again, Oxfam. In this new home, we hope to find our luck towards prosperity.

Street sweeper and vendor rolled into one, Melinda works hard to earn her keep. Her many endeavors now include selling clothes, which she brings along to meetings to pitch to her colleagues.



Volunteerism in the Time of Ondoy

EVELYN G. ESTACIO

Bgy. Lingga, Calamba City

As early as July and August, our area was already flooded because we live in a flood-prone area along the lake's coast. Our street was permanently flooded that we had to build a makeshift bridge so we can walk to the main road.

But on September 26, our place virtually became the sea. I braced myself because we were already surrounded by waters that rose very fast. It so happened that my husband and son both worked the night shift. Only my daughters and I were at home then, along with my mother-in-law, who was 81 years old and couldn't walk. We were powerless. My fear worsened, and I thought: "How will we move to higher ground? We have no boat, and none of us could swim."

We didn't evacuate. The water in the house was almost neck-deep. We sat on a bamboo bed, on which we also placed my mother-in-law's wheelchair. The water was touching the base of the bed. We were soaking wet and shivering in the cold. We had to urinate right there because the toilet was also submerged in flood water.

Unprepared

I was desperate, blaming myself for not preparing for Ondoy. We couldn't use cell phones because the batteries were already drained. Electric power was out and the waters had reached the wall outlets. We didn't have anything to eat, not even packaged instant food because I was waiting for my husband and son to arrive from work with some money to buy rice. We endured the longest

hours of our life.

Our barangay council was ill-prepared for disasters; we did not even have a boat to evacuate people with. The officials knew that Purok 5 and 6 in Bgy. Lingga are always flooded when there is a heavy downpour. The entire community was ill-prepared such that when the emergency came, each family relied on their own survival strategy. There was no cooperation or caring among neighbors. A sad proof was that nobody remembered to help us, considering that we lived in an interior part of the village. All our neighbors were already at the evacuation center.

It was already four in the afternoon when my husband and son came, riding on a wobbly bath tub they rented as a boat. First to go was my mother-in-law on her wheelchair and my two children. We evacuated only with the clothes on our backs and some important documents.

When they returned for us, one of my children fell into a deep portion of a ditch. It was fortunate that she was rescued by a fisherman or else she would have drowned because she doesn't know how to swim. But before we could even go further, I fell, too. I swallowed some floodwater and gasped for air, but fortunately the water was only up to my neck and my husband was able to grab my hands in time. God is really good for not abandoning us.

Life as an Evacuee and BHW

We finally arrived at the school. It was already crowded and very noisy. People moved all over the place, carrying whatever they were able to salvage. There was no more place for us at the school. Our biggest concern was my disabled mother-in-law because she would have a really hard time in the evacuation center. An acquaintance of mine, an old man, invited us to stay with him. He lived alone in his house because his children are living abroad. We immediately cleaned out a space that used to be a stock room. I pitied my mother-in-law because of her difficult condition. It was also difficult living with other people. All members of my family were also restless and depressed. We lived in that house for three months after Ondoy.

But I never gave up. I continued to perform my duties as BHW in our community. We focused our attention on the well-being of the other evacuees and in managing conditions like fever, colds, coughs, typhoid fever and diarrhea. Because of the cramped condition, these were the evacuees' most common illnesses. The Barangay Health Center was located inside the school. Here, the evacuees consulted the doctors. I assisted in the distribution of medicines and took the patients' blood pressure, especially the mothers who were stressed by the conditions in the evacuation center.

I also volunteered for Oxfam's WASH Committee. I taught evacuees about proper hand washing that could save lives using plain soap and water; about the importance of cleanliness in the surroundings, especially

in toilets; and about the importance of safe drinking water. I helped in the distribution of water disinfectants or Aqua tablets. I also accompanied Oxfam, MAPAGPALA and COM coordinators in the dissemination of the Hygiene Kit and Return Kit.

I also helped DSWD in drawing up the list of evacuees for relief distribution. We organized the lines. I even did the men's heavy work of passing relief goods—mats, beddings, soap, and pails—from the delivery truck to the people lined up. I went to a lot of places to deliver goods to those affected by the calamity.

I am also active in the women's organization, including the federation Pinagkaisang Pamayanan ng Laguna (PINAGPALA). I helped coordinate exposure trips for students of La Salle Zobel, Ateneo de Manila, Miriam College, San Beda, and the University of the Philippines. The students also helped us through donations to the evacuees.

As a volunteer leader of the women's group, I was able to nurture the spirit of service and putting the needs of the many first. I envision the equal treatment of all people. I don't easily get carried away by divisive comments from some members of the organization. I would reply: "Why? They are also calamity victims and members of the organization and they should also get their benefits." That's how I am. I hope to be a leader who can be trusted, and I do not like corruption.

Even if I myself had been a disaster victim, I sometimes do not prioritize my own family's needs and care. I delegated my duties to my children who, fortunately, understood and supported what I was doing.

Despite hardship and occasional hunger during distributions, I have always been positive and enlivened by helping others in my community. I see the joy in their faces when I arrive with NGO and LGU people, when I list down their names. When I fail to list the names of some, they become angry, saying I play favorites. At times, those who fail to be listed are not residents of my barangay in Lingga, Calamba City.

What the Future Holds

For me, the greatest lesson of Ondoy is disaster preparedness. The forecasts of the weather bureau and the fire department should be taken seriously, to ensure preparedness for whatever future calamities our country may face. We should always be ready, alert and respond rapidly. We shouldn't be stubborn and heed warnings instead of dismissing them, especially in dangerous flood-prone areas near Laguna Lake.

We should also care enough to collaborate and cooperate to be safe not only in times of disasters, but in preparing for calamities as well. With the help of DSWD, our barangay organized its Barangay Disaster Coordinating

Council (BDCC) last July 2010 at the Calamba City Hall. The local officials elected into the council have undergone the needed seminars and committee assignments were also clarified. As a BHW, I would be joining the Medical and Relief Team Committee.

Alongside these preparations, we keep faith in and pray to the Creator.

Once a reserved and simple wife, Evelyn had become not only a model spouse and mother, but also a diligent BHW who is enlightened about her rights. She is also the leader in the women's group in her community.



The Woman Warrior of Sto. Angel

NANCY DEGAMO

Bgy. Santo Angel Norte, Sta. Cruz

Early on that fateful morning, my husband was already convincing me to pack up and leave. “Love, let’s go. I feel the flood would come soon.” Between the two of us, my husband is the more anxious one. I just laughed and teased him, “For a man, you’re so panicky.” Like many other people, I don’t trust the weather bureau’s (PAGASA’s) forecasts. When they say it would be hot, it would rain hard. When they say a typhoon is coming, the sun will inevitably shine. But because of my husband’s insistence, I let him take our five children to his mother at Marossa. Our eldest and the baby were left with me.

When he had left, I began to worry because the water was rising fast. But courage is in my nature despite being a woman. I kept a clear head and, most importantly, I put all my trust in Him. Never mind our belongings.

My husband returned horrified; he even reprimanded me for my stubbornness. He said the water was already waist-deep and fast rising. I bundled up my children to keep them warm. Outside, we could no longer see the path we were on because of the water’s depth.

It had been only a month since I gave birth. Thus, I strode through the flood with utmost care, fearing I might drop our baby. I made our eldest hold on to my back, with my husband standing guard behind all of us. I began to shiver as the cold entered every part of my body. The water seemed endless. It was a big relief when we reached Marossa, although there were already many people in that private building, which had been declared as an evacuation center.

Evacuee's Woes

Perhaps because of being soaked in rainwater before bathing in “living water,” I had a relapse, and suffered chills and a splitting headache. It was fortunate that my relatives were also at the evacuation center, especially my mother who knew traditional medicine.

At that time everything was underwater, affecting my husband's trade as a tricycle driver. I never imagined the woes of a mother with many children would be my own. These included the experience of chasing after rations, trying to outrun a throng of other evacuees, for my family to survive the day. I couldn't care less if someone took a picture me during those times. For some people, that would be shameful, but I swallowed my pride, if only for my children's welfare. I didn't want them to go hungry.

My children stopped attending school because my husband couldn't ply his route. I also experienced having a sick child and being penniless. My heart broke as she vomited continuously and whispered to me, “Mama, I could no longer stand this.” Maybe it was because the water in the evacuation center was not potable. Fortunately, my in-laws helped us get to the hospital.

The flooding affected the entire town of Sta. Cruz. This was how hard life for each evacuee was. We had nothing at all.

Red Tape and Corruption

This situation strengthened my resolve to defend my fellow evacuees from opportunistic rations administrators. Before, I was apathetic but I realized that the evacuees' leaders lacked capabilities and were afraid to confront the excesses of some of those deputized by the DSWD. For instance, on several occasions, they erased the names of my companions from their lists — whom I personally know to be real Ondoy victims—although they were physically present.

This abuse became more pronounced when rations came in on World Food Day: half a sack of rice. A DSWD employee went up the truck and condescendingly said, “Call everyone in this evacuation center for the issuance of yellow cards. Those who are not present will get nothing.” It was almost ten in the morning—most evacuees were either already at work or at school. Others had gone to clean their houses; the water had been subsiding and they longed to go back home because of the hard life in the evacuation center. I didn't like what the ration administrators were doing, so I explained: “Why? Do you think the people are just waiting for rations? Of course, they would go off to work to earn money.”

I also observed that most of the ration administrators were listing their relatives even if they were not victims so they could stockpile the goods. I even learned that one even listed the names of his child and in-law separately to be able to get extra kits, especially money from Oxfam. This corruption

happened amidst the multitude of hungry people in dire need. They even had the gall to be arrogant as if the money that bought the goods came from their own pockets.

We also had a problem with how to pay the electric bill in the evacuation center because most of us had no source of income. I drafted letter soliciting assistance. I found that it was hard getting help from the government, especially about the needs of the poor. It was depressing to know that because of the bad eggs, discrimination exists in the government despite their rhetoric of equality under the law.

When we went to the Provincial Capitol, we were dismayed at how the secretary treated us. She asked why we were asking for money to pay for the electricity and why shouldn't the evacuees foot the bill? She could have just said that we were a worthless bunch. I resented her arrogance because she didn't realize that most of the evacuees are tricycle drivers, taho (sweet silken tofu) vendors, peddlers: people who derive income from street sales. How could they work when the streets are underwater?

Leader without the Horse and the Bolo

Around this time, I met people from Oxfam, COM and the MAPAGPALA coalition who invited us to a seminar about displaced persons' rights. In that activity I understood our plight in Marossa and realized my potential of becoming a woman leader who is fearless in articulating the evacuees' plight.

When the QRT was organized, I was one of the original six members. The others were Ka Melchor Magano (MAPAGPALA President), Diosdado Balgua Jr., Flor Umali, Ana G. Sante, and Clarissa Mangilinan. The Team's objective was to keep tabs on the conditions of the Ondoy victims and cases of abuse against bakwits (evacuees) like myself, especially those involving gender-based violence. With the local QRTs in place in every evacuation center in the barangay, the evacuees were informed of their rights and capacitated to defend them, not through violent means, but through an organized articulation of their plight.

In becoming a QRT member, DSWD people looked at us with disdain and even labeled us as activists. This revealed their belief that people shouldn't even ask for is rightfully theirs—the promised housing, rations and other support. Don't people have the right to ask? Is simply asking considered as fighting? Is that enough reason to get back at the evacuees? Instead of authorities setting good examples, why are they leading the violent curtailment of the rights of the needy? What kind of governance is this? We only wanted genuine service and respect for our rights. I hope the new administration changes this practice.

Our Team was successful. Being a QRT member enriched my knowledge especially about human rights.

Reflections

I continued being active in the organization FEDMMASC-MAPAGPALA as secretary. I know it's in my heart to help people. I realized that many people like me have principles and genuine regard for others.

It is now etched in my mind that in fighting for your rights, you don't need to grovel and be pathetic in the eyes of others, especially people from government. We must assert our rights with dignity. All human beings have the right to shelter, food, education, and other needs. Nobody has the right to trample upon these rights. These rights are asserted at any branch of the government without begging or seeming lowly. This is enshrined in our laws.

As a mother and a woman leader, I want to increase and widen my knowledge. I will attend trainings and seminars on human rights and will self-study and read about these topics. As a leader, I am often approached by my colleagues, who have issues against any leader or influential person. I believe that poverty is not a hindrance to seek redress and promote human rights and a life with honor. With or without compensation and credit, everybody should do what is good and true without waiting for anything in return.

Nancy is an active woman leader and Secretary of the Federasyon ng Magsasaka at Mangingisda ng Sta.

Cruz (FEDMMASC). Married and a mother of seven, she is a brave woman and a defender of rights, especially when she knows she's right and every time there is corruption and discrimination.



REFLECTIONS

Journeying Through the Storm

MELCHOR MAGANO

.....
Laguna Coordinator

It all began with a phone call from Janice Ian Manlutac of Oxfam about a project that would sustain the cooperation that has already been started during the emergency response. Central to this is the documentation of the life stories of women from the Quick Response Teams (QRT) and the Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Committee formed during typhoon Ondoy. I was honored because it was a sign of trust in the capability of MAPAGPALA to handle and manage a project.

One afternoon in September 2010, we met at Oxfam's office and discussed the crafting of case studies about women's participation and leadership in the emergency response during Ondoy. It would cover ten municipalities, five each for Rizal and Laguna, and three barangays per municipality. It will gather the women who were part of the emergency response initiated by Oxfam.

That was a big challenge for MAPAGPALA, but I never had second thoughts. I was confident we could do it, especially with COM as partner-collaborator. Later, COM Director Luz B. Malibiran became part of the discussion.

We encountered some problems in project implementation. It was hard to cover such a vast area within a very limited amount of time but we managed to mobilize other MAPAGPALA leaders to be able to cover the entire project area.

I recommend that the community writers undergo further training and to come up with publications; continuation of the focus group discussions (FGDs) to include more women who have not yet shared their experiences; conduct of more training and planning workshops about Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR); and, further strengthening of the partnership between Oxfam and MAPAGPALA.

Ka Melchor is the Overall Chairperson of the Mamamayan para sa Pagpapaunlad at Pangangalaga ng Lawa (MAPAGPALA, Inc.), an alliance of seven federations from the provinces of Laguna and Rizal and the National Capital Region (Taguig City).

GINA JIMENEZ

Laguna Coordinator

When Oxfam and MAPAGPAGLA, with the cooperation of CO Multiversity, conducted a research project about the experiences of women during typhoon Ondoy, I was one of those selected as Provincial Coordinator. I went to the target project areas in Laguna to select people with rich experiences during the typhoons Ondoy, Peping, and Santi. I also helped in plan and prepare the town discussions, the training of local writers, and other aspects of the project.

I picked up a lot of lessons about life while talking with the participants and on becoming aware of their stories. In any disaster or tragedy that comes your way, it is important to analyze and see the positive things they bring into your life. In mingling with other people, one should always practice humility and patience. In the course of helping other people, one should be remain firm amid criticisms. We should continue to fight for the rights and welfare of the needy. Be firm with our decisions. Always take a positive outlook in life and in our voyage to the future, we should always remember to care for the environment and look upon the welfare of all things under the sun.

Despite being a victim of Ondoy herself, Gina is one of the most hardworking and reliable Coordinators of the project in Laguna.

*This is how we were
after Ondoy's fury.
From suffering...*



*... to gradual
enlightenment,
learning, and
recovery.*



The voyage of hearts and minds of women in Laguna





Journeying

From the trials wrought by typhoon Ondy, they reflected on and gave voice to their own experiences.





Here are the women of Laguna who triumphed over the calamity.



They found themselves in writing, in oneness and togetherness as simple women who stood their ground and continued to work for the community.

R I Z A L



A Flood of Suffering in Rizal

Rizal province is part of Region IV-A, or CALABARZON (Cavite-Laguna-Batangas-Rizal-Quezon), envisioned by previous political administrations as the industrial center of the Philippines, despite the fact that a large part of its residents' livelihood is derived from farming and fishing.

The province is considered as the country's next business hub in the country because of its strategic location, 20 km east of Metro Manila.

A national survey also reveals that the province has the lowest poverty incidence rate relative to other areas in the Philippines.

Nestling Waters and Mountains. Agriculture, particularly fishing, is the primary source of income for majority of Rizal residents. Other sources are chicken and duck farms, while the mountains provide rich yields of rattan and firewood, as well as marble, rocks, sand, red clay and other mineral materials used in construction.

Rizal is nestled within the southern portion of the Sierra Madre mountain range, its face a combination of valleys and mountains, with low-lying mainly urbanized and densely populated areas in the western part of the province and the rugged, Sierra Madre in the east.

The province is bordered by Metro Manila in the west, and by the provinces of Bulacan, Quezon and Laguna in the north, east and south, respectively. Along the north is Laguna de Bay, encompassing 83 barangays from eight municipalities within a 57,000 hectare expanse.

Ondoy Surpassed Past Flooding Experiences. People who live in barangays near the lake have been used to and have already adapted to the regular rise of the waters even after light rainfall. But during typhoon Ondoy and the flooding in its aftermath, it took longer for the flooding to subside. The rains poured on, resulting in strong waves, causing more damage to the communities.

Rizal is one of the places which bore the full brunt of Ondoy's wrath.

ONDOY'S EFFECTS IN RIZAL

TOTAL DAMAGES (Partial)	Ondoy (Ketsana) 26 September 2009
Affected Individuals Affected Families	956,677 190,862
Damage to Houses: 1. Partial 2. Fully damaged TOTAL	79,625 7,285 86,910
No. of Evacuation Centers Individuals in Evacuation Centers Families in Evacuation Centers	142 50,040 katao 10,814 pamilya
Effects to Individuals Dead Missing Injured	167 314 705

SOURCE: *Typhoon Ondoy's Impact on Rizal Province* by Loel M. Malonzo, Executive Officer—Philippine Disaster Coordinating Council (PDCC) of the Provincial Government of Rizal (Oktubre 2009)

The provincial government estimated the total damages from Ondoy at P1,871,002,727, broken down as follows: public infrastructure (i.e., roads, bridges and other buildings) – P1,668,305,984; healthcare facilities – P22 million; and, schools – P180,696,743.

Rescue teams were unable to access many areas because of the terrain, insufficient rescue equipment and, over-all, inadequate emergency preparedness. Many families were stranded for hours atop roofs or trees near their homes.

This affected the timely arrival of relief goods from government and various organizations, resulting in scores suffering from hunger, illness and other evacuation-related difficulties.

Touching Base with the Hearts and Minds of the Women of Rizal

VIVIAN DEDASE-ESCOTON

It is said that survivors of disasters experience different stresses as their bodies, minds and persons respond to the event. Many tend to focus on how their lives changed and the perception that it will never be the same again. Oftentimes, constant anxiety and fear of future disasters replace peace of mind.

They frequently describe their situation as abject, confused, anxious, weak and hopeless. Others suffer the loss of predictability, safety and stability of their surroundings, and the familiarity of the daily routines that give structure to their lives. This results in mental distress, particularly because of the loss of resources or belongings and due to the disruptive changes in their surroundings.

While more than a year had passed since the typhoon's devastation, I know that these women still suffer from its effects because processing these kinds of psycho-social stress takes a long time, especially when there is no opportunity to do so. Looking back, reflecting, learning and writing about such experiences are not easy tasks for those who harbor severe pain and grief. I kept these in mind as I prepared and guided the women who participated in this project.

From our first interaction, I admired the resilience of the 75 women-participants from Rizal. I witnessed their courage and strength—between the sobs, unsteady hands, sighs, broodings, tuning out, halting narrations— how they painstakingly wove their stories until smiles slowly appeared on their faces. They wholeheartedly shared these thoughts, feelings and experiences; I am grateful that they entrusted me with their stories.

Our FGDs (Focus Group Discussion) became GCIs (Group Crisis Intervention¹) as they gained strength from one another in the telling and sharing of their tales. It took a long time to get them to open up. At the onset, some wept; some were apathetic, pens poised to write; some quietly shed tears. I had to talk to some of them individually, not so much as to get their stories but more importantly to put them at ease or to assuage the pain lodged within. They affirmed that despite being more than a year since the typhoon, it was the first time they focused on their own thoughts and feelings about their experience.

For these women, the whole process of looking back, reflecting, learning and writing about their experiences as disaster survivors became a way to process the stress that they experienced and may still be experiencing. This is perhaps the biggest contribution and success of the project: part of the process of healing their inner wounds to be able to face life's challenges anew.

Many of their stories can be wellsprings of lessons and insights, some of these will remain private because of their sensitive nature. Some have yet to be shared by the women for they are not yet emotionally ready to do so. Despite this, I am glad that when we met again during the sharing of stories at the provincial level, they were still present, smiling, and no longer sobbing. For me, it was a sign that the process of telling and writing their stories already had positive effects on their emotional transformation.

Below are some of the themes that emerged from the stories of the women from Rizal.

Volunteerism. Some narratives tell of the women's initial perception of themselves as weak because of their gender, while surfacing their strengths and other traits as leaders. For instance, there is the story of a nurse lamenting the loss of her partner, whose grief was somehow assuaged by her voluntary actions to heal the sick during typhoon Ondoy. Also notable was the initiative of a wife-and-husband team in using their boat to ferry people to the evacuation center regardless of their own safety and livelihood. The story of an untiring and brave grandmother underscored not just her heroism but also the caring for others that is an innate trait of Filipinos and leaders.

¹ Group crisis intervention (GCI) - GCI opens a venue for stronger communities and towards deepening the understanding of how people experience tragedies. The focus of this intervention is the deeply-seated emotional trauma and helping the survivors to regain control in acknowledging and understanding what happened. This includes not only listening to the survivors' reactions and giving them the space to share their stories, but also in assisting them in facing their future. A crucial factor is renewing contacts with the victims and helping to keep their hopes alive. Group Crisis Interventions can help as an immediate response to a severe crisis and as a means to include the reality of trauma as part of community life. GCI also provides opportunity for the airing and affirming of experiences and to help the participants to anticipate and prepare for future problems. – *Definition from the National Organization for Victims Assistance @1987, 1994, 1998, Washington DC*

Volunteerism is the characteristic that motivated them to participate in civic actions and to form organizations to continue living out what they learned. Also part of this is the sense of accountability and acceptance of responsibility for the group and for society, which they try to balance with responsibility to their families.

Evacuation. Experiences and conditions during the evacuation phase became a challenge to the resilience of the writers from Rizal. They tell of the difficulties faced while saving their loved ones; their struggles to assert their right to humanitarian assistance due them in the midst of their travails; their trying experiences at the evacuation centers living with people with different and diverse attitudes and perspectives in life; the insecurity of frequent transfers to different evacuation centers; and, in the midst of all these, having to rebuild their livelihood and themselves.

Despite the sadness of looking back and recalling painful memories, their stories serve as fountains of inspiration: the hours spent patiently waiting in line for relief goods; the emotional stories of leaders in the evacuation centers showing concern for others despite being mocked and hearing hurtful words; and, the BHWs, who while themselves were disaster victims, dutifully caring for others in need without asking for anything in return. All these show the patience, understanding and forbearance of the women, as they tirelessly work towards their personal and community aspirations for a home and shelter to come back to.

Livelihood. Majority of the women relied on fishing, farming and weaving for a living. When their livelihoods were wiped out, they exhibited thrift, frugality and appreciation of the assistance given them. They scrimped and saved; continued reaching out to other people and to organizations; and, systematically maximized the emergency assistance they received so they could pull themselves up by their bootstraps for the long-term.

Family Unity. From the torment felt by a mother not at home when the disaster struck, to the solitary experience of evacuating with one's own children without her supposed partner, to witnessing one's child being swept away by the raging waters—these bitter experiences became sources of strength for the women. Many discovered they can save their children and other loved ones single handedly and by necessity match a man's physical strength. Particularly noteworthy is the story of a woman who lost her child, but stayed positive; her experience served as her life inspiration to go on and rebound from tragedy.

The women who participated in this project used these experiences and the lessons as stepping stones toward actively participating in organizations and in a wider society; preparing for the future; valuing and strengthening the family especially during times of calamities; being frugal in managing their livelihoods; and, showing concern and vigilance to what is happening to the environment.

In the succeeding pages, we celebrate the different faces of women-leaders during times of calamities and learn from the experiences that have transformed their perspectives in a society and culture that accords more recognition and value to men.

Vivian Dedase-Escoton, a registered social worker, guided the women writers from Rizal in remembering, owning and sharing their Ondoy stories.



LIFE STORIES
OF THE WOMEN OF
RIZAL

An Eldest Child Lost, An Inspiration Gained

JINGKY ASUNCION

Bgy. San Guillermo, Morong

September 24, 2009 started out joyfully for our family. Dawn saw the birth of my daughter Sharmaine Althea, who, while delivered premature at seven months, came out healthy.

I gave birth home, in the company of my mother and a midwife. Aside from having no money to spare, I am also afraid of hospitals. My mother cared for me while my husband Ruben was away, plying the Antipolo route with his tricycle. When he learned that I gave birth, he immediately went home to our house near the river in Morong. Together with my sister, brother-in-law, nephew and eldest eight year old daughter Sherlyn, we shared stories and the chicken treat he brought home as the rains poured outside.

The next day, when I woke up and looked out of the window, I could no longer see the wooden bridge we use for crossing the river. We didn't pay attention to this, thinking that the flood water would not reach our house just like in the past. We were so surprised when the water rose to knee-level inside the house real fast. We quickly moved to my sister's house with my husband carrying me on his arms.

With the water was still rising by 10:00 a.m., we panicked. My brother-in-law volunteered to bring the children to safer ground and promised he will not let them out of his sight wherever he goes. "Go ahead! Take them first to a more secure place and we will follow you afterward". He took with him Sherlyn, my sister and a neighbor's family. They had not gone far when we heard my sister shouting: "The Bisaya family is getting drowned!" When my husband and I looked out, we saw that the Bisaya family was already far

gone—along with my daughter—carried away by the raging current.

My husband was about to follow them, but I called him back. My sister's house was about to collapse and would all be swept away next by the surging waters. He immediately smashed a wall, took our newly-born child Sharmaine and handed her to my sister, who was, at that time, clutching the branches of a mango tree near our house, along with three other men who were also trying to save themselves from the raging floodwaters, which chest high. My husband immediately climbed the tree, followed by myself holding on to a blanket he was holding to prevent me from being carried away by the flood.

I jumped from the window as our house was about to collapse. When my husband pulled on the blanket so that I could climb up, my skirt slipped and I reached the branches clad only in my panties. I repeatedly apologized to the three strangers.

We were ten people altogether, including my mother, two brothers, two children, my husband and myself. We were like birds perched precariously on that tree. We were so afraid it might break because of our number and combined weight and because of the strong winds and raging floodwaters.

I tightly embraced my infant daughter because it was very cold, while ceaselessly crying because I helplessly witnessed my first-born drown, along with my sister's family. I never stopped praying and hoping that all of them were still alive. My baby was crying and hungry, but I couldn't possibly breastfeed her because we will both surely fall into the flood's current. I almost lost it because of hunger, thirst and worry over my daughter who was swept away by the waters.

When darkness came, we heard a cry coming from the direction of the river from one of my sisters repeatedly begging for help. We stoically suffered deep within because we couldn't do anything at that point. The flood was still chest-high. When it receded, my husband crossed the riverbank to get my sister, who was herself on top of a camachile tree. It was when they came back that I finally learned that my daughter, my niece and brother-in-law indeed drowned and died.

Sad, wet and hungry, we trudged across thorns and garbage strewn rice fields on our way to Tambongco. When we arrived at my aunt's place, she immediately changed my newborn child's clothes. She was already turning blue because of the cold. After we changed our clothes and ate rice gruel, my aunt took us to the evacuation center in Sitio Gitna. I immediately took my baby daughter to the doctor. We were given medicines and food, as well as a cardboard box to sleep on. We slept on the cement floor for one week.

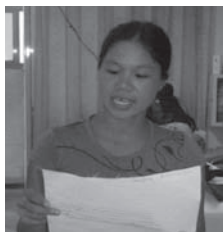
I was crying all the time because they still had not located my daughter. When she was found in Cardona, a fisherman said that they had a difficult time removing her body from where it was hanging. Her remains arrived. I almost went out of my mind. We held a funeral wake at the gym near the barangay and evacuation center last September 29. The next morning, the children were buried. I was so grateful to all who consoled us, gave flowers and food and volunteered to cook so that we had something to eat.

At the evacuation center, we were treated well by the barangay volunteers and officials. They were able to provide all of our needs, such as food, clothes and a roof where we could sleep. The administrators from the Church also gave out milk, diaper, soap, medicine, food and household goods. We were able to leave the evacuation center on October 2.

We temporarily set up our house at my aunt's lot because we could not return to our former home. We were still afraid and the memory of the past events was still fresh. Together with my my sister and parents, we are stayed under one roof. I had a house constructed made of sawali and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) gave us the other materials--wood, roofing and nails. The Church also donated other household basics to enable us to start again.

When my daughter died, I willed myself to be strong. I told myself that I can do this. Whenever I feel myself losing strength, I just kept thinking "If I do so, I will dishonor my daughter, who sacrificed her life to this typhoon!" For the sake of my children and husband, I should not give in to weakness and lose hope.

When another challenge like this comes again, we need to be strong regardless of the problems that will confront us. But I hope that another typhoon like Ondoy will not happen again so that no more family undergoes an experience similar to ours.



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*Jingky is a strong leader in her community because of what she went through during Ondoy. Cheerful, loving, industrious and persevering, her husband and children rely on her innate strength.*  
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Far from Home

LENY INOPIA

Bgy. Nagsandig, Cardona

“Can you bear being separated from your children?”
“Why not? I want them to finish their studies, which is why I want all of us to make sacrifices.”

“Mama, don’t go to work far from us. We will just quit school.”

“Nobody will quit school. You will all graduate. We can do this. The high schoolers among you who only have half-day classes, you can already take care of your younger siblings. Let’s help each other.”

This was how our family arrived at the decision that I should go and work as a household helper in a subdivision in Pasig.

I have seven children with my husband who works in Bulacan. Our eldest was then in fourth year high school and our youngest child was the only who was not studying in town. Although my husband earns ₱350 daily, our family can live with that amount. Our house in Nagsandig Looc is made of bamboo with iron roofing and sawali walls. We lived happily in our small home.

Until one day, my husband was among the piggery workers laid-off because of income loss. I felt weak, my dreams of seeing my children graduate and of having a good life with my family shattered. It was serendipitous that a friend of mine came for a visit and she was looking for a maid for a household composed of a mother and daughter in Pasig.

I started work on Marso 29, 2009. My pay amounted to ₱3,000. Even if I worked all-around the house, my tasks were not very difficult. But during the five months that I worked there, I would always think of and worry about my children every single day. I was always anxious for them. That was the hard part, but I bore it for the sake of my children’s future. Then Ondoy came and the correctness of our decision was put to test.

On the afternoon of September 25, I grew afraid for my family because the TV news reported on a coming typhoon. I worried that nobody would take care of our house that is near the Laguna Lake. I was worried for my children, especially my youngest, then only five years old.

That night, I didn't sleep a wink. In the evening of September 26, I saw on TV many corpses floating along the Marikina River. I wept, certain that our place was strongly hit by the typhoon. At first, my employer didn't allow me to go home to my family. They even promised to give me a cellular phone so that I could send a text message home instead; but no one in my family had a cell phone. After I cried ceaselessly and refused to eat, my employer was forced to allow me to go. She even gave me my wages.

The next afternoon, when I arrived home, I was quite surprised that it was already submerged in water. Nobody was home and I didn't know where my family went. Thankfully, they were able to evacuate safely to the house of a distant relative. I wept when I saw my children, wearing clothes that were not theirs. I learned that they were not able to save any of our belongings because the water rose very swiftly.

When typhoon Santi came next, our house was totally destroyed. When the waves stopped, my husband and children scavenged for bamboo and plywood which can be used to build another house. I pleaded with a lot owner to allow us to build a temporary shelter.

I didn't know how we could make a fresh start. I also felt neglected and not one government agency cared for our plight. Our flooded barrio was located far from the town center. In summer it could be reached by land vehicles, but come rainy season and high water levels, only boats can go in. Sometimes, when there's a profusion of water lilies, people take the mountain path.

While picking bamboo stalks near the shore, I was so glad to see a big boat coming to our barrio. It reached us after the people cleared off the water lilies from its path. They gave out big bags with blankets, towels and a few pieces of Kopiko (instant coffee mix). After that, no more relief assistance came and we didn't expect any more. I felt they were quite selective, choosing as recipients only those who are close to them. This was when I realized that our family should strive harder as we were lucky to survive this typhoon.

Fearful of reliving the agony of being apart from my family during a calamity, I did not leave Cardona anymore to seek employment. I told them I will never leave them again and that we would just all work harder; our earnings, however meager, can be made to support us as long as we are all together. At present, my husband does construction work at P200 a day. That was the only job he could get since he did not finish his studies. As for me, I am busy sewing door mats, an occupation I undertook to pay off the micro-finance loan from the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD) that I used to buy a TV set for my children.

One day, MAPAGPALA held a meeting in our barrio. At first, I did not attend, but during the second meeting, they had an election for officers and I was voted as the Treasurer of BUSILAK (Bigkis Ugnayan ng Samahan na Itataguyod ang Lawa ng Kababaihan). I became an active participant in the group and I was glad for their trust. Through our organization, I also met Oxfam and I was selected as one of the writers for these life stories.

Rising up from the Ondoy tragedy is a big challenge for me as a mother. There is the need to help others as well as to sacrifice for my children. I do not want them to stop schooling because that is the only way for them to stay on the right path. I want them to be successful unlike my husband and myself, who were not able to finish our studies.

This is what we are right now: continuing to struggle against life's challenges and trials. Now we are always prepared for calamities so that we won't repeat the experience of not being able to save any belongings. We may still be having a hard time coming to terms with our trials, but we continue to hope that, that, in the future, we shall emerge victorious.



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*Despite eyes swollen from crying while retelling her Ondoy experience, they say that Leny is still beautiful. She doesn't let any earning opportunity pass if only to see her children through school. She is the Treasurer of BUSILAK.*  
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A Treasured Envelope

DIVINA B. REDOME

Bgy. San Vicente, Angono

My husband and I had simple dreams for our family - make sure that the children finish their education and to save enough capital to open a small store in our old age.

I call my husband uragon (skillful or excellent in the Bicolano dialect) because even before we got married, he already had many partners and I accepted his five children as my own. Despite the fact that we have no children, we work as a team to support our family. I do manicure and haircuts, while he is a tricycle driver. We pool our income and make ends meet everyday, while we put the children through school. A heart ailment didn't stop me from continuing to aspire for a good life.

But, one day, my husband suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. I continued working outside the home after I have done household chores, while I was fighting despondency with prayers and silent tears. My husband's continued support, even if only through his positive thinking, was a big help. He kept telling me: "My love, we shall overcome this. When I get better, it will again be the two of us who would work together to reach our goals."

We sent the children to relatives in the province to economize and be able to send money to them. When my husband recovered, my positive outlook in life was reinforced because God never let me down. I was so glad when he got well and was able to work again as a construction mason. But we had not fully recovered when another storm came.

Ondoy

Ondoy came on a Saturday afternoon. Worried, my husband and I held hands and prayed as it rained non-stop while the water started to pool. We didn't leave our house, thinking that we may lose belongings we had salvaged. Besides, my husband said I am not fit to live in the evacuation center. "It would be dangerous for you to stay in a crowded place because of your ailment. We will just stay home."

There was no electricity, no drinking water, plenty of muddy, garbage-strewn floodwaters. We were forced to stay on the higher floor. I was always crying, but my complete faith in the Lord remained unwavering.

Days passed. I never left our house and always looked out the window. On the other hand, my husband was summoned by his employer to clean up their flooded house. We lived on his earnings. The tools for my trade, however, were destroyed by the flooding and I was unable to cross the bridge, which was elevated and lacked hand rails.

Sulking

Meanwhile, my neighbors who, like us, also didn't go to the evacuation site were always going out. When they come home, I saw that they were carrying different food items: sardines, rice, noodles, milk, biscuit, and sugar. I just stared at them as I am basically a reserved person. I heard that there was a queue for relief goods, but they were not telling me anything. Sometimes, I was even shouting already, "Me, too! May I also have some?" But nobody paid me any mind since they were already fighting over the goods and I am physically unable to do so.

Once, I asked them how they knew when the relief goods are coming. They said that the benefactor, World Vision, goes house-to-house. The next time some people went on rounds again, I vaguely heard that a "group" of five people is needed for a ticket for food allotted to five families. I asked some neighbors to include me in their group. But when we were on the way to the barangay to claim the items, I was expectedly slow in crossing the bridge. They turned to me and said that I should just go and find another group since they already have five people in their group.

I was so hurt that I just went back home and vented my feelings on my husband. At times, I wondered if I was just feeling envious, but I am just human seeing them being able to get something to eat even without lifting a finger. As I saw it, they were collecting relief goods to the point that they can even open up a small sari-sari (variety) store with their hoard. Some of them even sold their rice allocation for cash, since it was more than enough.

Blessings and Luck

My husband and I redoubled our efforts to struggle against life's trials. When I was able to cross the bridge, I sent text messages to my former customers to provide home service. Sometimes, they just go to my house, so with my earnings, we could buy even some mineral water. Then one day, what was due me unexpectedly came.

I was carrying my manicure set on my way to a home service job when I saw many people falling in line. But because I do not want to experience getting hurt again, it had been my attitude to no longer ask any questions; so, I focused my mind towards reaching my destination. Then an interviewer asked me, "Are you in an evacuation center?" When I answered in the negative, I was interviewed and given an Oxfam ticket. After that, I proceeded to my home service job.

I was very happy and grateful to God. When I got home, I heard my neighbors saying that they had to fight their way to the lines—one of them even fell from the bridge—but they weren't given any stub. I remained quiet as usual. When they learned that I got a ticket stub, they chided me: "That's life. Some people want to be the only recipients." I kept silent since God knows the truth. When my husband arrived in the evening, I gave him a happy welcome.

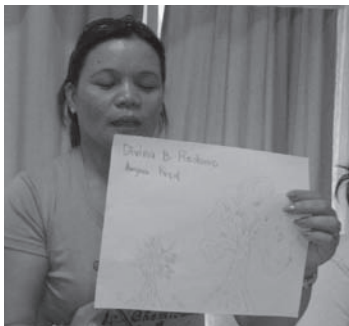
Envelope

Then the day came for falling in line to claim the ticket's relief goods. It was my first time to receive such help since we became victims of Ondoy. I almost passed out from sheer joy when, aside from the hygiene kit, they handed us an envelope. This became the cause of other people's resentment and gossip about my selfishness. The envelope that helped me and my husband with our daily needs and with the children's schooling in the province. The envelope that stood for the beginning of my renewed hope to attain our dreams in life.

That Oxfam envelope contained ₱1,000. From that money, I bought manicure tools, which I continue to treasure and cherish. From my earnings, I saved enough to join a paluwagan (a credit circle or savings-and-loan scheme usually organized by small associations and cooperatives). When my turn came, I bought a refrigerator because I aspired to to sell frozen foods. After I paid off that loan, I joined another paluwagan at ₱50 a week. When I received my money, I bought one kilogram each of tocino (preserved pork slices), hotdog, sausages, and embutido (ground meat roll), which I sold from our home,. Soon, I will again join the paluwagan to further develop my business, which came from Oxfam's envelope.

I can say that everything I have now is because of the envelope from Oxfam. I consider myself very fortunate, especially when I was asked to write my life story in relation to Ondoy. Not only am I honored to have my story included in a book, but I am happy that I would be able to share the lessons with other people. I have proved that even if I am a simple person or just a woman, I was able to step inside such places like Splash Mountain where a workshop about our stories was held. Under the leadership of UGMMARIZ (Ugnayan ng Mamamayan at Mangingisda sa Rizal), our organization KAILA (Kababaihan lingatan ang Lawa) also paved the way for a better life for me. I was not expecting to become their member; it just happened that I heard about the meeting so I attended and simply listened. Because of this, I saw the good it would bring and how the organization could help expand my knowledge, so I joined them without hesitation. At KAILA, we help each other undertake livelihood activities which can assist us to have sources of income and to raise the level of our consciousness as women.

In gratitude, I will further take care of and enhance all the blessings that I have received, such as learning how to interact with different kinds of people; sharing our experiences on resilience; trusting God and our own strengths; valuing and appreciating others; humility; respect for other's skills and capacities; self-esteem; having our own principles; the correct ways of doing things; appreciating the lessons we have learned from life; and, taking care of all these blessings and future ones. I am confident that eventually we shall all achieve our own dreams.



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*Seemingly limitless in her patience and diligence, which was also reflected during the writing of this book, Divine actively works for the organization's development and for the protection of Laguna Lake. Modest in demeanor, she always has a ready smile for everyone.*  
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No Match: Ondoy's Wrath against an Ever-Ready BHW

NIDA ODIADA

Bgy. Sto. Niño, Morong

I hail from Bicol, but my family migrated to the mountains of Sto. Niño in Tanay, Rizal in 1961. I took care of my two other siblings after our five other siblings died. I grew up in poverty which was the reason why I never went to school and I went to work as a domestic helper at an early age.

I haven't been blessed with my own child. I also experienced being near-death because of a grave illness. My loved ones died in succession, including my father, my first husband and my adopted child. When my brother got killed, I was left with the responsibility of raising his six orphaned children. To provide for them, I washed clothes, grew vegetables and raised chickens. In the face of these bitter trials and tragedies, I wondered why.

Becoming a barangay health worker (BHW) made me happy despite the difficult life and work. I was able to help others as a woman and as a person, and this made me glad! I could not forget my experiences as a BHW during the time of Ondoy.

It was hard living along the river since I get anxious even with a light downpour. My vegetable plot would again be destroyed. When I heard from the radio that a typhoon was coming, I immediately started to pack our belongings to make evacuation easier should the storm grow stronger.

At that time, the leader in me came to the fore. When it started raining heavily, I went around the neighborhood and advised people to start packing their things. "If these rains don't stop, we are going to evacuate," I warned them.

As I was preparing my own family for evacuation, the floodwaters suddenly rose. I texted my neighbors that we should prepare to leave, and advised by text the Barangay Captain and Mayor that we needed help to evacuate. At about 9:00 a.m., the Mayor came with members of the Morong Volunteer Emergency Response Team (MVERT), who brought us to the evacuation center at Romantancionco.

We stayed there for a long time. While many different government agencies brought bread and rice gruel, we had no stove and charcoal that we could use for cooking. When a Councilor brought some charcoal, I took it upon myself to apportion these to ensure that every room got their share. When some people from my barrio had diarrhea and fever, I requested medicines from the Mayor, who immediately provided us with our needs.

When the school rooms needed to be used again, we *bakwits* (shortened term for evacuees) were transferred to the gym. I coordinated with the MVERT and I organized room assignments for 220 people so that each family got a room. We were able to take good care of them in our new evacuation center. We designated a leader, a secretary, a representative and a door watcher for room. We also enforced a curfew for our own safety. Everyone had to be inside by eight in the evening since the gym closes at 9:30 p.m.

Because I was their leader, I had to attend to all the problems inside and outside the gym. I was approached by someone who was looking for their rations even if their evacuation site was in Balanti. I said “Okay, bring your family here so that I can take care of you. Here, we have our regulations and when you are within our jurisdiction, we can attend to you properly.” He repeatedly cursed me, saying that his daughter might get sick inside the gym. I was so upset and hurt that I almost forgot that I was a leader. That time, had I not cried instead, I would have hurt him physically. I simply admonished him: “You want assistance, yet you won’t go under our jurisdiction!” as I kept my pride in check.

As a leader and a BHW, I have faced different kinds of people and situations. I had sick wards who suffered from dissociative symptoms; one was 89 years old, and another was an American who already walked like a robot. “What have you sent me this time, my Lord?” I sighed out to God. But my resolve grew stronger anew because I had already gone through all these unusual experiences. The experience of taking care of my young nieces and nephews had allowed me to survive this, along with the help of God and people who supported us.

I know that I haven’t seen the end of all these problems. When we went back to our devastated home, some people disapproved of the fact that CARITAS gave me some household items. Also when 15 people were selected to attend a Tanay seminar, many people became angry with me. “Why send only her?” they asked. They won’t take any explanations so I didn’t pay them

any mind, even if they chided and maligned me. “It doesn’t matter if I get hurt as long as I myself do not hurt other people”. I grew up poor, and my parents may have bequeathed me no riches, except life lessons and a good attitude.

Besides, I knew that I would be sharing my learnings with them. This we did, not just among our barrio neighbors, but to a wider audience. These are our experiences as women during times of calamity from which lessons can be gleaned.

As a leader trusted by my community, I know that my obligations do not stop here. As long as I live, I have work to do. First is to serve God who gave us our lives. When storms and problems come again, we should put God first and be courageous to face head-on any thing that comes our way.

I learned a lot because of Ondoy. As a woman and a person, I developed a keen mind during this time. I also know that we can’t foresee when calamity will strike in our lives. That is why I am always ready to help out to the best of my abilities.



Nida does massage therapy, plants vegetables and raises livestock for a living. A quiet and simple woman, she is always prepared for any calamities and ever-mindful of the welfare of people in her community as well as victims of disasters.

M/V Flood Rescuer: When a Fishing Boat is More Than a Just Fishing Boat

ANNABELLE M. BREBONERIA

Sitio Sapa, Bgy. Pag-asa, Binangonan

Oh my! It's rainy month of July again! We will expectedly have a difficult time until December. These lines flash every time the rainy season starts. Despite being anxious, we are used to it.

Although the floodwaters were only knee-high, the children are affected as they go to school and play outside the house. That is why my neighbors and I solicited materials for a temporary bridge as a pathway. This was difficult but necessary because this is where we reside.

From my Ondoy experience and that of my family, I can say that when bad things happen around us, one must help others who are in need.

We live along the shores of Laguna Lake. My husband is a fisherman. We have five children plus two grandchildren whom we support everyday with a daily catch of grouper, shrimp and other sea food. I sell my husband's daily catch. We may be considered poor, but we are a simple and happy family sharing three square meals a day.

On September 25, 2009, we learned from the television that a typhoon was coming so I monitored the news until the next day. It was already raining continuously and heavily. Because we have been so used to flooding every time it rains, I went out of our house to observe our surroundings. I suddenly thought of going to our neighbor, whose child is also a member of the CFCA Foundation where I serve as a Parent-Leader. I went there to advise them that the Foundation's activity for that day will no longer push through.

A Neighborly Visit turns into an Evacuation

When I got there, I was surprised to see the floodwaters almost an arm length away from reaching the cot where my woman-neighbor lay. It had been only a week since she gave birth, while her husband just recently had an accident, leaving both of them not fully mobile. While they hesitated to evacuate at first, thinking that it might be difficult to live in other people's house, I thought I had to decide for them because of their delicate condition.

I asked another neighbor to help evacuate the mother-and-child first. The mother thanked me profusely, despite her concern for her invalid husband who was left behind. After we made sure that they were safe at the Barangay Hall-turned-evacuation center, I assured her that we would go back for her husband and bring him there. Our other neighbors helped out at this point, including my husband who assisted the invalid man to reunite him with his wife and child. It was only after they were safe that I remembered to go home and evacuate with my own children and grandchildren.

Strong rains fell. Across the stream, there was a long bench which served as a walkway for people. Many people milled around there, shooting the breeze, apparently unaware that a stronger typhoon was on its way. We fell in step with someone who, like us, was also going to the evacuation center. He was carrying numerous belongings and big bags, which were packed systematically indicating his preparedness. We were also able to bring some bags packed with clothes. People who saw us even jokingly asked what foreign destination abroad we are bound. In mocking tones, they even chided us: "Come on! There won't be a typhoon. You are only taxing yourselves!"

A seeming deluge

After a couple of hours, the rains, along with strong winds, came in full force. We were again coming from our house after getting the belongings that we left behind and after cooking some food for my children and grandchildren who were already in the evacuation center. I saw the people who were on their way out towards the road rush back in. The stream's current was surging strongly. Even the town proper was said to be already chest-deep in flood waters. Our way out towards the road is between the stream and a long, high-walled fence along the house of a well-off sitio resident.

I heard screams for help because the stream was already overflowing. We were still in the middle of the bridge when I heard a loud thud and someone shouting "It fell down already!" The tall wall-fence along our walkway had collapsed, blocking our exit. Many people were already weeping because of the seeming deluge. We could hear the roaring gush of loamy red-tinged water from the mountains. Numerous snakes surfaced and were floating on the waters.

Rescue Boat

My husband and I were trapped by the flooding at the bridge, so we decided to go back home and get our boat. We ferried as much people as we could toward the evacuation center. After my husband left me at the evacuation center, he continued to assist rescuing people from their houses using our boat, which was big, had an outboard motor and made of fiberglass. The end of the bridge that collapsed stood near our house. The streets seemed like the sea and a boat was the only way to reach the evacuation center and safety. My husband didn't mind the task of continuous ferrying the people that he can rescue.

The Barangay Hall had a spacious area for the evacuation, but it did not have walls. Thus the drizzle reached the Hall, and the floors got wet. Our family was safe in there, but I was worried about a son who was not with us. The next morning, I saw that he was able to reach our house. He said that he spent the whole night on flooded roads until he was picked up by a truck which gathered people stranded on the streets. I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked people's mutual cooperation during times like this.

Mutual support

Because of Ondoy, I became a member of the Samahan ng Kababaihan ng Sitio Sapa (SKSS) where I was delegated as an Auditor. We have community service projects consisting of cleaning the streets and our surroundings so that there won't be a repeat of the recent disaster. Our Ondoy experiences pushed me and my neighbors to form an organization; it provided a venue where we learned to appreciate the value of helping other people, especially the family.

I learned that one has to be alert and quick-witted about everything that happens in our surroundings at all times. In times when there are no calamities, I shall spend only on important and necessary items so that I can use the extra budget in times of emergency. I shall save this money so that when calamities strike, I can afford to buy food for my family, as well as to donate to other people. I shall also prepare large bags and plastic packages which I can use for dry storage of clothes, food, water, flash light, radio and other emergency necessities. I shall always monitor the TV news for weather updates.

As part of the organization, I shall, with a positive perspective, maintain my good relationship with other people towards the welfare of the community. I shall strive to do good in a systematic and practical manner. I shall give a hand to the best of my ability.

Typhoon Ondoy remains a big challenge in my life. Through Ondoy, I discharged my responsibilities as a mother to my children while at the same time I experiencing how it is to truly be a woman-leader. I witnessed how everyone learned to extend their assistance without discrimination—regardless whether one is a poor person or a celebrity-artist. During this time, many different groups gave us help, food donations and initial livelihood capital. For this, I shall continue being grateful to God.



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*Annabelle still lives at the relocation site in Southville 9, Brgy. Pinugay, Baras, Rizal. Jokingly referred to as a loudmouth, she nonetheless exhibits real heroism and reliability in helping out during calamities and for various organizational tasks.*  
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Flight, Queues and the Challenges of Evacuation

LUZVIMINDA SAYCO

Bgy. Dalig, Cardona

At night, we were packed like sardines. In the morning, we race like rats towards the donated relief items like food and medicines. If you move slowly, you won't get anything; things will run out and you will starve. This was how we lived in the different evacuation centers where we, successively, seemingly ceaselessly, moved.

As early as 7:00 in the morning of that Saturday of Ondoy's onslaught, I was already calling for help. We boarded a boat since there was no longer any dry land to walk on. Flood waters surrounded our island. My children and I carried our important belongings and I secured in a higher place other stuff which I was planning to bring next time.

Unceasing Evacuation

First, I brought my children to the old marketplace which had long stood unused. I left them there shortly to go back to our house. It was as if I swam one hectare since there were no longer any vehicles and the flood was already neck-deep. I went inside our house and saw our belongings floating in waist-high waters. I tied down our furniture and lifted the rest up the ceiling. I guess the flood won't get to these anymore, I told myself. When I went out, the flood level was much higher that I hitched a ride on a passing boat.

When I returned to my children, the water was already knee-high inside the market. People started to gather and evacuate their own families. We again moved to a higher place. The Barangay Captain and the councilors were already there, as well as a truck to ferry people towards the school

Like the crowded and chaotic market that we just left, the school was teeming with people being squeezed into rooms with seven to eight families. One could hear the loud wailing of the children and the angry scolding of their mothers. Much as we wanted to return to our home, we could not. We stayed in this school for a month until students resumed their classes.

Then we moved to a wide covered court that was used as a daily exercise venue. We stayed there for two weeks then we returned to the old market despite the remaining flood waters. Staying at the covered court already became embarrassing since people play basketball and do their exercises there every day.

We stayed at the old market for a year, except for some of us who had the means to rent a house. Some went back to their former homes or built new ones despite prohibitions since our area had been declared as a danger zone.

When typhoon Santi came and totally washed out our home, it was as if my world was also destroyed. I couldn't do anything except weep as I saw our house being swept away by the current. We became more hopeless our lives could return to what it was before.

Life's Crucible

For someone like me without a life partner for six years and raising six children singlehandedly, these trials were very difficult. I used to peddle fish every morning; after which I sew door mats that I sell in flea markets as far as the town of Tanay.

While Cardona is just a small town, we live in a peaceful and orderly community. Fishing is the main source of livelihood, and people go to bed early. Our local government administers its affairs well. People are helpful to and very cooperative with each other. All these changed because of the devastation wrought by typhoon Ondoy.

I first met MAPAGPALA at the old market when we were forming a women's group. I experienced leading an organization since I was tasked to coordinate with Oxfam, COM and other NGOs. I also started coordinating with government officials to make our concerns heard and relay our grievances, such as ensuring the proper relocation of disaster victims. A relocation site in Pinugay was offered to us, but majority rejected it since it was too far from town and our livelihoods in Cardona.

Our transactions with them stopped when elections came and I was like stuck between a rock and a hard place because of the political divisions between the "reds" and the "yellows". It was a tricky situation since among the eighteen families left at the old market, we were politically divided. So when the reds won, the yellows' situation seemed precarious as rumors reached us that they will be booted out of the evacuation center. I accompanied them to the Mayor who denied issuing such statement. I had to blurt out that

“Elections are just for one day. Why do we still focus on colors until now?”

Then one day, we were summoned by the DSWD who offered a housing program in Cardona, jointly supported by International Organization for Migration (IOM), Asian Social Institute (ASI) and another NGO helping disaster victims. They also distributed livelihood assistance in the amount of P15,000. Not everyone left at the old market were able to receive the housing assistance; only five of use were fortunate enough. I was happy and sad at the same time since this means separating from our former companions.

New Challenges

“Take me out the dark, my Lord!” That line from a song best describes our condition and prayer here at our new relocation site. If one really looks at it, we are still not completely safe and sound in this place, which is near rice fields located at the foot of the mountains. The terrain is prone to landslides. Dislodged rocks and boulders are all over because of a bulldozer operation at the top of the mountain. Our new homes are row houses measuring 25 sq.m. with four blocks and seven back-to-back rows. While there are individual CRs (comfort rooms or toilets), the place is still very small and crowded; only a thin wall divides the houses. Our condition is like we were still living in the evacuation center.

Our town official promised that this is only a temporary shelter. He said that he would expand and improve this housing project, which would be our permanent homes. For now, we hold on to his word. Meanwhile, we can not do anything except to be more careful and prepared should anything untoward happen to us here.

I am chosen as one of the leaders of the 75 resident families. Perhaps, because I would be dealing with so many people from all walks of life with different attitudes and viewpoints, I should now be more resilient to be able to continue serving our community as we collectively rebuild from the damages of Ondoy.

My experiences made me closer to God, who has always given me more strength and determination to face life's challenges. I think that perhaps the Lord has His reasons why we are currently in this condition.

Indeed, I, an ordinary mother and woman, started to live not just for my family. Because of the tragedy, I learned to interact, face and meet with different kinds of people in various places for our welfare as disaster victims.



Luzviminda became a leader inside the evacuation center. She now lives in the Buklod Pangarap Village relocation site in Cardona. While others consider her a cheapskate, she believes in living simply and being frugal.

Alive and Afloat on Five Thousand Pesos

ANNETH SINFUEGO

Brgy. Pag-Asa, Binangonan

Our family earns its livelihood by fishing. My husband and I support our 13-year old first-born and our five year old youngest child. We live near Laguna Lake. I have gotten used to the fact that even with a light downpour, the grounds around our house become flooded and we have to walk on a bamboo bridge to get to the road outside.

We used to have a palakayang pamanti (fish catcher made of bamboo and nylon netting). From our earnings, I am able to save ₱20 a day; when my savings reached ₱3,000 I bought a bubu, a contraption for catching shrimp. I again saved my additional earnings and from my ₱15,000 savings, I was able to buy a fish cage. I also borrowed ₱5,000 from the lending association for other needed fishing tools; I had to pay ₱250 a week for this loan. I also cultivated kangkong (swamp cabbage), which doesn't need much care or labor. Through these we were able to diversify our sources of income. Industry and perseverance were our primary capital.

We lived decently, not impoverished, comfortable, content and with enough income. I became busy taking care of my family's needs, supporting my husband by selling his daily catch of fish and shrimp, cooking, doing laundry and looking after my children who are studying. I didn't have time for other things, such as interacting with people around me or becoming involved with society's problems. All these changed on September 26, 2009.

Evacuation to the Barangay Center

Despite the heavy rains at 7:00 that morning, I still considered it an ordinary downpour. There was no report from the weather bureau that Ondoy would be hitting Metro Manila. At around 10:00 a.m., I became nervous when I saw the water's flow becoming stronger and found out our neighbors already evacuated. I grew fearful when the flooding in our kitchen reached up to our knees; but we still didn't leave our house, fearing it could be more dangerous since the winds was already too strong and the floodwaters surging.

We had no food so my husband went next-door and got us some bread from our neighbors' already empty house. I prayed for the Lord to protect us from harm. When only the roofs of the houses around us could be seen and my husband was already asking me about what to do, I decided to evacuate. The winds were at their most furious when we boarded our boat. Afterwards, I plunged myself into chest-high waters, carrying my child with me and moving towards the barangay center.

Many people were already at the Barangay Hall when we arrived. We were not able to eat because of insufficient food and crowded lines. When night came, we endured lying on the cement floor with a towel given by a fellow evacuee as a sleeping mat.

When we returned to our house the next day, the water in the kitchen was still knee-deep and our belongings were already submerged in the flood. Instead of staying at the evacuation center with its distressing conditions and different kinds of people, my husband constructed a path so we could move around the house without going into the flood.

My husband tried his luck and sailed to see if we still had any of livelihood left. His expectations were dashed: our fish cage had been washed-out; the swamp cabbage crop was also gone, along with our bubu and other fishing tools. I felt sorry for myself and my family so much then. I didn't know how to start anew and rebuild our livelihood. Hopeless, as they say. I couldn't even think straight on what I should do next. Everyday, I diligently waited in line at the Barangay Hall just so we would have something to eat. I even fell from the bridge because I was running to reach the line. Despite these hardships, I knew that I had to steel myself to face a new beginning and life challenge.

While all our sources of livelihood disappeared, I still give thanks to God for keeping my family intact. We just need to face life with great hope for the future and starting again in our work as fisher folk.

Oxfam's Assistance

A month after the typhoon, I was waiting for some relief goods when the people from Oxfam arrived. They talked to our barangay captain about distributing home kits as an emergency aid for the evacuees. I wasn't qualified to get any support because we already went back to our house.

Those of us who were in similar situation pleaded our case to our Captain: maybe we could also get some support since we were just making do with our flooded houses and we no longer had any livelihood left. He talked to the Oxfam people so we also became their beneficiaries. I received a hygiene kit, home return kit at livelihood support worth P5,000. I immediately bought a bubu so we could have an income source for our daily needs.

This marked the time when we started to rise again. We tried to save money to buy more fish traps. We became practical with the little resources we had until, after six months, we were able to recoup what we lost. Full of hope, our lives went back to normal. Always present was our trust in God who promised that "I will never forsake nor even leave you."

New role as a woman leader

In January 12, 2010, I was invited by COM through AKBAYLAWA, one of the local organizations of UGMMARIZ, to attend a Women's Dialogue with nine other women from Taytay, Rizal. We talked about our situation during Ondoy. I realized that many livelihood projects can be done through the organization.

I became interested in forming a women's organization, which could help lessen our hardships and meet everyone's needs.

We established the Samahan ng Kababaihan ng Sitio Sapa (SKSS) under UGMMARIZ, which in turn is part of the MAPAGPALA coalition. We aim for more knowledge and awareness-raising about what is happening in our environment and to have the means to approach different agencies, NGOs and LGUs to address our needs, be it material or emotional. We also wanted livelihood projects for women. I was able to attend a few training, such as Feasibility Study Writing and Gender Sensitivity Training.

For me, the obligation as a leader is to discharge my duties with goodness and resilience, without any blemish, and, most importantly, with the sincerity to serve one's constituents without expecting anything in return. I always keep in mind that everything that I do is not for my individual welfare, but for sake of all the members.

Being a woman leader is not easy. I now have two obligations: to other people and to my family. Sometimes, I need to leave my family for two to three days at a time to attend training and other organizational work. Because I can be so busy, I sometimes can no longer take care of my children. I was no longer able to guide my youngest child with his school lessons that his grades

fell. This is the reason why I believe that time for my family and for the larger society should be balanced, because I am also a mother and a homemaker.

From these experiences, I learned that as a woman, wife and mother, I am mainly responsible for preparing for calamity's arrival. It became a lesson for me to prepare all things, be it for home or work use, before calamity strikes. Before the situation gets out of hand, one should evacuate when necessary.

In confronting very life storm that hits us, we should be strong and our lives should have a direction not based on impulse. This so that we can carry on with our lives and the struggle to face life's challenges.

Anneth is the Chairwoman ng Samahang Kababihan ng Sitio Sapa (SKSS, Inc.). She is also a QRT member. Her life capital consists of being industrious. A "healthy" mother, she has what it takes to fight life's battles.



Tranformed by Ondoy: From a Grieving Nurse to a Strong Leader

CLARISE PERALTA

Bgy. San Vicente, Angono

I often wondered in the past why my life was tempestuous. Still, I remain full of hope.

We live a peaceful and orderly life in a hut in Angono, the “art capital of the Philippines”. We earn enough to send our children to school, buy the necessities such as household goods, food and provide for other needs. My husband is a seafarer and I am a nurse.

Departure

The first tempest in my life was my husband’s death due to bone cancer. Treatment of his illness used up our savings and investments. It felt like losing a wing. Amid mourning and sorrow, my in-laws proved to be a source of strength. They reminded me to put the welfare of our children foremost in my mind.

“Mama, even though Papa is gone, we are here, loving you. Do not lose hope” These words from my children inspired me to rise up and support them on my own, God-fearing and respectful of others.

Slowly, I and my children became happy again, until the second tempest came: Ondoy.

Evacuation

It was the morning of September 26 – my brother had just arrived home – when the waters suddenly rose. We were supposed to evacuate but I first had to bring home my nephew from the Angono Elementary School. Because of the high water level on the way back, I had to look for a rope which I tied to me and to the children with me.

Meanwhile, my children and sibling were able to evacuate to a big house. When I rejoined them, I learned they were not able to bring any provision because of the sudden rise in the floodwaters. While waiting out the storm, I witnessed our house slowly being dragged away by the current.

The next morning, I looked for another place to stay, but there was nothing. Everything was occupied. I met a neighbor bearing her belongings who told me they were moving to the church. My family and I followed them there.

Toughing it out

In the evacuation center, there was also a storm brewing. I felt sorry for us when we arrived. My youngest sibling and I begged for a little space where we might stay. We had a piece of carton to spread on the floor to sleep on. I wept when my children asked me, “Mama, aren’t pieces of cartons supposed to be for selling in bulk to junk shops? We’re supposed to sleep on beds or sleeping mats, yes? Why do we have to sleep on a cement floor? Do we still have a house?”

My children and I endured sleeping on the cold cement floor. The chapel was dark; there were no lights. I felt the same: I could not see where we were going, how to begin again.

After a few days, despite our entreaties, people in the church asked us to move on. The guard told us we were only allowed to stay there until the following day. The parish priest had told him the evacuees would disturb the church-goers.

A lay minister advised me to talk to the parish priest, who in turn told me, “Sister, the church is not an evacuation center for disaster victims! The town fiesta is nearing and we have activities lined up. You will get in our way.” I was rudely awakened: that church people could also be self-centered and devoid of compassion for people in need.

We were grateful when a group of University of the Philippines students and their professor arrived, asking us about our needs. They advised me to talk with municipal officials to address our problems. I consulted the municipal councilor who helped us evacuate our homes. It was agreed to go to the Angono Elementary School; however, the caretaker told us we could not stay

there long because the facility would be used by students. I just couldn't help thinking: we are calamity victims, yet we are being refused shelter, however temporary it may be.

At the school, we scrambled for places in a room that could accommodate only five families. Our fellow evacuees had large families. I could see in my children's eyes the suffering, but I could only console them with "Patience my children. We will get through this."

A few days passed and the DSWD advised us to leave because children were coming back to school. Despite our entreaties for a longer stay our homes were still submerged, they simply told us to go talk to the Mayor.

The Mayor in turn told us that since our houses were in the front area, we still could not return. If we had no place to go, we had to stay in the evacuation center temporarily. Because they were the leaders, we had no choice but to obey them.

We stayed up to two months in Arveemar, a covered court owned by the Ynarez family. Here I did my duty as a leader and mother to my family. When one of our fellow-evacuees suffered high blood pressure and nosebleeds and had no money to consult a doctor, I used the money I had been saving for my children's tuition to help them out.

We had to line up for relief goods given by NGOs and the local government unit. We were like beggars and I witnessed how our LGU officials abandoned us to the care of the NGOs. I went on an exodus to various government agencies to ask for additional assistance.

But a new tempest was coming! While we were in the Tent City, my niece died. I suppressed my despair at our miserable life in the evacuation center. I put on my brave face to show my children and my fellow evacuees that—as mother and father—I was a strong and steadfast leader, despite our trials and difficulties.

Hope

The World Vision Development Foundation and ABS-CBN were the first to offer us assistance. When the Oxfam team came, they distributed hygiene kits containing bath soap, blankets, towels and a change of underwear. We were also happy at the cash they gave (P1,000) which I used to buy a small stove for cooking.

This was the start of my involvement with the Oxfam QRT. Since then, I accompanied them to different areas for relief distribution. As a QRT member, I sometimes had conflicts with people asking for relief assistance. During the distribution of return kits, a number of people would not be in the recipient list. When I would tell them we were abiding by the master list provided by the evacuation center, they would get angry. "Shove it up your...!", they

would shout at me. Sometimes, we are aware that they are not genuine disaster victims, yet they still have the gall to act in that way.

As a QRT and WASH committee volunteer, as a child-to-child facilitator, and through the Red Cross 143, I grew tougher in facing the difficulties that came. I was able to organize a women's group – KAILA – as part of the MAPAGPALA coalition. We had 132 members – all women – all desiring knowledge, especially about how to be a strong leader defending their rights amid calamities.

Struggling with these tempests has borne results. As part of the process of getting back on my feet, I was able to avail of low-cost housing from the National Housing Authority (NHA). Being an OXFAM volunteer also helped me deal with other calamity victims from the provinces of Rizal and Laguna. This perhaps is my greatest reward: to be offered the opportunity to share my life story and the lessons from it with other people.

I realize that if there are storms, there is that shining, peaceful moment at its end. We can never lose hope and call on the Lord.

At the end of it all, I can say there has not been a tempest I have not pulled through. In being a leader, I learned of new things. Today, in our community, people call this once-grieving person the “Nurse of Ondoy”.



Friendly and full of banter, Clarise serves as an inspiration to her organization because of her diligence and integrity. She is the current leader of the Kababaihan Iingatan ang Lawa (KILA) and continues helping fellow-evacuees in their relocation site at Southville 9 in Pinugay.

The Tireless Grandma

SALVACION QUITE

Bgy. Wawa, Tanay, Rizal

Call me Salve. I am a single mother, raising her eight children for the past two years as a seamstress. Despite being a single mother, I am cheerful, tireless and loving to my children, grandchild, sibling and even my neighbors. They call be Grandma Tireless because of what they observe everyday. Either I am working with my sewing machine, or in the backyard feeding my pigs or tending to my home vegetable garden. When typhoon Ondoy came, my other abilities were put to the test, in a time of calamity.

Courage and Firmness against Fear and Grief

I was apprehensive because of the raging floodwaters, which brought with it trees and other debris which kept banging into our house. Because we were on high ground, after ensuring my children's and grandchildren's safety, I invited my neighbors to seek refuge in our place. It was not long, however, before the muddy waters flooded into the house.

As the waters rose, so did the fear. I did not show this fear so that none of us would lose hope. It was as if a dagger was plunged into my heart as we left our homes. I saw our belongings swept away, and heard the squeals of the pigs I had raised. I saw the gradual disintegration of portions of my house. All that I had worked for, slowly disappearing from view.

I asked those present to evacuate toward the school. I tied a rope around my grandchildren's waists and we waded into the waist-high waters toward the barangay, which was three kilometers away. We were praying as we proceeded. I knew I had to be strong for the people depending on me.

No shelter, no one to turn to

My burden grew heavier when we were told at our hoped-for sanctuary “You cannot stay here. Even the schoolbuilding is full”. It was painful to be refused shelter in this time of need. Together, we moved on amid the strong wind and rain, the mud sucking our feet in, as debris (parts of houses, appliances and household goods) and living creatures (dogs, cats and chickens) floated rapidly by.

We took shelter temporarily in a house near the hospital entrance. To assuage our fear and sadness, we embraced – my family and I – together with the seven families who went with us.

We heard that relief distribution was taking place in the barangay, thanks to the generosity of government agencies and NGOs. Imagine my frustration because they seemed to be selective about who should receive the assistance. I steeled myself and refused to be turned away, “We are victims of Ondoy as well and should not be deprived of assistance!”

The tempo of life virtually stopped during that time. Our life for the next three months revolved around falling in line for food and survival needs. I had no work because all my sewing supplies were submerged.

Still, relief assistance came from different private groups like ABS – CBN’s Sagip Kapamilya, the GMA Kapuso Foundation, DZRH, among others. I experienced queues, the jostling and the jockeying for position for a few kilos of rice, sardines, noodles, coffee and sugar. Still, I would return happy with my small treasure trove, which I would share with my fellow-evacuees. “Come, eat, and let’s get on with life” was my mantra. The supplies would never be enough, so I kept on pestering our village leader until he sent us what we needed.

Although I am thankful to the Lord for the blessing we have received, I know more trials are in store, even after Ondoy. We still could not return to our houses which are still underwater.

Reality Check

When the waters subsided after three months, we were able to return to our homes. We did repairs, using salvaged plywood to rebuild. I couldn’t help crying while cleaning the house in Dulo ng Wawa, as I was able to dig up clothes and my sewing machine that had been buried in the mud. That sewing machine was my partner in raising my children.

Nevertheless, this tragedy and the fact that all of us survived made me realize the triviality of material things. What is important is the bond of love in my family and our care for one another.

When we heard that those who were worst hit by Ondoy were being asked to come to the barangay hall to receive assistance, I thought to myself, “Here we go again! We’re being asked to go to the barangay, which turned

us away in the first place and refused use food in time of dire need!” as the barangay health workers arrived to take down our names.

I took charge of gathering my neighbors so they could get something for house repairs and rebuild their homes. We prepared the necessary documents; we were interviewed by DSWD people; and, we submitted the requirements to the barangay. We also heard more assistance arrived for the livelihood program, food-for-work, among others. But until now, despite persistent follow up with the barangay, after signing so many documents, we still had not received any assistance to rebuild our lives – a year after Ondoy!

For the next three months, we kept submitting proposals up to the municipal level for livelihood assistance. We lobbied the DSWD, who told us there was no more assistance, despite what was being trumpeted on TV regarding the continuing inflow of assistance to the people of Tanay. I had the feeling that those who were benefiting were their relatives, cronies and acquaintances.

Because of this government inaction and inertia, I learned to fight for our rights, despite being a woman, and despite being called “poison” because I would bare the unfairness and irregularities. I kept railing at all the wrong they did.

Eventually another group arrived, asking about our post-Ondoy situation. This was the team from Oxfam, COPE Foundation, and MAPAGPALA. At first I was reluctant especially about signing something which would come to naught. Nevertheless, hope sprang. I was glad to be proven wrong. I once more gathered my neighbors and, since then, we would regularly gather for additional knowledge particularly in defense of our rights as Tanay residents.

Only a woman?

At present, I am the chairperson of a group we had formed during the time of Ondoy – the MAKIBALITA (Mga Nagkakaisang Barangay Lider ng Tanay / United Barangay Leaders of Tanay). We formed this because of our common aim of securing livelihood assistance post-Ondoy. After the calamity, I would interact not only with my family or neighbors, but with other women and men leaders from different barangays. We would come together to advocate and fight for our human rights and rights as citizens.

I needed to be a leader not only within my own family. Because of my experiences, I began to understand that I could be a woman and a community leader. I can do what men can do. I can be strong-willed, loving, self-confident and care for others. Perhaps, aside from being friendly, I also have courage. I fear nothing when I know I am in the right. I fight for what is right.

But courage is not enough. You must find time to listen to the needs and aspirations of your people. I help them whenever I can. Otherwise I connect them with people who can.

I can show everyone that I can be a woman and be strong for my family and my organization. If the situation calls for it, we struggle for our rights, such as the right to demand and be accorded assistance by government agencies. I have argued with people in positions of power and I am able to do this tactfully.

Ten Sewing Machines

I became active in our organization and attended one meeting where I was introduced to a reporter from the Philippine Daily Inquirer. She wrote about our Ondoy stories, including the loss of livelihood – particularly about the loss of my sewing machine.

My prayers were answered by that interview. When the interview was published, a good Samaritan read it and donated ten sewing machines to our group. This was my sign – that things were turning around and we would be able to rebuild our lives, which were disrupted by Ondoy.

What I know is that one should live life righteously. Even if, at present, we still have no sources of capital to start our livelihoods, I have not lost hope for my family and our organization. I still look forward to a brighter tomorrow, God-willing.



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*A strong-willed woman, fearless and principled, Salve is Chairwoman of the Mga Nagkakaisang Barangay Lider ng Tanay (MAKIBALITA). She is jovial and gregarious and thus has a strong influence among her people.*  
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True Confessions of an Evacuation and Relocation Center Leader

LOURDES PALMA

Sitio Gabihan, Bgy. Tandang Kutyo, Tanay

I sew basketball shorts. Because payment is by bulk, I start work at 5:30 in the morning. I was a widow at 29, and my husband died of a lung disease. We had four children, and I supported them by working while my mother took care of them. I raised them well as a single parent.

Our wooden house is located near the river. Whenever there are strong rains, floods follow. I have gotten used to floodwaters rising chest high but subsiding quickly. Typhoon Ondoy was different, because the floodwaters receded and returned even higher. This swept away our house, everything in it, along with the lives lost in our area.

Caring for Others

That morning, after ensuring my mother, her grandchildren and other relatives were safely on the way to the evacuation center, I went around the neighborhood to look for my remaining child while warning fellow residents to evacuate to the schoolhouse. I also foraged for food, hot coffee and dry clothes.

We spent the next three days looking for food. I was beginning to feel weak. Whenever I would rush to the barangay hall upon word of relief distribution being done, I would arrive too late – the goods already gone amid the masses of people in line. Fortunately, after bringing this up with our barangay captain, he instructed the local municipal social welfare development

officer (MSWDO) to release more relief goods.

During the listing of evacuee families at the school, I was selected as room leader. Whenever rations arrived, I would apportion these to my companions to ensure orderly distribution.

One time, I was awakened at one in the early morning by soldiers who were looking for the room leader. I was fearful at first; uncertain of what it was about. It turned out they were distributing blankets, sleeping mats and water jugs to each family. Afterward, relief arrived from different organizations like Oxfam, ABS-CBN, GMA 7, the Red Cross and individual volunteers. Despite the hard work as room leader, I am happy because the people in the evacuation center never went hungry.

Because of the conditions in the schoolhouse, my mother suffered a stroke. Because of our lack of resources, the doctor treated her in the evacuation center while a barangay midwife monitored her condition.

Life in a Tent

We had ourselves listed with the MSWDO so we could transfer to the Barangay Katipunan Bayani gym in one tent, along with fifteen other families. Once there, the Rotary Club distributed blankets, sleeping mats, mosquito nets, cooking pots, drinking glasses, plates and other utensils.

Thirty tents were set up in four rows in our new shelter. I was selected line and tent leader. Conditions were more difficult. The tents were enclosed and humid, intensifying the various smells of urine and feces, particularly of children. We would sleep outside so we could keep the flaps of our tent open for ventilation.

I had added responsibilities as line leader and I would be on the receiving end of snide remarks and hurtful comments (“She’s currying favor with the donors!”, “We’re more knowledgeable than her, why was she appointed leader?”, “She sucks up to the barangay captain”). I would just put up with these, though they hurt, to keep the peace.

When the Oxfam team returned, I was selected as part of the WASH Committee. Part of my responsibilities involved environmental cleanliness and ensuring the cleanliness of the communal toilet built by Oxfam for the tent city evacuees.

One day, a team from COPE (Community Organization of Philippine Enterprises) arrived to meet WASH committee members. At that point, only a few attended; the dropouts said since no relief goods were being given in such meetings, they would no longer come. This saddened me.

As WASH committee member, I spotted errors in the master list given to Oxfam. Not all who were in the tent city were listed. At the same time, included in the list were single males and females (not household heads), or people who had already moved out of the tent city. These would be entitled to

houses in the relocation site. I brought this to the volunteer worker's attention, who told me to let it go. I brought this up during the next meeting, upsetting a few people. I reasoned out that truth must be told, especially in view of the hardships of people in the tents who do not even receive the relief goods being distributed. I cried angry tears because of their blaming attitude. "If you think what I did was wrong, remove me from the Ad Hoc Committee!"

Eventually, things were ironed out. I was retained in the Ad Hoc Committee, and I went with the COPE team. At the same time, I collaborated again with the Oxfam WASH committee. A "graduation" was held and certificates of completion of training were distributed. Later, after each family was interviewed, some of us received ₱5,000 as livelihood support.

It was also promised that similar support would be extended in Phase 3. To date, people are still looking forward to such support.

Women United

We formed MAKIBALITA (Mga Nagkaisang Barangay Lider ng Tanay) with 28 members from different Tanay barangays. We came together to build our capacity to respond to community issues and problems.

I became active in activities related to our community – from discussions on the house repair program at the National Disaster Management Center in Camp Aguinaldo; to soliciting assistance from the Department of Agriculture for backyard gardening tools; to submitting a masterlist to the DSWD national office for their Food-for-Work and House Repair programs.

Together with COM, the MAPAGPALA coalition, and sectors such as the youth, women, senior citizens, farmers and fisher folk, I became part of a signature campaign which we sent to President Aquino concerning house repair and in opposition to Executive Order 815 (establishment of a ferry station in Laguna Lake).

Last January 2010, we were transferred to the relocation site at Gabihan, Bgy Tandang Kutyo in Tanay, where we remain to this day. I have continued sewing as my livelihood. Because my children are grown up and have their own families, what I make from sewing goes to support myself and my mother.

I continue being a leader – which is happy though exhausting – accomplishing things with the organization. Even when I have work, I leave it behind whenever necessary. My employer allows me to do so, because he understands the organization and our situation. My children also help me take care of Mother whenever I have to leave.

Despite the difficulties and the weariness – from the time we were in the evacuation center to the time we were relocated – I know I am capable of accomplishing things I had never dreamed of before both as a single parent and as a community leader. I've proven that I can do what others can do.

I have become more understanding and patient with my fellow person. I have also become alert about matters related to calamities, should another Ondoy come – NOT!. I am more prepared.



Lourdes is the vice-president of MAKIBALITA. She was strengthened by her trials in life and continues to respond and address the needs of her family and her organization. Silent and intent, one becomes aware of the depth of her principles on engaging Lourdes in conversation.

Reflections: Journeying amid the Storm

JAIME V. EVANGELISTA

Rizal Coordinator

To achieve the project objectives, conducting house-to-house interviews was a major part of data gathering — such as whether participants meet the criteria set by the team; obtaining consent to have their stories published; and, listening to their unique experiences. Although, at times, it became distressing — because some of them burst into tears in the middle of a story — it was during these interviews that I was able to determine whether the selected women would be able to share their experiences.

It wasn't hard to prepare for the work and do the rounds of three towns and nine barangays. We felt the support of our local leaders who believed in the project and assisted the interviewees while we were in their areas. Because of such cooperation, our daily tasks proceeded systematically and efficiently.

In choosing the areas, the participants' needs were foremost in our minds: the place should be well-kept and enough nourishment to keep everyone going. We properly documented all expenses with corresponding receipts as per Oxfam's guidelines.

Particular attention was focused on the evaluations and assessments of all the activities, including the interviews, FGD and Provincial Presentation. These were valuable in clarifying the accomplishments and our capabilities, as well as in summing up our experiences in implementing this project.

Jaime, the Project Coordinator for Rizal and the Chairperson of Ugnayan ng Mamamayan at Mangingisda ng Rizal (UGMMARIZ, Inc.), is from Bgy. Calahan, Cardona, Rizal. He works efficiently, enabling him to finish tasks assigned to him quickly. His hefty build mirrors the breadth of his thinking and strength of his commitment to his beliefs.

FELIMON BUENA

Rizal Coordinator

My biggest challenge was how to elicit the women's participation, which is key in documenting their life stories. These were the women-leaders from various sectors who responded to the disaster that was Ondoy. This was not an easy task because they were mothers busy with their own families, especially caring for their children. We also had to contend with the mindset that the project would bring them immediate results and benefits.

As Project Coordinator, I was well received, perhaps because I assiduously went back to the barangays as I developed contacts and continued reaching out to them to encourage their participation. This served as my way, not only to get them to attend the activities, but also to wholeheartedly open up themselves to narrate their experiences.

Aside from coordinating this project, Felimon is Chairperson of Kapatiran ng Malayang Maliliit na Mangingisda ng Pilipinas-Rizal chapter. He is from Bgry. Wawa, Tanay, Rizal. Silent and reserved, he has a razor-sharp mind and a roaring voice behind a microphone as he promotes the welfare of small fisher folk and the Laguna Lake.

Significant Moments in the Crafting of Life Stories from Rizal



Meetings, workshops and presentations attended by participants from the municipalities of Angono, Binangonan, Cardona, Morong and Tanay



*Self-portrait of one of
the Rizal writers Nancy
Degamo, drawn during
one of the meetings*

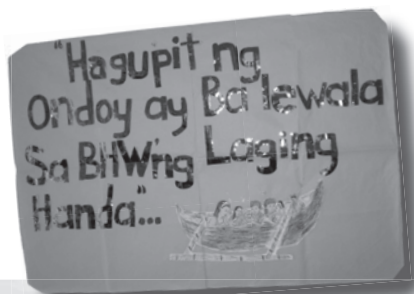


*Writeshop session:
Vivian Escoton explains to the women how to write
their life stories creatively*



*The women,
taking the
writing process
to heart with the
guidance of the
editors*





After writing away the bitterness brought by Ondoy, smiles and laughter





PROJECT
IMPLEMENTORS

OXFAM



Oxfam is the partner of MAPAGPALA and COM in the provinces of Rizal and Laguna in promoting emergency humanitarian response that strengthens the capacities of communities and organizations to prepare against the threats of coming disasters and to advocate for human rights in times of calamities.

Oxfam is an international organization working to end poverty and suffering. In the Philippines, we help in poor communities, especially the small farmers and fisher folks, to improve their livelihood and to be resilient in facing coming disasters and climate change. Oxfam supports the strengthening of voices and identities of the poor, particularly poor women, to change their unequal status in society.

Our world also focuses on women since this sector ranks second only to the youth in sector in terms of highest poverty incidence. We believe that when poor women get equal opportunity, they have the hug potential to rise from poverty.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZER MULTIVERSITY (COM)

Community Organizer Multiversity (COM) is the primary NGO that guides the MAPAGPALA coalition through organizing, training and formation of local organizers led by the chairpersons of the federations towards the sector's strengthening and expansion.



Established in 1994 as a center of learning, COM aims to help respond to the difficult challenges faced by marginalized communities to solve the lashed inflicted by the poverty imposed by globalization. Working with like-minded groups, COM also assists in developing the capacities of community organizers (COs), people's organizations and other development organizations by creating and developing processes that are innovative and appropriate to contexts that will bring about the empowerment of communities.

MAPAGPALA



MAPAGPALA (Mamamayan para sa Pagpapaunlad at Pangangalaga ng Lawa) is a coalition of organization of small fisher folks, farmers, women, youth and workers who live around Laguna Lake. It is composed of seven federations from the provinces of Laguna and Rizal and from the National Capital Region (Taguig City).

MAPAGPALA actively works to promote the rights and welfare of the people towards vital and bountiful fisheries. Its programmes and services include the following: organizing and training; advocacies, such as campaigns for the housing and land rights; livelihood promotion; preparing and implementing social services in times of calamities, and; assistance in the conduct of integration programmes for students.



Oxfam

The Post-Ketsana Recovery Project *Building Resilient Communities*

Oxfam is an international non-profit organization working in close to 100 countries worldwide to end poverty and human suffering. In the Philippines, we work with poor people to sustain their livelihoods, and reduce their risks to natural and human-made disasters and climate change impacts. We strive to enable poor people to have a voice in economic issues affecting them and we support poor women as they lead in transforming unequal social and economic relations.



Australian Government

Aid Program

This project is supported by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), one of the biggest developmental agencies in the world promoting positive and sustainable change especially in the areas of poverty alleviation, education, economy and disaster risk reduction (DRR). AusAID leads and coordinates Australia's responses to humanitarian disasters and represents Australia in international development forums.