



Australia Awards

Making basic human rights more accessible

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A rights-based approach -- this is the major lesson I learned from taking up Masters of Law at University of Melbourne from June 2011 to December 2012. It really opened my mind that our rights should not only be enshrined on a piece of paper. Our basic human rights should be accessible to us. It must be promoted and fulfilled by the government. I asked myself why is this not the case in the Philippines.

Prior to going to Australia, I was teaching full time at St. Louis University (SLU) in Baguio City where I finished my AB Political Science and Bachelor of Laws degrees. Back then, I was also a partner at a law office that is located in the city.

I actually got into the Australia Awards Scholarships program because of a significant encounter. I was standing in line for something and mentioned the book I was reading, *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, to a colleague. A new faculty member, Marjorie Balaya-as, joined our conversation, which led to her mentioning her connection with the Igorota Foundation.

It turned out that PAHRODF has just sent the Foundation invites to apply for the Australia Awards scholarship. I immediately sent in my application. Six months later, I was on my way to Melbourne where I took up courses in human rights.

One major adjustment for me there was the language. I couldn't easily pick up the words because Australians talk very fast. So what I did was to record all the lectures then listen to them during my 45-minute train ride to where I live.

Planning and networking

When I came back to the Philippines, a turn of events led me to transfer to St. Mary's University (SMU), a sister school of SLU located in the Nueva Vizcaya province. There was an opening for the Deanship of the College of Law and the outgoing Dean offered it to me.

As a new faculty member and already Dean, I had to "test the waters" so to speak. I believe that leadership is not about the position but about influence. I'm very happy that the senior faculty members were supportive of me.

To make my Re-Entry Action Plan (REAP) of establishing a Human Rights Center in SLU a reality, I had to wait and look for the best opportunity. The right time came when the our Director of Community Extension instructed each school and college in the University to have its own Community Extension Services Program (CESP) aligned with its mandate.

I saw it as an opportunity for my REAP because the College of Law does not yet have any CESP related to law or legal matters. It was the middle of the academic year and plans and budget have already been laid out so we just did initial work on it until the following school year. With the blessing of the University President and the Director, we were able to incorporate the establishment of the center to the 2014 plans.

Of course, my REAP is more than just launching a center. It has to be carefully planned out, has to be sustainable, and has to really render service. Our first step was to do capacity building and trainings.

I really felt divine providence in this project when, into the planning phase of the HR center, I was nominated as vice-president for Luzon of the Philippine Association of Law Schools (PALS). For some internal reason, they wanted the officers to be Ilokano and I was the only Ilokano there apart from the outgoing vice president.

It was at PALS that I was able to build my network for the center. I asked for help from other respected professors and lawyers. I also tapped schools that already have established Human Rights centers such as Ateneo de Davao and Ateneo de Manila, as well as the University of San Carlos. We are sending nine law students for training in these schools in April and May 2015.

Bringing hope

Things have started falling into place. A director for the center has been identified and who already said yes. Moreover, the blueprint for the center is now laid out for July 2015-2016 after the training of the students. We aim to launch the center on the 20th year anniversary of SMU's College of Law come 2016.

Looking back, I was initially overwhelmed at the beginning because I didn't have many friends in St. Mary's back then. I really prayed to God and I feel so blessed thinking about it now how I was surrounded by leaders who had integrity and who I admire very much. They were very understanding and supportive even when, at times, I harbored self-doubt.

Suddenly, my dream for the Human Rights Center – the first of its kind in Northern Luzon – is actually becoming a reality! Its aim is to help the oftentimes-overloaded Public Attorney's Office as well as the legal aids of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines in our community, who are also over docketed.

Apart from providing help to its immediate community, I also saw the center as an internship training facility for our students who previously had none. I'd like to see the center assisting

those who need help in accessing their basic human rights and for these people to feel that they are in capable and credible hands.

I also envision the center as a possible link for former inmates so they'll get new chances in life. They need to earn their dignity back after they are freed from prison. I'm thinking of partnering with TESDA as well as other schools in the university for livelihood trainings, etc.

The HR Center is my way of contributing to a better Philippines. By highlighting the rights-based approach, I hope to be able to do just that.

Atty. Marie Joy Payumo-Salgado finished her Master of Laws at the University of Melbourne in 2013. Her REAP focused on the establishment of human rights center at St Mary's University, Nueva Viscaya.