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US-based Pinoy doctor 'sells' heirloom rice to help feed Cordillera children

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Despite having a medical degree from the University of the Philippines, Doctor Emmanuel Barias barely made ends meet as a young doctor in Davao in the late 1990s that he had to peddle lechon by the kilo at Gaisano Mall after work just to have enough money to buy milk for his infant child.

Now a successful family physician in the United States, Barias continues to sell food products whenever he can—but this time, to help feed and send malnourished children to school in Cagayan.

Just last month, the US-based Filipino doctor started the wellness program called The Garden Herbs project for preschool-aged Filipino children with the help of friends and volunteers.

The program, which aims to improve the health and learning ability of young students by feeding them with nutritious meals, is being pilot-tested at a daycare center in the remote barangay of Cabbo in Peñablanca, Cagayan.

Barias has been able to help the Garden Herbs project raise \$2,000 or roughly P80,000 by selling “heirloom rice” produced by farmers in the Cordillera region online and at Urban Bru Café, his restaurant in Oklahoma.

Barias, who completed his residency training at St. Mary’s Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is currently the Hospital Chief of Staff of the Memorial Hospital of Texas County.

Before establishing the Garden Herbs program, Barias has already been involved in several non-profit organizations.

In 2002, he established the non-government group Asian Outreach Foundation (AOF), which aims to help Asian American immigrants become informed patients through education and exposure to the US healthcare system. It has since been renamed as the West Michigan Asian American Association.

Four years after moving to Guymon in 2008, Barias and his wife Susan were awarded by the Main Street Guymon Board of Directors as Main Street Heroes for 2012 for the leadership training program they organized for the community’s youth.

The Barias' Main Street Guymon Transformation program has been hailed as a success by community leaders for empowering youth citizens to take a more active role in community building projects.

Growing up poor

In an interview via email with GMA News Online, the family physician said growing up poor and hungry in Tuguegarao prompted him as an adult to find ways to prevent children from experiencing the same ordeal he did.

He recalled that as a four year old child, he was urged by his cousin, a preschool teacher at a daycare center, to attend classes with the promise that he will be served with free oatmeal if he went.

"I attended the class one day and got so hooked on oatmeal that I started going to the daycare center daily. I learned how to read through the classes on alphabet and reading that teachers held at the center after the feeding program," he said.

Barias sources the heirloom rice he sells from Eighth Wonder Inc., a social enterprise founded by former American missionary Mary Hensley. Eighth Wonder buys several kinds of rice—including the Ifugao Diket, Kalinga Jekot and kalinga Unoy varieties—produced by farmers in the Cordillera region for sale in the United States and splits the profit with them.

"Aside from giving the children something to eat, I think this project is also able to help farmers indirectly through my partnership with Eighth Wonder. We sell the rice in the US and the profits go back to the Philippines. The farmers earn and the children are fed," he said.

Garden Herbs project

Barias' years of involvement in non-profit work has helped the Garden Herbs project continue its feeding program without bloating the overhead costs. Based on the doctor's assessment, the purchase of a single bag of rice, which costs \$6 or P240, is enough to feed five children for a day.

"One way we're able to run this program efficiently is by purchasing the food and other materials judiciously. We buy in bulk, we ask discounts from sellers and we only serve enough. There are no leftovers. We learn about consumption on a day to day basis and adjust the volume of food served accordingly," he said.

Aside from the feeding program, the Garden Herbs team work together with preschool teachers at the Cabbo daycare center to engage children in various physical activities, including sports and playground interactions.

And although the program has been running for barely a month, Barias said his team and the community in Cabbo have already noticed several improvements in the health and overall well-being of the 96 preschool students who currently benefit from the project.

“From being undernourished children who were visibly scared, withdrawn and inactive, the students have now been observed to be more talkative and playing actively. The parents see the big difference—their children now look forward to going to school,” he said.

The initial success of the program, Barias said, has led to the clamor for the Garden Herbs program to be implemented in Cabbo’s neighboring barangays. As a result, the program is now being started in Barangays Bical and Cabasan.

For Barias, forging a successful career abroad is not an excuse for a Filipino to turn his back on his own country.

Despite being on call as a doctor and not having the luxury of time to fly to the Philippines often to check on the progress of the Garden Herbs project, Barias is already planning to link up with the Departments of Health, Social Welfare and Development, and Education to study the possibility of implementing the project in all barangays in the country.

“This project is designed to be sustainable without too much effort. But it requires political will, volunteerism and a small sacrifice from Filipinos abroad... If people can buy shoes to give footwear to people in Africa, why can’t we buy food to feed children in the Philippines?” he said. - VVP, GMA News

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