

empower a person change a nation DREAM



Just off Miami Street is a small archway, nestled between two residential buildings. Entering this archway is like arriving into the underworld of Manila's poor.

As if to prepare us for this underworld, or perhaps frighten us away, a funeral tent is adjacent to the entry. A young boy, killed by a passing car, lies there.

It is hard to describe the backdrop that animates life here, and at what point poverty becomes so powerful, that hope is gone. Leave Miami street, and it feels like you have stepped into an underground tunnel. The ceiling hangs low, and the floor emits an earthy smell of life and excrement. Maura, our friend and guide, does not live nearby; so we follow a tangled path to a nook where a ladder hides. It is up this ladder that Maura lives.

Can Maura dream? She has big eyes and is slender with a gracious smile. Yet her home is too small for eight people to live there. Actually it is too small for eight people to sit in.

"I have six children. I am 42 years old. I am pregnant. My first husband left after an affair," Maura said.

"I live with my mother. This is our home. All my life I have lived here, in this place. My first husband gives 20-50 php once a month to help us. My mother sells cigarettes. My three children had no school today. There was no money for school today. I have thought of aborting my child." Maura says all these things, but she does not seem bitter. Perhaps

she would need hope to feel bitterness.

Maura attended Cubao Elementary School and graduated from Carlos P. Garcia High School. Her dream was to take a tailoring course, but the family could not afford it.

"I hoped to work in a factory or a well known shop," she said. "Yes, I dreamed when I was young, but I stopped dreaming when my family split up."

"I also cannot dream for my children, because I cannot provide for their dreams," Maura said. "I take what comes. I do tell them they should have dreams, because I have lost mine, but they are silent."

Can Maura dream?

There are very few secrets in the walls of this home. People cannot hide things. There are no pretensions in their faces or their words. Here, a fornicator is a fornicator and a drinker is a drinker. The muffled night sounds are like a symphony of drums to the adolescents, and bodies are squeezed together with hunger. Young, old, drugs, time, death, nakedness, shadows, thieves; the fabric of life flutters in the open like a tattered flag on display.

Social worker Cathy Gacutan has a pragmatic view of dreams based on her nine years of working with the poor.

"The people I work with trust in fate," she said. "They say, 'This is my fate I cannot do anything about it any more. It is my fate to be poor.'"

Alex Bontigao, a social worker in an educational assistance program [located in Quezon City] said, "It is very hard to be involved in any savings plans or programs to change the situation of those in poverty, because they have just given up on bettering their lives. The poor are in situations where there is no dignity and no hope."

So can Maura dream?

"Dreams do not have enough value to the poor to pursue," said Gacutan. "Not when they are faced with such immediate needs."

So should Maura dream?



Dreams have two faces, active and passive. Thomas E. Lawrence [an American author, etc.] said "All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible."

In the confines of poverty, Maura's dreams are confined as well, and she acknowledges their vanity and uselessness. This resignation to life brought Matthew Perry, an on-line reporter for the "Times UK" to write an article saying that, despite his own atheistic beliefs, Africa needs Christian missionaries. He goes on to say, "Missionaries, not aid money, are the solution to Africa's biggest problem the crushing passivity of the people's mindset."



He said, "Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world -- a directness in their dealings with others -- that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall."

I decided to visit Claudio "Ding" Teodoro, a Pastor who works with the poor in the San Buena settlement near Guar. Ding and his wife, Mona were professionals and entrepreneurs who set aside their business pursuits to reach out to impoverished people in Manila.

I met Ding at his church. He came riding up on his motorcycle, his long thick hair standing on end from the wind. We sat in the garage on plastic chairs and talked about what he has learned. He said, "I once asked a group of adults who were standing around, 'Do you have a dream?' None of them answered until one lady spoke up and said, 'I don't dream. If I dream I will be frustrated.' Everyone there agreed with her."

"The older people have come to a place of frustration in their lives. They are satisfied with a meal. Resignation is a hard thing for someone to shake," said Ding.

There are a couple of ways of encouraging the poor to dream that Ding has found successful.

"When a person becomes a Christian, they have an inherent purpose and a hope. They also feel accepted. When that happens, they begin to relate to other members of their community and even outside their community, he said.

"I have found in these informal villages the people do not mingle outside of their settlements. Even the youth are content to court and marry their neighbors. I asked a boy, why he didn't date outside his 'village'. 'They would not accept us,' he told me, 'we are from here. They are from there.' The acceptance we offer as a

"There needs to be more Filipinos reaching out to Filipinos," Ding said.



Claudio (Ding) Teodoro is shown during the Saturday morning feeding of 600 kids. He is putting words into action.

church begins to break down their fear of rejection, and they start to reach out.

"Secondly, communities need a winner. We took one girl in a community and guided her through college. The whole area was proud. They had accepted the fallacy that they were losers.

"Another thing, and I am not belittling the foreigners, but once the poor see a white person, he becomes something to milk. There needs to be more Filipinos reaching out to Filipinos. Sixty percent of the people in the foreign-run churches are insincere. The people are there because of attraction to the white person. It boils down to finances, and they have more. It is expensive to minister to the poor. You cannot say to a hungry person, 'Jesus is all you need.'

"When my wife Mona and I started working with the poor, I was afraid of the consequences. We felt working with the poor there would be no return. If you reach out to professionals, you are guaranteed a return, but that same guarantee is not true with the poor.

"But...my fears have been proved wrong. Money has come. And," Ding said with amazement, "we have 80 street children

that attend Sunday school. Every week they give 600 pesos! Every week!"

The issues Maura confronts include crushing poverty, but also social rejection, lack of education, health issues, fear for her children and a belief in a God who works miracles only in heaven. These are not issues to her alone. There are communities throughout Manila with segregated pockets of people, isolated by their perception of personal worthlessness.

I like Ding's model. I like the idea that he starts empowering a community, by empowering a person, and sees them both through to a successful conclusion. I also agree that lasting change will only happen from within, whether it is a person or a country.

For Maura to dream, she needs to believe there can be change. For her to believe that, she needs to have someone believe it with her.

Throughout the Philippines we have people like Ding and Mona Teodoro, believing in people, seeing that belief to a successful conclusion, but they are not the end, only a beginning. We need more people believing. We need more people dreaming. The issues we face need us all.



Charisma, joy, and love of youth keep 600 children entertained and in control. It takes a lot of energy and time to feed 600 kids (see sidebar). Mona Teodoro takes a well deserved break.

PROVIDING A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

After visiting with Claudio (Ding) Teodoro earlier in the week, I wanted to follow up on his comment that you cannot say to a hungry person, "Jesus is all you need." I had heard about his Saturday morning feeding program and decided we needed to check it out. This is what we saw and heard.

Ten years ago the church of Ding and Mona decided to do something special for some of the street children that were begging. "Our thought was to give them a good Christmas party," said Ding. "The night before the party, we were preparing a meal to serve 50 kids, but then we got excited and cooked enough for 100 kids. It was a mess. 500 kids showed up! Everybody got just a little bit [of food]."

That experience was the start of a Saturday event called "Super Kids Bible Club." It is held in modules of ten week increments. 600 kids show up weekly for this bible club and when they leave, they leave with a bag of rice and chicken adobo. They are working on their 37th consecutive module.

Each week they cook 70 kilos of rice and 16 kilos of chicken. If a child attends each week of a 10-week module, they get a special prize—more food. Most (90-95%) of the kids never miss a week.

The children come from four informal settlements: Baging Silang, Guar, San Buena and Mancan Marcos. The children, ages three to 13, walk up to three kilometers to stand in line Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m. Five hours later the last of them leave happy.

The church has forged a relationship of trust with hundreds of children. When they started the program, Ding said they had an "ordinary adult church." Looking around I saw neither ordinary nor adult. To be honest, it was refreshing.

Reaching out may start with food, but it has not ended there. To help Mona and Ding help kids, contact Pastor Ding Teodoro at New Hope to Asia Christian Foundation, Inc., 632-655-5752.