

Empowered to Serve



Nay Belen guiding community members in developing their risk map.

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 August 19, 2014

This feature story was also published online by Rappler.com in time for World Humanitarian Day 2014

If you asked her if she thought of herself as a humanitarian hero, the shy and unassuming Nay Belen would probably tell you, "Di naman (Not really)."

But indeed she is. She is one of the products of the ACCORD model to disaster risk reduction - building the capacity of the most vulnerable so that they themselves can work towards strengthening their resilience.

From beneficiary to community volunteer to full-time staff, Nay Belen is an archetype of someone empowered to serve others like her.

Vulnerability

Evelyn Asaldo, fondly called Nay Belen, is a native of Calabanga, Camarines Sur. She has been married to her husband Edwin since 1982; their union has been blessed with 8 children. She helps her husband, a fisherman, by making *pawid* (nipa shingle). Combined, they make up to PhP 150.00 (around US \$3.50) per day. It was a happy but difficult life. They really had to work themselves to the bone just to make ends meet.



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In 2006 came Reming (international name: Durian), one of the strongest typhoons the Philippines has ever experienced. With wind speeds reaching up to a maximum of 320 kph, the storm washed out and totally damaged their house.

She considers herself fortunate to be chosen as a beneficiary of three successive projects CARE Nederland and Assistance and Cooperation for Community Resilience and Development (ACCORD) in partnership with the Disaster Preparedness Programme of the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (DIPECHO) implemented in the aftermath of Typhoon Reming. But it was ACCORD's fortune that Nay Belen was willing to be more.

Knowledge

The three projects under DIPECHO focused on strengthening the risk reduction capacities of schools, local authorities, and high-risk communities like her own. This included the conduct of several trainings by ACCORD in their barangay, which seemed to have quenched her thirst.

She has always had a thirst for knowledge. Not satisfied with merely attending trainings, Nay Belen volunteered as a community facilitator. She helped the staff not only in preparing visual aids and other workshop materials but more importantly in encouraging her neighbors and friends to attend.

Seeing that Nay Belen had potential, the staff asked her to undergo further training as a community facilitator - and that training was in front of teachers. She recalls, "I prepared well for my session on evacuation center management, but I still buckled down in front of them."

It took an ACCORD staff pulling her into a room and telling her that she already knew these things which the teachers still have to learn to steel her nerves. She came back, continued, and aced her first workshop session.

Courage

In 2011, after five years, the ACCORD projects in the area were ending. As one of the trained community facilitators, Nay Belen was absorbed into the structure of the municipality. The new mayor of Calabanga had committed to continue the disaster risk reduction initiatives started by ACCORD. Nay Belen served as a community organizer in the municipal solid waste management program.

One year later, ACCORD contacted her and offered her a job as full-time staff. Nay Belen recalls, "I could not believe it myself. Why me? Can I do it?" They told her that they wanted her because she had lots of initiative and familiarity with the organization's model. With the blessing of her family, she accepted and left the province of Camarines Sur for the first time in her life.

She was first assigned to Isabela province for the Scale Up Build Up Project (SUBU), which aimed to build on and replicate the successes of the earlier projects in partnership with DIPECHO. This was then followed by an emergency response project in Malinao, Aklan for those affected by Typhoon Yolanda in partnership with the United Kingdom's Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC).

She felt pangs of loneliness at times, saying that "I was happy because not everyone is given the chance to serve in other areas, but it was also hard to be away from your family."



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Nay Belen soldiered on though, and she found capacities she never thought she had. She experienced coordination work. “At first, I was intimidated at having to talk to the mayor and the municipal disaster risk reduction and management officer. But they were very kind and accommodating, so those fears went away.”

She was also assigned to do validation of beneficiaries’ selection and monitoring of shelter repairs. “I enjoyed it, because I was able to go house to house and meet people like me. To be able to help them was a blessing.” She did a lot of walking under the heat of the sun, riding the *habal-habal* (motorcycle with an extended seat for an extra passenger) into mountainous areas, and crossing rivers. Volunteers in the area who went with her would exclaim, “*Ang bilis mo Nay!* (You are too fast).”

Gratitude

She gives a lot of credit for what she has achieved to the rights-based approach taught by ACCORD in its trainings. “When it was first discussed with us, I cried. They told us that everyone has the capacity to be part of community development. It doesn’t matter if you did not finish college as long

as you are willing and open to new ideas. It really resonated with me,” she shares.

She experienced it first-hand in how the staff treated her. Nay Belen recalls, “They did not treat me differently. They gave me lots of encouragement and always answered my questions when I was not sure of what I was doing. That motivated me to always give my best.”

Leadership

At 52 years old, Nay Belen is an example that age doesn’t matter. She did not finish high school but she managed to pass the Alternative Learning System (ALS) test last year, which earns her the equivalent of a high school diploma. She has also been trying to learn working with computers, though she admits that her speed in typing leaves much to be desired.

She has just recently left the organization to handle family-related concerns. But she says that she is willing to return once asked, saying that “ACCORD helped mold me. I want to show them that despite my age, my learnings can still be put to good use – in the service of others.”



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