

# Bayanijuan folk grateful for safe haven

**By Karen Lapitan**

*Inquirer Southern Luzon*

**and Sunshine Lichauco de Leon**

*Contributor*

CALAUAN, LAGUNA—FORMER VENDOR Tess Ortinero, 59, wondered where she would be now—whether she would even still be alive—if she were still living along a Manila estero the night Tropical Storm “Ondoy” came.

That thought also ran through the mind of Corazon Aguillon, 49.

Ortinero, Aguillon and their families used to live at Estero de Paco. In June, they were among the first 271 families

**BAYANIJUAN/ A9**

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relocated to Bayanijuan sa Calauan, the resettlement site of the Kapit Bisig para sa Ilog Pasig (KBPIP) river rehabilitation project.

The 107-hectare property, co-managed by ABS-CBN Foundation Inc. (AFI) and the National Housing Authority (NHA), is where people who had been struggling to survive against stark odds are building a new community.

"If we stayed in Paco, I'm not sure we could have survived Ondoy," Ortinero told the INQUIRER yesterday. She said she heard their former place had been swamped by roof-high floods.

"Here, Ondoy was almost not felt," she said. The relocation site had escaped flooding.

"We are grateful we moved here. I can't imagine where we would be now if we chose to stay there," said Aguillon, a mother of four.

Some residents of the new community are into poultry, others into gardening. A handful have put up *sari-sari* stores.

## Reviving a river

The project is part of the efforts to bring the Pasig River back to life.

The main strategy of KBPIP, with the help of the environment department, is to put up Clean River Zones near the Pasig and its tributaries.

The project's first goal is to have the 5,000 informal settlers at Estero de Paco relocated to Calauan within five years. The 3-km stretch to be cleared runs from the tenement houses on Quirino Avenue, through Paco market and ends at the entrance to the Pasig.

Since the informal settlers directly contribute to the river's pollution (studies show each individual removed from the area means removal of half a kilo per day of waste), cleaning the river must start with the transfer of these families.

"Tributaries are like arteries in the human body. If they are blocked, the body can't function well," KBPIP president Gina Lopez said.

## Life of drugs

For 17-year-old Shaolin, living along the *estero* was synonymous to a life of daily drug use and petty crime.

Addicted to sniffing rugby since age 6, he never attended school.

Since moving to Calauan, he has quit taking drugs. He runs errands, helps with manual labor, takes part in night patrols.

"It is the first time I feel loved and accepted. I want to help make this place beautiful and orderly," Shaolin said.

On Estero de Paco, 10 families lived in makeshift structures on a 20-sq.m. lot. Family members took turns sleeping for lack of space.

The river was used as toilet, shower and garbage dump. The trash was so thick you would never know a river lay underneath. Children could walk on it as if it were a landfill.

Woe to babies if they fell in the river. It would be virtually impossible to find them.

There was also the unbearable stench. Death and disease were commonplace.

## Peace of mind

Hermi, who lived along the *estero* for 15 years, said: "Before, I was scared all the time. Now I have peace of mind that my children will not fall into the river or get hit by the speeding cars."

Cheryl, a mother, said: "My children used to play inside the house because I was afraid the water in the *estero* would rise and they would fall in. Now they can run freely."

Thelma, a grandmother, said: "The children do not get sick anymore. They used to always have lumps, colds and fever that never went away."

## New life

At the Bayanijuan, each family moved into a newly painted house (30-sq.m. room with a bathroom) on a 40-sq.m. lot. They were given a welcome kit of groceries from Nestlé, hygienic supplies and a sack of rice from Unilever.

An orientation explained to them the importance of hygiene, as well as the opportunities and rules of their new environment.

Lopez said: "We tell them it's a clean slate for all of them, and whatever they did before does not matter. But it's *bayanihan*. There are rules and we have to work together. We will help them but they must also learn to

help themselves."

Derived from the term "*bayanihan*" or "everyone working together," the name of the community is a play on the words "*bayani*" (hero) and "*Juan*" (for "Every Filipino").

In Bayanijuan, everyone, it seems, is a hero.

## New skills

In exchange for community work, each adult gets a salary for the first two months. Then they are taught new skills.

"You need to take care of them so they don't go back," Lopez said.

The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (Tesda) has organized a livelihood training program teaching carpentry, electrical repair and painting.

Trainees have been fixing the ceiling of a day-care center which, thanks to the Department of Social Welfare and Development, will open in December.

Upon receiving their Tesda certificates, the newly skilled workers may apply for work in Ayala Land's nearby Sta. Rosa development project.

A Dubai-based company offers work to those who speak English. English classes will also soon be offered to the residents.

## Protecting the environment

Out-of-school youths make frames and lamps from recycled paper under a project called Bags for Life.

Surrounded by agricultural land, residents are taught how to care for the environment.

With seeds donated by the Army and the agriculture department, many grow organic short rotation crops, such as corn and cassava.

There are plans to build a central sewage system and to start a vermiculture project. Samuel Ortinero, 40, has organized the composting of trash.

He said: "Waking up to nature makes you feel closer to God ... We are inspired by the values being taught here."

## Everyone helps

Other plans include building a children's playground and a basketball court.

The resettlement has been made possible through partnerships of government agencies, the military, the



**FACE OF JOY** After years of living along a Manila estero, these two women have found hope for the future after being relocated to their new home at the Bayanijuan sa Calauan resettlement site in Laguna.



**ROAD TO NEW FUTURE** After leaving behind their shanties along an estero in Paco, Manila, these children spend their free time playing in the Bayanijuan sa Calauan resettlement site in Laguna. Soon they'll have a real basketball court. PHOTOS BY SUNSHINE UCHAUICO DE LEON

private sector, individuals and non-government groups.

The project started during the Estrada presidency but was left unfinished with his ouster. When KBPIP was named co-manager of the project, its NHA partner turned over 700 unfinished houses.

With the help of Globe Asiatique and Habitat for Humanity, the windows and floors were fixed and the renovated homes were given to the first 271 families.

More funds are needed to build more houses.

## Hope named Juanita

Corporate sponsorship for housing is key. San Miguel Corp.'s P21-million donation last month will ensure that 300 more families from Paco can have new homes.

Asked why they picked this project, SMC president Ramon Ang said: "It was the sincerity and passion of Gina Lopez that did it ... We saw a wonderful opportunity to help people and clean up the river."

Two months ago, the first baby was born in Bayanijuan. Named Juanita, she sleeps in a basket crib in her parents' new home.

Juanita's coming signifies hope for the river, its people, and what can happen if you believe in the possibility of change.

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