

The Foster Mom

TRINING DE LEON PANICUCCI provides a loving home for orphaned babies up for adoption. BY SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON

THE OPPORTUNITY to help improve the world in some small way can come sometimes in the most unexpected forms—a random meeting on the street, a conversation you overhear, reading material you pick up or, in the case of Trining Panicucci, a simple long-distance phone call.

“I was on a trip to Rome in 1998 when my sister called from Manila. I thought she was calling just to chat.” Panicucci remembers the life-changing conversation as if it was just yesterday. “‘Trining,’ my sister Regina said, ‘I know you like babies. I heard you have an extra room in your house. Will you take a new born abandoned baby into your home and care for it for it until there is an extra crib in the home for babies?’”

Although the decision was made within moments, it was not without deep reflection. Panicucci was in her sixties when she received this request, and caring for a newborn baby was the last thing she could ever imagine herself doing. This prayerful woman’s faith in God is formidable, however, and her beliefs soon stepped in to rationalize such an unexpected request.

It has been ten years and Panicucci has loved and sheltered a dozen babies since that fateful call. She looks affectionately at Bernadette, the four-year-old currently under her care, and explains excitedly how everything fell into place soon after the little boy was born and brought to her Manila house—just a few days after their conversation.

The baby was christened Jose Miguel and although he stayed with her only three months, the impact of his time spent with Panicucci was profound. Her face grows serious as she remembers, “I was devastated when the home for babies called and asked me to send him back. I treated him as if he was my own and had hoped to care for him until an adoptive parent had been found. Instead, I had no choice but to give him back to an institution where he would become one of too many.”

Just as the pain of giving birth leads to greater treasures, the hurt of that moment soon transformed itself into a beautiful change in her life. She recalls the thought that would eventually help the lives of so many infants, “I decided right then I would become a foster mother. This would mean that children would leave me only to go to a real home.”

Kaisahang Buhay Foundation (KBF), a private, nonprofit foundation that facilitates adoption, was soon contacted and a lifelong

relationship was begun. Expectant mothers who are unable to care for their children contact KBF and the foundation makes sure that the mother’s needs are provided for until the babies are born. The infants are then sent to foster parents and after a six-month mandatory waiting period, KBF begins the worldwide search for adoptive parents.

Although caring for an infant brings a whole new level of responsibility to her life, Panicucci says it’s completely worth it once you understand how easy it is to make a difference in these little lives. She explains, “All of them just need love. The best part is seeing the development and the change in each baby. In the beginning, each cried constantly simply because he needed love.” What keeps “Nona”, as her wards call her, so passionate about her new role is clear, “Seeing a positive change in their character is the greatest satisfaction. It’s an immediate reward to see a baby become more lively!”

Panicucci cares for at least two children at a time and they remain with her from anywhere between a few months until a few years. Included in all family events, they sleep in her room accompanied by a *yaya*, which she admits is a great luxury.

When the children are lucky enough to move on to their permanent homes, which are often overseas, Panicucci says any sadness she feels is tempered by the fact they are going to a better life, to parents they can call their own. With a thoughtful expression, she says, “The great thing is they give you another baby, so your love is still there to give. Love is something that you should not keep to yourself.”

People visit Panicucci and see how happy having children around has made her, and this has started a “fostering bug”. She hopes the idea will spread to as many people as possible: “I think more people would do it if they realized how enjoyable and fulfilling it is. These babies are starting with nothing so as long as you do your best, it is all anyone can ask for!”

The babies that come to Panicucci arrive without a name, and with no sense of where they belong. They leave having been given a good start in life, healed from early rejection by the simple act of a stranger loving them as her own. They may be scattered around the world and may or may not remember these first months or years, but the effect of that act will surely last a lifetime. *Kaisahang Buhay Foundation (KBF)*, 913.1469 / 912.1159 to 60.

PHOTOGRAPH BY OCS ALVAREZ

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