



The Miracle of *Ondoy*

HOW A TERRIBLE TYPHOON BROUGHT TOGETHER PEOPLE
OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND MOBILIZED THEM
TO HELP VICTIMS FROM MARIKINA TO ILOCOS.

By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon

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he great thing about an enormous white space is that, with the right spirit, it can be transformed into anything you imagine. The devastation caused by Typhoon Ondoy was so overwhelming and unimaginable that it could easily have left many Metro Manila residents wanting to help but not knowing how or what to do. Instead, thanks to a fast-moving “chain of good” which began when Noynoy Aquino and Mar Roxas asked friends and volunteers to pour their efforts and funds into the relief operations, Whitespace in Makati and the Balay Expo in Cubao became, by two o’clock the following afternoon, drop-off and packing centers where people could transform their desire to help into immediate action.

What began with one phone call quickly blossomed into such an unwavering supply of goods and an extraordinary volunteer effort. *Tulong Bayan*, the name given to the Makati and Cubao operations, was able to produce and deliver 250,000 relief bags in its twelve days of existence. The thousands of volunteers and donors who answered the flood victims’ call for help showed that although the typhoon destroyed the lives of many individuals, the heart and compassionate spirit of the Filipino people are still very much alive and flourishing. Without a moment’s hesitation, people went out of their way to give as much as they could—time, effort, resources, contacts—in an incredible show of humanity. It was the shimmering rainbow which emerged from the great storm.

Louie Locsin and Ruby Meyer were among the first to arrive, and they immediately mobilized volunteers to clean up the mud-filled 900-square-meter space. At the earliest stages of the relief operation, volunteers simply sat on the floor packing bags. Yet everyone was so eager to contribute that each day brought new ideas and supplies, enabling people to work faster and more efficiently. Walking into Whitespace was like entering a cross between an ant farm and a military-style summer camp. The atmosphere was not only “buzzing” and incredibly active, but everything and everyone were in such constant motion that if you were not moving it was easy to feel out of place. An “organized chaos” filled the air as everything being done had a system to follow, and those systems were driven by a sense of practicality and logic.

Mounds of filled plastic bags ready to be loaded onto trucks filled the entranceway. The perimeter of the main room had clearly labeled areas where delivered goods were being organized; at its center was a line of tables where different groups of people used an assembly line to pack a series of relief supplies into bags. Aslie Aslanian, the gatekeeper of a popular nightclub, provided a voice to the music of everyone’s almost synchronized movements on a loudspeaker, making announcements to fill certain needs: “We need thirty men to help load trucks. Please line up outside in ten minutes.”

Every day *Tulong Bayan* had between 400 and 800 volunteers of all ages and backgrounds. The old worked with the young, strangers worked with friends, all of them united in their desire to help those in need. With a work force made up of young children, high school and college students, socialites, mothers, those dropping by after work, and even sports teams that pitched in instead of holding practice, the work proceeded without pause.

So many steps went into creating a well-stocked relief bag that there was truly a job for anyone. Volunteers could load and unload trucks, sort goods that arrived, be a rice, sugar or soap packer, make beds from empty cartons, help with administration or count the loads, donations and deliveries. It was easy to notice the natural division of labor—women generally liked making the bags and the able-bodied men and boys liked to use their muscles to help carry and load.

Given the centralized locations in Makati and Cubao, and the long hours (open until midnight), volunteers could come whenever they had time. Many of them stayed all day. Because there were no clocks on the walls, Ninfa Bito, one of the organizers, had a way of marking the passing of time: “Some people came every day at certain times so if I saw certain faces, I knew what time of the day it was.” The spirit of helping became infectious—volunteers shared their experiences with friends and family, who in turn became inspired to get involved.

Bito continues, “This is the first time Manila people got shocked out of complacency. Everyone came to help, whether rich or poor.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AT MACULANGAN.





Although the amount of damage we had here was nothing compared to out there, it affected people enough to really mobilize themselves.”

In certain ways, the volunteers themselves benefited from the manual labor they did. Sevrine Miaillhe, who brought along her four children, aged ten to four, explains, “This was the first time my children helped in a hands-on way during a crisis. The images they saw of the destruction really left an impact and they really felt ‘we are so small, there is nothing we can do’. So feeling that they could do something was a good way for them to process it all.” She tells of how each child found his or her perfect task—the older sons, eight-year-old Theophile and ten-year-old Eliot, helped push carts of goods, while seven-year-old Anabelle helped make beds out of cartons and four-year-old Benjamin opened boxes and took out cans.

Volunteers such as Felicia Atienza sourced and donated relief supplies and put in her own physical labor. She tells why she preferred to be hands-on: “The packing was the most satisfying because I always think of the person who will receive it. I am thinking of how I would feel if this tragedy happened to me and I received these goods.”

Lizzie Zobel, a volunteer who spent every day being a “carrier” of goods, says, “Sometimes it’s hard in these situations to contribute yourself personally because you don’t know where to go or how to help. A place like this gives people a ‘how’ and allows them a closeness to the situation, which gives it a different meaning. When you ask people just to donate to a bank account, there is a distance.” She continues, “I loved how organized everything was. It was wonderful that it did not matter where you came from or what you were capable of giving, everyone contributed what was accessible to him or what skill she had.”

People worked with unparalleled enthusiasm, focus and passion. Bitto recalls, “I have never seen so many people run after boxes of sardines. It was like a locust swarm as soon as new supplies came in—they were so eager to pack and load bags. And when a truck got loaded, people actually cheered!” Chris Bonoan, who was in charge of the overall organization of the relief effort, marveled at how everyone did what it took to get the job done, “Everyone listened and paid attention. Even if no one had slept or eaten and people had lost their voices, no one complained about loading 3,000 bags late at night.”



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**CANNED
GOODS**



The well-oiled machine was run not just by dedicated individuals but by proactive ones as well. Newly arrived volunteers did not wait for people to tell them what to do. Gaita Forés, who provided food to keep all volunteers full of energy throughout the twelve-day relief operation, says, “They just watched what other people were doing and went and did it themselves. They found their spot and did whatever needed to be done. At first, some would say it was hard to open the bags, but pretty soon they developed their own fast-paced rhythm and were having fun.”

Although everyone made sure to follow the existing systems, the whole effort remained a “work in progress” and so people could freely offer ideas of how things could be done better or faster. Creating a chain of people to pass bags along to each other became a quicker way of loading trucks than bringing each bag to the vehicle, and having “counters” at each assembly table who would then add up their totals proved to be faster than having each person count how many bags were made.

Handing out thousands of plastic bags to a country already inundated with trash problems weighed heavily on the minds of the organizing team. So when supporter Panjee Tapales suggested avoiding flimsy plastic bags which tended to clog the pipes, daily runs to Divisoria to buy heftier, more reusable bags were added to the schedule.

The grim determination to finish their job led some volunteers to be extra creative. When a group of students saw that they could not finish packing their supply of relief bags because there were not enough of certain goods to make a complete set, they came up with their own solution. They pooled whatever money they had in their pockets, got into a taxi and returned proudly with two sacks of rice and four boxes of canned goods.

Relief goods were sent to any private organization and relief center that asked for them and had the necessary infrastructure (i.e., parish priests, Rotary Clubs, Red Cross, schools). The relief packages reached communities in Bulacan, Pasig, Muntinlupa, Rizal, Laguna, Marikina, Pangasinan, Cagayan and Ilocos. Volunteers like Zobel were attracted to *Tulong Bayan* because it was careful to distribute to the people and places that really needed help, and made sure that the right persons received the goods.

Bonoan shares a particularly heartwarming story. The driver of a volunteer had been helping pack goods for days before he told them that parts of Commonwealth in Quezon City, where he lived, were submerged and had yet to receive relief goods. Upon hearing this, the organizers gave him 300 bags to deliver, which the recipients greeted with tears. In gratitude, they wrote down the name of each family that received a bag and how many people were helped in that family. When that list reached the volunteers, people were so moved that the next bags were packed with even greater speed.

Like the volunteers, the enormous supply of donations which made this relief effort possible also came in all shapes and sizes—from huge trucks filled with sacks of rice or bottles of water sent by individuals and corporations, to large and sometimes anonymous cash donations, to little “sando bags” holding three canned goods, to those who just wandered in and offered a donation of a hundred pesos. Bonoan recalls that one driver who had been regularly watching the arrival of goods, decided to go to a convenience store and returned with a bag of coffee sachets. When Bonoan asked him who sent the bag, his reply was, “No, ma’am, it’s my lunch money for the week.”

People also volunteered their trucks, vans and pickups to meet transportation needs. Once a vehicle was loaded with goods, a volunteer or someone with a local connection to that specific area would ride with the supplies to make sure the deliveries were made effectively. When a volunteer arrived at a church one night to find that the relief bags were not enough to meet the long line of people waiting for aid, she called Bonoan, who immediately sent a truck to make up for the difference.

Given the fast pace at which goods arrived and left the space, there were many times when certain goods were in short supply or had run out. Frantic calls and texts were immediately sent to friends, acquaintances, coworkers, and everyone in between. And while Whitespace held its breath and the volunteers kept working, the true magic happened.

Volunteer Monique Villonco says, “The miracle of the loaves and fish happened repeatedly. As soon as someone declared something was needed, no matter what it was, how much we needed or how difficult it might have been to get it to us, it would appear right away. It was incredible as it happened time and time again. No matter what it took, people mobilized their resources, worked together and got it done.”

The organizing team is particularly grateful to online networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, crediting them for the lightning-quick speed with which their needs were met. Bito says, “When we would run out of a certain item, we would post it and someone would repost it.” People often came in and said, “We heard you needed more volunteers... or more of this...”

The sunlight that emerged after this dark storm highlights what Filipinos can accomplish when joined together in goal and purpose, a lesson to keep in mind for the future. Gaita Forés places this thought in the bigger picture: “People finally found a cause to unite and pool their resources for. I hope things can be taken a step further where it does not take a disaster for all of us to be willing to do this.” And as Lizzie Zobel points out, the *bayanihan* spirit which emerged is one of the most powerful tools which the people have available. “The Filipinos, more than other countries, have a real sense of community. They have a sense of the significance of helping each other. It’s inspiring and continues to inspire...” ✕