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When the search for something fun turns into an untiring vocation

When Ronald Bagi, 31, started out as a high school teacher in a school for Lumad children, it was just for fun.

“Adventure yung pakay ko doon,” he explained. *“Pero ‘nung nakita ko na yung mga bata, yung kakulangan sa kanila, ginrab ko na yung opportunity na magturo sa kanila bilang isang teacher ng mga Lumad,”* he said.

A then 21-year-old engineering student in the University of Mindanao, he stopped studying in 2003. Bagi then heard of TRIFPSS, the Tribal Filipino Program of Surigao Del Sur, a school for Lumad elementary children, and was hired as a teacher in 2005.

Due to the lack of mathematics teachers in another school, he was absorbed in ALCADDEV (Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural Livelihood Development), a high school for the Lumad, in 2008.

Aside from teaching mathematics, he also teaches Philippine history, science (biology and chemistry), economics, agriculture, and home economics. Besides working as a full-time teacher and master adviser, he also works as one of the cultural directors and a dorm-in-charge of the school, mainly due to the lack of staff.

Currently, he teaches almost a hundred students; 40 students in Year 1, 30 plus in Year 2, another 30 plus in Year 3, and 20 in Year 4. He works all day during Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from morning to late afternoon, and if possible, gets one break period.

When asked if he ever finds his work tiring, he said, *“Trabaho kasi eh, kahit 24 hours yung trabaho mo, kaya.”*

He met his then wife in Han-ayan province while he was starting out as a teacher in ALCADDEV. Being a teacher-in-charge in a community in Tandag province, unlike him, she cannot leave Surigao and support their people who traveled to Manila to protest.

“Sumama rin siya sa fact-finding mission [of the killings], kaya separate kami ngayon nagtatrabaho, dito ako ngayon sa national, doon naman siya sa Mindanao,” he said.

Being from the same line of work, they are almost always away from each other, moving from one city to the next, as militarization takes place more frequently than the times before.

“Sanay na kami sa aming trabaho. Nagkakaintindihan naman kami,” he said.

Back in 2005, Bagi was made to strip his clothes by military forces staying in their community, when he was still starting out as a teacher.

“Yun ang pinaka-hindi ko malilimutan na karanasan. ‘Dun ako na-encourage kasi hindi nga nila ako nirespeto bilang guro, how about sa mga Lumad na walang pinag-aralan?’ he said.

Bagi remains strong amidst constant death threats the Lumad have been receiving for the past decade. Last Sept. 1, 2015, members of the Lumad community were killed by paramilitary forces of Magahat-Bagani. Three of them, Tatay Emok Samarca, Datu Bello Sinzo, and Dionel Campos, were from ALCADDEV, whom he worked with and knew personally.

“Matapos ‘nun, sabi pa nga ng mga bandido na, ‘pag hindi raw kami aalis, pagbalik nila, mamasakerin kami. ‘Yun, dali-dali kaming umuwi, umalis sa aming komunidad,” he said.

After a series of evacuation, moving from Han-ayan, to nearby provinces Tandag, Lianga and Diatagon, they traveled to Manila, by foot, in a call for the government to stop the continued militarization in Surigao.

Bagi explained how they have been evacuating their homes for a decade now, as private mining companies have finally started their operations on their land in Andap Valley Complex, which should have been started since 2005.

“Marami na kaming series of evacuation mula 2006 hanggang ngayon, 2015, dahil madalas na silang mag-operate sa lugar,” he said.

He explained how their evacuation, or pagbakwit, is deeply rooted to land grabbing. According to him, international fact-finding mission teams stated that the military forces are still staying in Han-ayan, and so they cannot come back to their homes, in a month or so.

These experiences of witnessing their leaders being killed one by one, year after year, became his internal force to continue teaching Lumad children, despite the constant threats of militarization their community receives from military forces residing in Surigao.

“Sayang ang buhay ng direktor namin na nawala. Magiging useless kung kami ay susuko sa aming pinaglalaban, sa pagkamit ng hustisya, sa kanyang kamatayan,” he ends. #