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Feature Story on Puzzle Cafe Katipunan  
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### **The Story of Jose Canoy**

Her brother being diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), Ysabella Canoy knew what it entailed.

“Growing up, I had a faint understanding of my brother’s condition,” she said. “But in my house, that just meant that Jose needed more love.”

Ysabella was in Grade 7 when she realized the world looked at Jose differently from the way she and her family did. “That’s when I also realized this should be changed,” she said.

At age 4, Jose was diagnosed with PDD, a term referring to a condition that involve delays in the development of many skills. Individuals diagnosed with PDD show repetitive behaviour and find social interaction difficult.

“It was hard growing up, because people would stare at us a lot whenever Jose throws tantrums in public. He wouldn’t be functioning like anyone else,” Ysabella said. “He would be staring at a lot of things and talk to people left and right. To some people, that might just come out as offensive.”

The Canoy’s being a close-knit family, Ysabella explained how everyone engaged in planning for the future of their brother. “We started planning the future of Jose, since he was not going to be able to go to college, find a job, and get married. It’s up to us,” she said.

According to Ysabella, the original plan was to open a convenience store for Jose, since he liked to arrange disarrayed things whenever they go to the supermarket.

Ysabella being the closest sibling to Jose, growing up with him and taking up BS Special Education in college because of him, she told her parents that starting the cafe might be their one and only chance to help spread autism awareness. They decided that a convenience store is not sufficient to help Jose with his condition.

“I told my parents that if we’re going to do this, we must do it big,” she said. “I didn’t see how a convenience store would be beneficial to his development in terms of him improving and honing his skills. And how would you promote awareness with a convenience store?”

Since the planned location is near neighbouring villages, the whole family decided it would be a nice idea to have a convenience store -- and a cafe with it as well. Ysabella emphasized that this would give Jose a chance to hone his skills, particularly socializing and communicating with people. “When we were planning this, it was all for Jose. This whole idea sprung up because of Jose. Everything was fueled by Jose,” she said.

In April last year, the family opened Puzzle Cafe especially for Jose and individuals with the same condition as him.

“When we started the cafe, we wanted the name to come from Jose. But with his autism, it’s hard for him to imagine things; it’s hard for him to think about things that are concrete,” Ysabella said. “We had to wait for the cafe to be physically there before he was able to understand what was going on.”

For the names, they wrote down every single thing Jose might like. “Eventually, when we wrote down the word ‘puzzle,’ he liked it, since it’s his special talent.”

In fact, Jose’s special talent is finishing a 3,000 to 4,000-piece puzzle in only a matter of seven to eight hours.

“That’s when I realized that the puzzle piece has significance to the autism community,” Ysabella said. “Maybe not here yet, but on a global scale, the puzzle piece is recognized as a symbol for autism.”

Currently, Puzzle Cafe employs nine differently-abled individuals; five are with autism, two are with Down syndrome.

With their venture into the new business, the Canoy family considered the help of Independent Learning Center, a school providing a job readiness program for individuals with special needs. Ysabel emphasized that with this, they can give the kids an opportunity to work.

“In our cafe, we feel that we change one person at a time about autism,” Ysabella

said. "We're proud that we change perspectives."

Propagating autism awareness through the cafe was difficult for the Canoy family at first because Jose's condition, PDD, has no identifying factor -- unlike illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, and cancer. In order to spread their campaign, Ysabella said that they started to work on the puzzle piece.

"It's not catching on yet. But now that we've opened Puzzle Cafe, we hope big businesses and other people would come forward and support us," she said.

Project Inclusion, a movement by Unilab, was where Ysabella took the lead from in involving individuals with autism and other disabilities in the business. The movement aims to raise awareness for companies to see that these individuals can work in an office-setting.

"We found that the most crucial step in this is communication between the kids' parents and their teachers," Ysabella said. "We have to see that these individuals take a while to adjust."

Every single day, the cafe gets compliments from customers saying thank you for giving the individuals an opportunity, but Ysabella believes that these kids deserve everything.

"Personally, I think they should be given an opportunity; it's not a privilege, not a luxury," she said.

Ysabella is hoping that the cafe will start and stay small, inspire other businesses to go forward and do greater things. In terms of spreading awareness, she thinks that they are successful.

"We hope to stay open for a long time, for these individuals, and for Jose," she ended. #