

TAKING ACTION



By Edu Punay

HAJIME YOKOTA WAS A 17-year-old high school student eager to explore the world outside his homeland when, in 1994, he visited an orphanage in Castillejos town in Zambales, a province about 100 kilometers northwest of Manila, housing victims of the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo eruption.

With just stories from friends who had been there and an address as his guide, he arrived at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport and asked airport security personnel how to get to the Jireh Children's Home.

He took a taxi to the Light Rail Transit station in Baclaran in Pasay City, rode the train to Monumento in Calocan and took the provincial bus to Zambales from there. When he arrived at around 8 in the evening, he asked for directions from helpful locals and reached his destination after riding a passenger jeepney and a tricycle.

"I practically rode all types of public transport on that one-day journey," recalls Yokota of his first foreign trip alone.

But for him, traveling was not about the sights and



Jireh Home kids join hair cutting training dubbed as "Power of Scissors" by ACTION in partnership with Japanese and Filipino hairdressers (above). Products of Ecomismo, ACTION's program for unemployed mothers (left).

scenery on the road; what mattered were the people he met to pursue a personal advocacy – helping less fortunate children.

The young man was welcomed by administrators of the orphanage after explaining his purpose.

"I wanted to help but I had no resources yet, so I just helped in reconstruction of the place damaged by *lahar*," he narrates. "They were the ones who took

care of me. They treated me as a member of the family and I stayed there for one month, where I was exposed to the needs of the kids there."

It was this experience that started it all for Yokota, founder of A Child's Trust Is Ours to Nurture (ACTION), a non-government organization providing assistance to and programs for 39 orphanages and institutions in the country.

When he went back to Japan, the young student started what later on grew as an advocacy for childcare.

"I wanted to do something for them. I called

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a TV station (NHK) and they gave me the chance to appeal for help for the kids in Jireh for 10 minutes in a program that was aired nationwide. In two weeks, I raised an equivalent of P1 million for the orphanage," he recalls.

His story also inspired other students around Japan. He returned to Jireh with 16 other students who traveled at their own expense and also contributed to his project.

At that time, the money they raised was used for construction of a better facility for the orphans' home.

And for the past 20 years, Yokota has been holding the same immersion program for Japanese students in Jireh, which now has buildings for elementary and high school and a guest house.

ACTION's programs have also expanded to other institutions for orphans, the handicapped, street kids and victims of abuse in the provinces of Bulacan, Pampanga, Bataan, Tarlac and Nueva Ecija.

It has also been providing training programs for social workers. In most of its projects, it works hand-in-hand with the Department of Social Welfare and Development Region III office.

"My vision is simple: to expand opportunities and provide better care and environment for children to enable them to achieve their dreams. In this country, *marami ang mahihirap kaya kailangan tulong-tulong para umahon*," shares Yokota, who has mastered the Filipino language with his two-decade stay here.



ACTION founder Hajime Yokota (above) - himself a black belt - also serves as instructor at the Jireh Home (right). Ecomismo products made from recycled materials (bottom).



Last year, ACTION took a major leap with a pilot project funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) involving a three-year free skills training program for orphans and street kids.

Prominent Japanese and Filipino instructors are hired for the programs - basic hair cutting, dance lessons and karate classes - that run for six months.

The NGO also came up with a module promoting house parenting standards and education against child abuse.

It is also helping unemployed mothers in Malabon City in the production of wallets, pouches and pencil cases using recycled materials that are exported to Japan.

ACTION was conferred in 2010 by the Japanese government with its Japan Foundation Award. It was also given recognition by the Nippon foundation.

Yokota attributes the success of his cause to his supportive parents, who allowed him to pursue it early on.

He says the biggest reward for all his efforts is to see the children-beneficiaries achieve their dreams.

This was what he saw in one of the orphans in Jireh, who was then a three-year-old and is now a graduate of information technology course in college.

His ideal goal for the Philippines is rather ambitious - that there will be no more need for any of the current 600 orphanages all over the country.

But he admits that raising funds has been the biggest challenge. Most of ACTION's sponsors are from Japan.

Finding donors in the country, he laments, is tough - especially since last year when the pork barrel scam involving bogus NGOs broke.

"Sponsors here are very choosy and careful. Of course, that's understandable because of the Napoles scam," he comments.

Still, Yokota is hopeful that the Filipino sponsors would know the good record of his NGO.

"I hope to work with Pinoys who also want to help. *Sayang naman kasi maraming orphans at street kids na may promising potentials na hindi nade-develop dahil sa kahirapan*," he laments.

"When you develop these talents, they will certainly contribute to this country," adds Yokota, now 37 and father of a one-year-old boy.

Despite the challenges, he sees a bright future for ACTION. Yokota plans to come up with a career-based scholarship program where donors would support the education of orphans and street kids who want to pursue their respective careers.

"For example, a kid from the orphanage wants to become a doctor. We can get a sponsor who is also

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a doctor. This way, helping is closer to the heart," he explains.

And in pursuing this plan, he also intends to expand the horizon of beneficiaries whose dreams are usually limited to becoming doctors, teachers and policemen.

"The kids here are not aware of the many other careers in store for them when they grow up," he says in justifying ACTION's next project involving a book.

To be launched in November with the help of a publishing company, the book entitled "Nais Kong Maging: 100 Jobs in the Philippines Volume 1" will tell rags-to-riches stories of people from various fields from A to Z.

It will educate orphans and street kids on the various professions they can pursue and will also include a list of scholarships from partner institutions.

Yokota believes in the motto "If there's a will, there's a way." He considers failure to take advan-



The lively beneficiaries of ACTION from five child care institutions in Zambales after staging presentations in their dance and karate workshops.

tage of opportunities to help others a sin.

For him, looking at his achievements is secondary as the tasks

that lie ahead are more important.

"There are still so many things to be done. If there's a way and I don't try, that is the ultimate

failure," he adds. 🇵🇭

To learn more about ACTION, email action.yokota@gmail.com