Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

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When I was 10, I wanted to be a billionaire. I wanted to be a movie director, doctor, entrepreneur, and fashion designer. I wanted to be everything. Everything, as long as it wasn’t a teacher.

In my primary school years, my grade was infamous for being uncontrollable. We were rowdy, noisy, and crazy. Even at such a young age, I would notice my teachers, eyebrows scrunched and mouth agape yelling at my classmates to “be quiet!”, and sensed their desperation. The community around me fueled my reservation as, growing up as a minority in a small town in a developing country, our dreams and ambitions were all we had. My parents, relatives, and community needed me to make something of myself - and a school teacher in a small town just wouldn’t cut it.

One summer during the pandemic, I started my own small business. As I had just moved to Singapore and was stuck in a faceless apartment with no one to talk to, I decided to earn some money by setting up an e-commerce store that sells Singaporean products to the Indonesian market. When my mom asked me if I was willing to help with a foster home for high schoolers in eastern Indonesia set up by our local church, I had an epiphany. Setting up my small business had high profits and was surprisingly easy to start. As such, I offered an entrepreneurial-based class on social media marketing and digital skills and brought together a group of students to create an initiative called Aku Bisa.

At first, I was terrified. Firstly, my Indonesian was incredibly rusty, and secondly, I was worried that I’d be faced with a difficult class and would do them more harm than good. To my surprise, the first lesson changed my perspective completely. Although they were shy and reserved, despite a horrible internet connection and being separated by a 3-hour plane ride, I loved every second of my teaching experience with the 12 teenagers in Rumah Belajar Parousia.

I visited Desa Kapan in Eastern Indonesia a few months after that first lesson. There, I held my first-ever in-person class. As I delivered my class and saw their passion: their raised arms, their new-found skills of graphic design and finance, and their recalling of past material, I knew teaching had turned into a passion of mine.

One particular student, Vince, holds a special place in my heart. Vince was always the leader of her class; she’d shoot up her hand for every question I asked, ask questions about every new concept I shared, and break the ice when the group is being particularly quiet. After a few months with Aku Bisa, Vince graduated and went on to go to a local university to learn to become a teacher herself. This was incredibly rare as most students in Kapan Village graduate high school only to become farmers or policemen, continuing the cycle of poverty. As I kept in contact with Vince through Instagram and social media, I felt a sense of joy and awe that I was able to be a part of her remarkable journey. From there, I realized the potential impact our team at Aku Bisa could have by empowering all our students. As such, I spent the next year creating lesson plans and teaching classes every weekend. My team and I continued to grow Aku Bisa to work directly with 2 other organizations, taking 95 students under our wing. We also built our website to be a platform where our curriculum and lesson plans are free to access by any organization that wants to carry out our vision of quality education and empowerment.

Aku Bisa translates to ‘I Can’ in Indonesian. As per our name, we want to empower not just our students, but any individual or organization with a passion for teaching and contributing toward quality education.

Teaching is not about slamming your hand on the table and shushing a few snotty pubescent kids. And it is more than cultivating a certain skill or reciting formulas. It is about empowering your students to learn, be creative, and have a growth mindset.

As I looked around the small room in Rumah Belajar Parousia, I became increasingly aware of the impact my teaching had on the lives of these high schoolers. There, I learned that success is not about money, fame, or validation. It is about empowering others to reach their potential and being as ready as they can be to claim their place in the world. In my journey of loving to teach, I also learned a lot from some brilliant students. And as such, I learned to love being a student too.