**RISING FROM THE ASHES: A STORY OF HOPE, RESILIENCE, AND EMPOWERMENT**

I vividly remember the excitement I felt when I first heard about the protests that promised a brief escape from school work. Like many others, I thought it would last only a few days—a small break, nothing more. Who could have imagined that this brief pause would stretch into over eight long years of chaos, uncertainty, and hardship? It’s been a whirlwind, affecting everything from my education to my mental health, touching nearly every aspect of my life. Yet, in the midst of these challenges, there’s something powerful that has emerged: a sense of unity, a community strengthened by our shared struggles, and a determination to help each other rise from the ashes. (Fongwa Vanessa)

For many, the horror of this crisis runs even deeper.

"You know those movie scenes where the bad guy bursts into a room with a gun, and everything descends into chaos? I never thought I would live to see something like that happen in my own community—until it did. Not once, not twice, but enough times to leave families grieving for what feels like an eternity." When our teacher mentioned a strike, I was excited about getting a break from school. But then she asked, "Do you really want the strike to start?" Her words chilled me, and their true weight became clear later as our region experienced its first winter of violence and terror. The once-vibrant streets became empty, and the laughter that once echoed in schools was replaced by the sound of gunfire. Fear, ghost towns, and loss became our new normal. Many lost their jobs, some lost their lives, and others lost loved ones. Even today, many students who dropped out of school during that time have not returned. Eight years later, the crisis persists, but while we may not be able to end it on our own, we can ease the burden for some families. By offering a helping hand, we can bring a bit of joy back into their lives, perhaps even lighting their homes from within, despite the cold reality that still lingers outside. (Mazda Eugette)

I still remember how happy I was when I first got the paper from my teacher announcing the protest. I didn’t even bother reading the full details—I was just thrilled at the thought of a break from the daily climb up the hills of Ntamulung to school every morning. I was relieved to escape the early morning scolding for being late, the thought of finally resting filled me with joy. My friends and I made plans to catch up on school work (although we all knew that was one of the little lies we told ourselves). We spent long hours chatting after school, savoring the few days of freedom we expected to have. But a few days became weeks, then months, then years. November 2016 will forever be etched in my memory. If I could go back to that moment when I first held that piece of paper, knowing what I know now—seeing the chaos, the shattered dreams, and the countless lives lost—I would cry out in anguish. But we cannot just dwell on the past. We have to hope that the future will be brighter. The moment to make a change is now, and as individuals, we must seize every opportunity to make that change. (Animbom Odette)

Each of us has a unique story about this ongoing crisis, and one day, when the time is right, we will all share them fully. While our losses and experiences differ, we are united by a common goal: a better tomorrow. This shared vision is why we founded Support for Empowerment; an initiative focused on creating a community where everyone can thrive.

We launched our first project in September “Get a book for A child” raising $300 which was used to provide school supplies for 80 students affected by the crisis in the northwest region. The smiles on their faces and the relief from the parents who thought their children would never go back to school were overwhelming. One parent said, "I didn’t know if my kids would go to school this year, but thanks to you, I have hope.

In the face of unimaginable hardship, we have learned that small acts of kindness can make a world of difference. Each of us has a unique story to tell about how this crisis has shaped our lives and while the challenges we face are monumental, our resolve is even stronger. Together, we are not just surviving; we are building a brighter future for ourselves and generations to come. In the face of adversity, we choose hope, action, and resilience, believing that our collective efforts will bring about the change we seek.

As we rise from the ashes, we carry with us the lessons of the past and the dreams of a better future. Our community, united by hope, will continue to strive for a world where education, peace, and opportunity are not just dreams but realities for every child.

Together, let’s rebuild our community from the ashes.