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“On November 8, the strongest storm met the strongest people.” — Joanna Sustento, Typhoon Yolanda survivor

The room fell silent. Everyone listened. Time stopped.

Hers was like a voice in the wilderness of our collective memory. Slowly, deliberately, she told her story in vivid detail. How the monster typhoon named “Yolanda” came that day. How the savage storm surge barreled through their home in Tacloban. How they were tossed around in the violent waves of water and debris, desperately holding on to life and each other. And how the raging waters took away her father, mother, eldest brother, sister-in-law, and nephew — some of whose remains have not been found until now.

Her grief, her pain, her wounds, felt fresh. Everyone ached with her in silence. But towards the tearful end of the narrative of her nightmare, this young woman found in her own tragedy a glimpse of triumph, the strength of a survivor she never knew she had. A strength she knows now she shares with our people.

Joanna Sustento shared her story in a room full of kind strangers, in the afternoon session of a groundbreaking gathering called, “The 11th Hour: A National Conference On Climate Change Adaptation and Mental Health.”

Organized by the Balik Kalipay Center (BKC) for Psychosocial Response, Inc. (BKC), a non-government organization formed to provide mental health and psychosocial services and helmed by its founding president Dr. June Pagaduan Lopez, The 11th Hour was an urgent call for holistic action in the face of climate change and resulting disasters that have destroyed entire villages and claimed thousands of lives in our country.

It's an epic struggle. Against poverty, greed, corruption, the unbridled exhaustion of the planet's resources, and the perfect storm that is climate change. But as in the classic myths, forces otherwise stronger than them cannot easily defeat a handful of heroes —armed with conscience, capabilities, and a collective spirit.

BKC had prepared for almost a year for this two-day conference that was held last March 22-23 at the Multi-Purpose Hall of the Henry Sy, Sr. building in the De La Salle University in Manila. But according to Dr. Lopez, it all started as far back as ten years ago.

“Exactly a decade ago, the mental health community gathered for a consultation workshop organized by the University of Philippines-Manila with the Support of the World Health Organization and the Department of Health to discuss the psychosocial consequences of health emergencies and disasters. This was just after the twin disasters of Milenyo and Reming. What was expected to be a gathering of a small number of stakeholders turned out to be an auditorium-full of about 60 organizations, local and international. We were overwhelmed! The feeling was that mental health as an indispensable element of humanitarian response has finally come of age in the Philippines.”

Dr. Lopez continued, “This is what this conference is about. It is our attempt to exemplify the methodologies of psychosocially minded interventions which have evolved from that time ten years ago when we pledged to continue the campaign to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into our humanitarian responses to crises and catastrophes. It is our way of putting our thoughts behind what we have been doing to alleviate the mental suffering of our people after their experience of traumatic adverse life events.”

The 11th Hour conference brought together some of the best minds and hearts in the fields of environmental and mental health science: expert resource speakers, academics, scientists, policymakers, practitioners and key players from government, NGOs and civil society, international and faith-based institutions, the media and private sector — to share and seek better ways to effectively mainstream MHPSS in the continuing dialogues on climate change adaptation (CCA) and disaster risk reduction and management (DRMM).

The conference started with talks and discussions on the science and technology of climate change and disasters led by Dr. Alyssa M. Peleo-Alampay, PhD., a geologist and professor at the University of the Philippines, and Dr. Corazon PB. Claudio, PhD., who talked about risks, challenges, opportunities and some best practices in climate change adaptation. Both are awardees and members of The Outstanding Women In The Nation’s Service (TOWNS).

De La Salle University professor Dr. Wilfredo Licuanan talked about the Philippine coastal and marine ecosystem and how global warming and the El Nino phenomenon have resulted in possibly irreversible damage and mass coral bleaching in Philippine waters.

Department of Health Secretary Dr. Pauly Jean B. Rosell-Ubial kicked off the afternoon session of the first day with a talk on holistic approach to building community resilience, specifically the inclusion and delivery of MHPSS in the department’s Health Emergency Management program. Dr. Gloria Balboa of DOH expounded more on this in detail on the second day.

After DOH Secretary Rosell-Ubial, survivor Joanna Sustento shared the painful memory of how Yolanda took away her family as she herself barely survived.

Dr. Maria Lourdes A. Carandang, PhD., discussed the psychosocial impact of disasters on families, women, and children. In human emergencies, she said, children are the most vulnerable, but also the most resilient. She explained key principles of Play and Mindfulness Based Expressive Art Therapy, and how play empowers traumatized children. She ended with a poignant story about a ten-year-old boy who lost his family to Typhoon Pablo, and how he had cried out to his dead parents and siblings that he knew they loved him, and that he loved them, too. Dr. Carandang summed it up in three words: love never dies.

The first day came to a close with the launching of “Memories of Water,” edited by poet, teacher, and Palanca awardee Merlie M. Alunan, and published by the Ateneo de Naga University Press. Verses voiced spoke of struggles in the raging waters that engulfed land, as well as the engulfing pain of loss and memory. But the weaving of words on which to carry their mourning across the waters of time offered these writers a quantum of solace, healing, and hope.

How bury in the earth, in the mind

Our ravaged village,

The corpses lining the beaches,

My family, lost, erased.

My love for them is the kiss of the south wind.

Though this metal is baptized in fire,

Still is my edge dulled by desolation.

excerpt from "After the Storm"

by Victor Jose Penaranda

from Our Memory of Water

The second day of the conference began with a warm message via video from Vice-President Maria Leonora "Leni" Robredo acknowledging and affirming the conference and its objectives with whole-hearted support. Dr. Gloria Balboa of the Department of Health (DOH) followed with an extensive overview of the existing national guidelines on mental health and psychosocial response. This opened discussions with other agencies like the National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) as well as non-government organizations on how best to coordinate and mainstream efforts.

Afterwards, participants chose between packed parallel sessions and workshops on relevant and related topics, such as: survivors' stories from the Yolanda disaster and initiatives for healing through culture and the arts; fostering resilience through education; mental health and psychosocial support in media; psychological first aid; integrating arts and creative processes in disaster risk reduction and mental health and psychosocial processing, facilitated by members of the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA), and; the use of indigenous culture and music in creating and restoring the wholeness and well-being of a community.

In the session on healing through the culture and the arts, Leyte-Samar Heritage Society, Inc. president Joycie Dorado-Alegre shared about the importance of understanding culture and how even in death there is a need to respect and observe cultural traditions. To the shock of many resident survivors in Tacloban, the bodies of the dead were just bulldozed into a mass grave without ritual or respect. While government was understandably concerned with cleaning up and health and sanitation issues, people were still looking for their family members among the living and the dead, grieving their loss. Artists in Tacloban at the time came together to create a symbolic ritual where those left behind were given a chance to honor their dead with ceremony and solemnity.

In the session on mental health and psychosocial support in media, senior journalist Michael Lim Ubac of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, shared his post-Yolanda thesis comparing two towns both directly hit by the typhoon, but with different results: one was devastated with mass deaths; while the other, more prepared with early evacuation and small strong shelters, suffered only damage to property. Journalists Kristine Sabillo and Matikas Santos of Inquirer.net had been early fielded at the time, even temporarily stranded in the horror of the aftermath in Leyte and Samar, when power, transportation, and communication were down. While there were reports of looting and chaos, they had encountered kinder souls who survived the tragedy. A lasting memory was the stench of the dead that stayed with them through sleepless nights, weeks, even months after. It was recognized that even journalists trained to go cover catastrophic and critical events, suffer from trauma. After all, the medium is the message.

Envisioned by Dr. Lopez, with the help of many professional colleagues and the support of the De La Salle University, much of the planning, programming and logistics of the 11th hour conference was organized behind the scenes by BKC Program Director Abbey Pasano del Puerto, and carried on the shoulders of young BKC and La Salle volunteers who literally worked day and night to put things together. The fruits of everyone's labor were the important discussions, partnerships, networks, and resolutions from the conference.

At the end of two full days, the whole group gathered in the hall for a moment of profound spiritual silence and renewal. And then, finally, in the festive spirit of a resilient race, the conference closed with everyone drumming and dancing to ancient rhythms and heartbeats, affirming life and fellowship amid epic challenges in this eleventh hour.

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A warm fire burned in the hearts and bellies of everyone. This was just the beginning.