

Haven for victims of trafficking inaugurated

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MANILA, Philippines - Soft-spoken Ana (not her real name) would pass for the age of 17 or 18. But this 20-year-old girl from Samar has gone through a very traumatic experience when she was just 16.

With a social worker beside her, Ana said a distant relative recruited her to work as a restaurant dishwasher. She, however, ended up in a brothel.

"Hindi ko naman gusto ang ganitong trabaho," she meekly said when she recalled that one of her customers reminded her that she was in that kind of business.

Ana is among the more than 50,000 victims rescued from human trafficking. She has reintegrated into society and now is a proud advocate in the fight against human trafficking.

Although the case she filed in the province was earlier dismissed by the court for lack of jurisdiction, she is still determined to re-file her case and see those responsible behind bars.

According to Ma. Cecilia Flores-Oebanda, founder and president of the Visayan Forum Foundation (VFF), Inc., rescued victims are often discouraged from seeking justice and are subjected to constant pressures and threats from traffickers.

Safe haven



With this predicament, the VFF and the Angelo King Foundation constructed a building that would serve as a safe haven for human trafficking survivors. Called the Center of Hope and situated in Antipolo City, the facility will serve as a safe refuge for rescued victims where they can find help in recuperating from trauma as they pursue their cases. The center will also provide life-skills training for the victims' reintegration back into society.

"Isa sa pinagpilian namin, anywhere basta malayo sa mga traffickers. Kasi during the time, grabe ang harassment na na-encounter namin sa halfway houses namin sa ports at saka sa airports. So hindi talaga safe yung mga bata doon," Oebanda told abs-cbnNEWS.com.

Oebanda said the Center of Hope is VFF's response to one of the major problems mentioned in the US Government's

Trafficking in Persons report last year, particularly on the lack of facilities to secure and prepare the victims for successful prosecution.

Based on the report, the Philippines is a major source and transit area for trafficking, specifically for forced labor and prostitution.

Traffickers, she said, have been evading areas where the VFF operates. They use back doors to send victims to forced labor or to prostitution dens.

"Pero sa ngayon, tinitingnan din namin yung mga airport kasi maraming mga cheap airlines na ginagamit. We're also actively working in areas we consider as back doors like Clark and Malaysia.

Doon medyo marami," added Oebanda.

The VFF's long-time partner, Microsoft Philippines, will provide information technology training to victims and survivors through the STEP-UP (Stop Trafficking and Exploitation of People Through Unlimited Potential) program.

"STEP-UP is about helping Filipinos face a new beginning and take back what they lost. We are empowering them by providing access to resources and technology training that boosts confidence and rebuilds lives," said John Bessey, Microsoft Philippines' managing director.



'Not just a dormitory'

The three-storey center can accommodate up to 80 people. It has several dorm-type accommodations, a common kitchen, receiving area, training rooms, and a library.

"True to its name, the Center of Hope is what we can call a home away from the claws of traffickers. It's a place where victims and survivors will no longer be afraid. Instead, they will be excited about their future and will be eager to start their lives anew because of the empowering activities and training they will engage in during their stay," Oebanda added.

Oebanda happily announced that another building will soon be constructed in the same 1,500-square-meter area that will be used for training sometime next year.

"We do not only open the doors of the Center to hundreds or even thousands of trafficking victims and survivors. More importantly, we are leading them to a better life. We want this to be their home where they can start again while also fighting their legal battles. We want to destroy the power and control of traffickers over their lives and those of their families," she said.

The center will be operational by the middle of this month. It will be manned by a team of social workers, psychologists, house parents, trainers and security personnel.

"Harry Potter" author donates fund for lot

The lot where the building was constructed was purchased through the generous donation of J.K. Rowling, the author of the famous "Harry Potter" series.

Oebanda said the donation was handed to her during an anti-slavery awarding event in which the VFF official was a recipient.

"Noong 2005, I was awarded the Anti-Slavery Award. Pagkatapos ang nagbigay ng award ko si J.K. Rowling. Right there and then, nang malaman niya ang advocacy namin, she donated 50,000 pounds," she said, adding, "We are really happy and lucky to have this place."

Other partners who helped in the construction of the building were Boysen Philippines, Zonta Club, Soroptimist International, and other civic groups and countless individuals.

Leslie Basett, deputy chief of mission of the US Embassy in Manila, led the ribbon-cutting during the inauguration last Friday. Basett was assisted by Oebanda, and Teddy Kingsu, president of the Angelo King Foundation.

Also in attendance were Justice undersecretary Jose Vicente Salazar and Johnson Ongking of Boysen Philippines.

For Ana, small steps like this help victims like herself rise above their ordeals and reclaim the dignity once stolen from them by human traffickers.

Ref.: <http://visayanforum.org/portal/index.php?option=cms&mode=view&id=940>

