

FROM Japan, WITH LOVE

AFTER A VISIT TO AN ORPHANAGE IN ZAMBALES IN 1994, A JAPANESE NATIONAL DECIDED TO MAKE THE PHILIPPINES HIS HOME AND TO DO WHAT HE CAN TO HELP FILIPINO CHILDREN.

HAJIME YOKOTA WAS JUST A 17-YEAR-OLD HIGH SCHOOL student when he decided to visit the Philippines, by himself, in 1994.

"Gusto kong mag-ibang bansa pero hindi ako mahilig sa sightseeing," says the Japanese national, who now speaks fluent Filipino. "Tapos narinig ko sa isang kaibigan kong Japanese na meron silang research team para sa Pinatubo eruption. One of their sites, malapit sa bahay ampuhan." He decided to visit the orphanage.

After convincing his parents to let him go, and armed with nothing but the address of the orphanage, Hajime set off for the Philippines. "Pagpunta dito sa airport, hindi pa ako marunong mag-English, Japanese lang," he narrates. He took a taxi to Baclaran, the LRT to Monumento, a bus to Olongapo, and finally a jeep to Castellejos in Zambales, with directions he got from people he encountered. It took him seven hours to get from the airport to the orphanage.

"Tapos s'yempre, sa bahay ampuhan, hindi ako kilala. Parang biglang, 'O, sino ka?'" he recalls with a laugh. He managed to communicate with the pastor running the orphanage through hand gestures. "Sabi ko, I'm a high school student, tapos gusto ko mag-stay dito sana, kahit ano, gagawin ko." The pastor agreed to let him stay.

The orphanage had been damaged by the Mt. Pinatubo eruption of 1991, and Hajime, along with some carpenters, did construction work often lasting eight hours a day. He ended up staying for a month and a half before flying home to Japan.

"Yung nasa memory ko, yung na-experience ko dito, puro masaya. Kasi mga Filipino mabait, friendly, tapos hindi nila ako kilala, tinanggap nila ako. Parang nagkaroon ako ng utang na loob. I wanted to do something for them," he says. He was also clearly affected by all the children he saw on the streets when he was on the road from and to the airport.

Back in Tokyo, Hajime wanted to share his experiences, so he contacted newspapers, magazines, and TV programs to feature his story. That's when donations started coming in, and interest grew among fellow Japanese students. Six months after leaving the Philippines, with some funds and 15 Japanese volunteers, Hajime came back to the orphanage.

That was the beginning of ACTION (A Child's Trust Is Ours to Nurture), which "envision[s] a world where children are protected and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential in communities that uphold their rights and respect the dignity of people."

Over the years, the award-winning organization has built up a list of programs to help improve the quality of life of marginalized children. Aside from assisting various orphanages, providing psycho-social intervention programs, and providing educational assistance, ACTION also has its Chikara—chikara is power in Japanese—programs: the Dance no Chikara Project (hiphop dance classes); Karate no Chikara Project (taught by Hajime, who used to coach the Philippine team); Food no Chikara Project (a feeding program); Futsal no Chikara Project (a futsal team in Olongapo made up of former streetkids); and Hasami no Chikara (Power of Scissors) Project.

The Power of Scissors Project is a long-term training program conducted



Hajime Yokota, founder of ACTION, also wanted to help unemployed parents of underprivileged kids by providing them with means to earn income. Through Ecomismo, the organization's livelihood project, 15 mothers in Malabon make wallets, pouches, slippers, and other items out of foil packets, which are then sold in Japan.

by top local hairstylist Jude Hipolito, as well as known hairstylists who fly in from Japan. The ACTION staff carefully screens participants, who are teenage orphans, after which professional consultants train them. These professionals will eventually help them find work in established salons.

ACTION now has plans of opening its own salon for graduates of its program. But aside from providing future livelihood for underprivileged kids, ACTION's programs also have a hand in the character formation of participants.

The karate and dance programs, for example, have students from a rehabilitation center for kids in conflict with the law. "Mga boys na ang iba ay siga, ay nasa Karate training at dance lessons. Madalas kasi kulang sa rehabilitation activities ang mga residential centers," said Hajime.

"Sa karate training, for six months, wala silang uniform. After six months, meron silang exam para sa uniform. Kahit libre, feeling nila, 'Dahil sa effort

ko 'to! Nakuha ko 'to dahil sa sipag ko.' So they appreciate it," he says.

"Marami akong narinig na parang they realize na yung effort mo, hindi sayang. Kailangan mo magsipag para umasenso. Kasi wala silang exposure sa ganun. Maraming napapaligiran ng matanda, parating sigaw, 'Hindi mo kaya 'yan, tamad-tamad mo!' For the first time, alam nila na 'pag masipag, may resulta na maganda. 'Kapag masipag ako, yung mga gusto kong mangyari, magkakatotoo.' So they learn, para di sila sumuko sa buhay."

To help unemployed parents, ACTION also has a livelihood program called Ecomismo, where mothers create handicrafts which are to be sold in Japanese department stores.

ACTION also works with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to train house parents at children's residential institutions, to improve the quality of care that the kids get.

To support all programs of the organization, which employs eight professional social workers, ACTION gets funding from Japan. Hajime admits that, lately, getting funds has been difficult, partly because of the decline in the value of the yen.

But Hajime remains creative when it comes to raising funds—for one, he puts donation boxes in 56 salons in Japan—"Kahit P5,000 a year times 56, medyo malaki na yun!"—but he admits that he now has to tap funds from local sources.

Given the amount of work involved and the challenges he faces, one wonders why Hajime even bothers. Hajime, who has also stayed in India, Kenya, Rwanda, and Romania, says that he realizes how lucky he is to have been born in Japan, and that he wants all children to have the same chance at a good life.

"I met so many children na gusto nila mag-aral. Tapos I met one kid in Kenya, siya ang pinakamatalino sa elementary. Gusto niyang maging doctor para tulog sa kapwa. Kaya lang, di siya makatapos ng high school kasi mahirap lang family niya. Parang, ano ba 'to? Unfair, di ba?"

He adds, "Siguro lahat ng bata, kahit saan, meron silang talent, meron silang gusto sa buhay, may pangarap, may potential. Pero yung potential nila, hindi magagamit if they're born in the Philippines. Pero if they're born in Japan, baka madami silang magagawa sa buhay. Baka yung bata dun sa Kenya, if he was born in Japan, siguro ngayon, doktor na siya."

"Parang gusto ko lang magbigay ng chance and opportunity sa lahat ng bata. Pero hanggang dun lang—ito yung chance mo, i-grab mo. Pero depende pa rin sa sipag mo kung umasenso ka or hindi."

Hajime invites Filipinos to help him in the mission to give Filipino children a better life. "Isang Japanese, pumunta dito twenty years ago, doing charity work for children," he says. "Sana pati kayong mga Filipino. Let's do it together."

If you want to help ACTION, visit its main Philippine office: 9-A 4/L, RM Centrepoint, Rizal Avenue corner Magsaysay Drive, East Tapinac, Olongapo City; call (6347) 602-1710; email info@actionman.jp; or visit its website, action.org.ph.