

Silahis ng Kalusugan School for the Chronically-Ill: A Living Legacy

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² Silahis ng Kalusugan

“Pahintuin nyo na ng pag-aaral si Riza...”

Coming from her own teacher, these words were heartbreaking for the 10-year-old girl who loved school. Riza was asked to quit school not for misbehavior, truancy or poor grades (she was at the top of her class) but because she scared her teachers and the school nurse. Diagnosed with Tetralogy of Fallot, Riza had her share of cyanotic spells that landed her in the school clinic. It seemed the latest episode was simply overwhelming. The school authorities thought that it was too risky to have Riza around.

It was devastating news for the normally cheerful student. School was one of the “normal” things in her life that seemed like an endless series of visits to the hospital for checkups, blood works, ECGs, 2D echo and phlebotomies. Just as disconcerting was the school’s unwillingness to try a home-based study program.

While awaiting approval for a procedure, Riza’s mother chanced upon what looked like a classroom at the back of the Pediatrics Ward. She was pleasantly surprised when told that indeed, there was a “special” school for children and adolescents receiving treatment at the Philippine General Hospital. In less than a week, Riza was back in school at the Silahis ng Kalusugan School for the Chronically Ill. That was back in 2007. In 2010, Riza had open heart surgery and it was touch and go for a few weeks. But she made it back and will graduate from high school this summer.

Riza is just one of hundreds of patients whose dreams of staying in school are kept alive by one woman’s incredible foresight and pioneering spirit. The school was founded by Dr. Perla Santos-Ocampo on Sept. 23, 1966 and remains the only one of its kind in the Philippines. She was then the Chair of the Department of Pediatrics when she convinced a special education teacher, Esterlita Samson to hold classes for admitted patients.

The first classes were held at the far end of then Ward 12 - Pediatrics ward. The “classroom” had an approximate floor area of four square meters. The first students were

eleven patients with diverse illnesses who needed instructions in different grade levels. Mrs. Samson also provided bedside teaching for those who were too ill to walk over to the “classroom”.

Dr. Perla Santos-Ocampo eventually signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Education. The MOA allowed students at the Silahis ng Kalusugan to be enrolled at a nearby elementary or high school while receiving instructions at the Philippine General Hospital. All instructions were then accredited, allowing a smooth transition to regular school. The MOA was renewed last year and ensured the appointment of two full time teachers to the Silahis and financial support from the Manila City Schools Division.

More than four decades after its founding, the *Silahis ng Kalusugan* has become even more relevant with the increasing numbers of children and adolescents with chronic illnesses. The present batch of twenty children and adolescents are under treatment for cancer, renal and cardiac diseases and congenital conditions. The youngest is a little boy with tracheoesophageal fistula who is waiting for surgery. Among the high school students is a freshman with osteogenesis imperfecta. A graduating student has Takayasu’s disease. Another has End Stage Renal Disease and she has her dialysis twice a week after morning classes.

The students’ lives are anything but normal and there are frequent reminders of how uncertain life is. Many bear the physical signs of their struggle with their illnesses. But drop by the school any day, close your eyes and listen. They sound like other children, raucous and rambunctious at times. And when you ask them what they would like to be when they grow up, most likely you will get a definite answer. Psychologist. Social worker. Hair stylist. IT specialist.

This is one of Dr. Perla Santos-Ocampo’s enduring, living legacies: planting the seed of hope, allowing hundreds of children and adolescents to dare to dream of a future.

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