

RONITA'S STORY—THE PHILIPPINES

22-year-old Ronita lives in a barangay (local district), in Quezon City, the Philippines. She lives with her husband Lean and their two children, Egzy who is 3 and Clark who is 5. Ronita's husband works 7 days a week in waste disposal, from 3am to 9pm each day. It is exhausting, laborious work, made harder by the very hot climate. Despite this, Ronita and her husband are only able to rent a very small brick room (measuring around 10 square metres).

The minimum wage for non-agricultural workers in Metro Manila is 570 pesos but many people don't earn that. Caritas Australia's partners in the Philippines, the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ), estimate that Ronita's husband would earn under \$370 pesos (\$10AUD a day).

Ronita described their resulting living conditions: "We will carry a pail [from a neighbour] and we will put it in our drums so we can have water. But the electricity, we paid for that and the house. And it's very difficult because it's too small. When you come to our house, when you open the door, that's it. We don't have room. We don't have anything. When you open it, the kitchen, the living room, the room, it's already in one place."

Growing up, Ronita's family faced many challenges. She grew up with her mum, who worked three jobs because Ronita's father left their family. Ronita has two brothers who married young and never finished school. Meanwhile, school life was challenging for Ronita. "It's very hard for me to go to regular school because my classmates bullied me because my shirt is too old and getting yellowish... The teachers, they need to stand up for us, but they don't. They just laugh with the bullies at me. That's why it's very hard for me to talk to them because they also mock me even though they are my teachers."

When Ronita moved out with Lean, her mother continued to financially support her and her husband. Ronita left school when she became pregnant as a teenager. She was at risk of never re-entering the education system when she had her first child, Clark, at 17. "I was happy because I have my first baby, but I think that it's very early for me to have a child. But I think also that it happened already, so what are we going to do? What am I going to do?"

In the Philippines, unplanned and teenage pregnancy is very prevalent. In 2022, the teenage pregnancy rate was 5.4%. On top of this, those who have children before turning 18 are less likely than their childless peers to complete secondary education. However, completion of secondary education has life-long implications for family earnings and in turn, the ability to overcome the cycle of poverty.

Thankfully, Ronita was given a second chance at completing her studies. The Alternative Learning System (ALS) program at FCJ provides a safe space for students like Ronita to attend classes several times a week and make up units for their Grade 12 Senior High School Diploma by doing projects and completing a portfolio of work.

Sister Jen, one of the teachers at FCJ, remarked on what she has seen in her barangay: "Most of the time, the main reasons why many children did not have a chance to go to school is because of early pregnancy, being dropped out from formal school because of financial problems and broken families."

Ronita began studying again when her first son Clark was just 2 years old. She remarked, "The ALS in there was so very nice. The teachers, they inspire us and they give us the best so that we could graduate on ALS... "Mum Jen is a very good teacher to us. She always laughs with us and when she teaches us, she always looking at us, focusing on us."

While Ronita studied at ALS, she became pregnant with her second child. FCJ offers ALS classes that allow young mothers to bring their children to class if they cannot afford childcare. This made it possible for Ronita to continue her studies. Ronita said, "When I have children and I find it so difficult, that's make me think that, oh, I need to study. I need to work hard for my kids. I need to find a good job to be inspiration to them... So, even though I'm pregnant, I participated always in ALS."

For over 20 years, the Faithful Companions of Jesus has supported the local community in Quezon City and will be serving approximately 2,000 participants over the next three years. The area FCJ works in is an urban slum, built next to a local dumpsite, and lies on a fault line. Many of the houses are in poor condition and some don't have sanitation. The residents face low income and low educational levels. Many community members face health issues and some live with a disability.

Located in the heart of the barangay, FCJ has two centres in the community. Many of the staff members live in the area, and many were once participants in FCJ's programs themselves. FCJ runs a number of programs that include: house renovating, food processing, basic literacy skills, urban gardening, upcycling and income generating activities. They run a seniors group, children's sport and play groups, and technical education and skills development program. They also have a



clinic visited weekly by a doctor and community nurse.

In the community, school dropout rates remain prevalent. Sister Paola, head of FCJ remarked, "People drop out of school: they have projects that need scissors, paper, materials and the parents can't afford it... There isn't a culture in many places to encourage students to finish school, especially if their parents didn't finish either." FCJ is working on expanding the reach of their programs, so that fewer students like Ronita end up leaving school.

Ronita also attends a young mother's group regularly, which is facilitated by Nurse Lyn who works for FCJ. The group runs informal sessions with local mums who face financial and other difficulties. Here they learn about family planning, paediatric and maternal health, and are encouraged to support other mums. Ronita said: "When I'm with young mums I feel confident because they're like me. They're young with children, even though they have more children than me, I feel confident with them because I know that they understand my situation."

After completing the ALS class, Ronita attended senior high school classes outside of the barangay while a neighbour minded her children. Despite the challenges, Ronita persevered with her studies in this environment. Often, she wouldn't get enough sleep as she had to take care of her children and study into the early hours of the morning, even skipping lunch at school as she was unable to afford it.

She has now completed her final high school exams and secured a job at a call centre, which required a Grade 12 Senior High School Diploma to apply. She hopes to earn enough income to continue her studies and support her family.

As Jen remarked, "Alternative Learning System is important in this area because many are given an opportunity to finish their education and find a decent job... Maybe because it will give them confidence to apply for a job because they now have a national certificate from the government. That's the first requirement in applying for a decent job."

With the support of FCJ, Ronita has managed to overcome tremendous obstacles in her life. Having a higher school certificate means she will have a greater chance of improving her employment prospects.

She said, "I am so thankful for FCJ. I still go to mother's group and to their doctors a lot. When I did the Alternative Learning classes, I was really encouraged by my teacher Ma'am Jen and Ma'am Grace. "One day I hope I will be school teacher, just like Ma'am Jen and Ma'am Grace. I hope for a better future. I have now graduated senior school and I am so proud of myself. I feel hopeful for the future... Now it's not impossible for me to achieve my dream... Thank you for that."

REFLECTION: Genesis 22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18 | Romans 8:31–34 | Mark 9:2–10

When Jesus took his closest friends to the top of a high mountain, they experienced something quite extraordinary. The transfiguration gave them a glimpse of what it meant for Jesus to be the son of God. It is hardly surprising that Peter said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here.' The Gospel also tells us that Jesus' friends were frightened, and this is also easy to understand. They were overwhelmed. Nevertheless, it's not long before Jesus reminds them that he is destined to die. His friends must come down from the mountain and walk with Jesus through all the ordinary and arduous days and weeks that lie ahead.

We can all say 'it is wonderful for us to be here' no matter where that happens to be. Life is full of wonder. That doesn't mean it is always easy. We live in the arms of a very deep mystery. God's love enfolds us.

Throughout Lent, we are called to support Project Compassion, an initiative of Caritas Australia. This year, Project Compassion celebrates 60 years of partnership with some of the most marginal communities in the world. With your help, we have walked alongside literally millions of people in dozens of countries.

This week we encounter the story of Ronita who lives in Quezon City, part of metro Manila in the Philippines. Becoming a mother at a young age meant that her schooling was cut short. Her husband, Lean, leaves for work at 3am and returns at 9pm, earning less than \$US10 per day in a demanding job in waste disposal. On such a small income, Ronita & Lean, along with two young children, are able to rent a room of about 10 square metres.

With your help through Project Compassion, Caritas Australia has been able to support the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) to run the Alternative Learning System program. This program has meant that Ronita has been able to continue her education. The FCJ sisters provide a safe space for many young people such as Ronita to finish school and find better jobs. Ronita has had the opportunity to change her life.

Caritas Australia believes that the world can be transfigured to become more like the kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke. We can encounter people whom others choose to ignore. When we do so, we discover that here too are children of God. We are asked to listen to them.



Please donate to Project Compassion 2024. Together, we can help vulnerable communities face their challenges today and build a better tomorrow **for all future generations.**