

Meeting Real Heroes Who Expose Themselves to Kidnappers and the MILF to Help Kids.



“Don’t go to those places; don’t make yourself a bait of kidnappers!”

Thus we were warned at the start of our two-day trek to a poor mountain community that we later learned was only a few kilometres away from a camp of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and a mangrove community located near a site where the recent kidnapping of a Fil-American family took place.

And as I thank God for a safe return home to Manila, I shudder to think about the continuing danger faced by our fellow advocates who had made it possible for us at the Kristiyano-Islam Peace Library (Kris) to safely deliver school supplies and books to less than 500 poor children living in the Zamboanga Peninsula.



In my book, these hardy and brave souls are the true present-day heroes who stick their necks out so that children in the hinterlands of Tungawan, Zamboanga del Sur (Sibugay) can have better education; and children in Layag Layag, Zamboanga City will no longer swim to school.

The risks to lives and safety they face on regular basis makes my own reluctance to do the three day trip -- due to loss of business income in Manila and the cost of the trip that my family has to initially absorb as we await donors to fulfill their pledge to help -- look mundane and silly. Even my own health concerns then now look childish compared to their challenging task.

And so, today I doff my hat off to real heroes in the person of Claretian priest Fr. Larry Miranda and Fr. Pedro Cleofe who run the Claret Kindergarten School of Tungawan and the Calret Mission Center in Sitio Bangkal where we brought books to start work on what would later be a full-scale library borne out of the partnership of the Claret Mission Center, Kris Peace Library; and the Kapatirang Claretian Inc, a group of Claretian priests and seminarians I now head.

Tungawan is known as one of the strongholds of the MILF and Sitio Bangkal where we distributed books and school supplies to kids is just a few kilometers away from an MILF camp. Just recently cases of bus burning, kidnapping and killings occurred in this place.



Yet, Fr. Miranda's posts on his Facebook wall about the life of a Claretian missionary in Tungawan betrays the real danger in that part of the country where regular killings and kidnappings go unsolved and un-investigated by people and authorities living under a cloud of fear.

The same dangerous environment pervades in Layag Layag and yet you don't see it in the Facebook wall of fellow blogger Jay Jaboneta who first reported on the fate of the hapless kids who swim to school. Although the focus is on the welfare of the kids, what lies unreported by Jay is the possibility that Abu Sayyaf kidnappers can swoop down on them anytime as they travel out to open sea to reach to the poor kids of Layag Layag.

Thus, it was such an honor to meet Dr. Anton Lim and his dedicated army of volunteers of the Zamboanga Funds for Little Kids and the Tzu Chi Foundation of Zamboanga; Rikki Lim, president of the Rotary Club of Zamboanga; volunteer Vince Carbon, Chelit Suñaz and many others who helped us at Kris Library deliver books that would later be placed at the almost empty shelves of the Talon Talon Library where the Layag Layag kids go to study.



Million of thanks goes to Rikki Lim and Vince Carbon for not only helping me and Kris volunteers led by my sister Gail, husband Joey Jimenez and cousin Mariflor del Rosario familiarize ourselves with the unique mangrove and the good people of Layag Layag, but for also taking good photos to make sure the memory of this fruitful and wonderful trip stay with us forever. Rikki has become a "legend" in the art of photography for the magic he weaves in his photos and videos as Zamboanga City's most sought-after expert in the field. Thanks Rikki for bringing your army of Rotaract volunteers led by Matthew Guerrero.

We could not have also kept order in the group of 250 young children of Layag Layag who were pushing and shoving each other to get to the set of school supplies donated by the Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran Foundation and the KIDS Foundation of actor Diether Ocampo without their help.

Compared to the clear and present danger my fellow advocate face, my own complaints about the burden of putting forward a thick-skinned face as I beg for donations; or getting red in the face with anger and frustrations when donors hide from me; or the time I take away from business and family to engage in this advocacy look puny and infinitesimal (very small).

Thanks guys for all the help and inspiration.

[Read more about Armand Dean Nocum](#)

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