

'Fulfillment does not pay the bills.'

Maayong hapon!

Attending classes with an empty stomach and working until 12 midnight to earn a living?

This was me for years while in college. I came from a poor family. But the only thing that inspired me to keep going was the importance of education to change my life.

Determined, I finished college with flying colors – class valedictorian, magna cum laude, and one of the Ten Outstanding Students of the Philippines. I was proud. My family was proud.

But weeks after my graduation, I still hadn't found a job. I was desperate and embarrassed despite all my accolades.

A week later, an organization hired me as their teacher for children with disabilities from poor families. I disliked the nature of the job. I didn't understand the importance of educating these children. But I had to take it. I needed to earn to feed my family.

But as I continued working with children with disabilities and their families, I began to love what I was doing. I came to understand that the inclusion of children with disabilities is one of the greatest diversity challenges of our time. I came to believe what Cardinal Roger Malhony said that any society like the Philippines is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members – the last, the least, the littlest. The whole experience made me get to know more the people on the margins of society. I felt a deep sense of purpose and fulfillment.

But three years after I graduated, nothing significant had changed with my family's economic situation. The house had no electricity because my parents couldn't pay the bills. I felt that I had failed my parents especially when they said, 'Rolando, fulfillment does not pay the bills'.

That moment was a game changer. I was at crossroads. Should I look for good-paying jobs? Or continue with what I was doing in the disability sector? I have to admit that I was tempted to give up and agree with my parents. But I didn't. I decided to keep on working with children with disabilities and their families at the grassroots and political level.

I took another job. After my community work, I'd go straight to the university to teach. I also managed to do paid workshops and talks on weekends. I felt physically exhausted but I was fulfilled. I was able to send my younger sisters to school. I provided livelihood support for my parents. Up to these days, I continue supporting them in parallel with my work in the disability sector, now as a youth ambassador to the United Nations.

I know how challenging it is to choose between pursuing passion and economic stability. But how an individual deals with this dilemma is a matter of choice. If one chooses to try to do both requires real strategy. What about using weekends or evenings to earn money in other ways? I am aware that this sounds exhausting. But that's how it works: Building a more inclusive world through your passion isn't easy work. Whether you're working on disability issues like me, working on refugee integration, on women

empowerment, working for social change requires taking risks, making tough choices, and putting a lot of hard work. But none of that has or will stop me.

By being strategic and working really hard, I continue to support my family and to advance the cause that I care about.

For me, for now, I am happy and grateful to say that fulfilment really does pay the bills. And I believe that it can for you, too.

Daghang salamat!