



Ma'am Doppie (in red) with fellow teacher Mrs. Glenda Aruejo and their talented group at the Unilever Philippines Choral Competition.

Carols in the air

"Lord, we ask in all humility for Your grace as we go up on stage today. Win or lose, help us do our best..." So goes this particular coach's prayer whenever students from the Crisanto Guysayko Memorial Elementary School (CGMES) in Nagcarlan, Laguna enter competitions.

Mrs. Zenaida Belmonte-Monteagudo—or Ma'am Doppie, as she is fondly called—has been training students of her school for different contests for many years now. More often than not, her contestants go on to become winners. Recently, the CGMES speech choir bagged first place in the district level, which means they will be advancing to the division level in a few weeks' time.

A Christmas Challenge

Of all the contests that her students have participated in, Ma'am Doppie remembers a shining moment in her coaching career, when her choral group triumphed in a national Christmas carol competition four years ago.

"Unilever Philippines approached our principal on November 2000 to request our school to join their choral competition. [The principal] asked me to coach," she recalls. Ma'am Doppie hesitated because she felt there wasn't enough time to prepare, but after insistent urging from the principal and

A winning coach remembers a very special Christmas

BY RUTH M. FLORESCA

fellow teachers, she relented and began preparations.

Forty pupils were chosen from grades one to four. Rexcie Magcase, the school's "suking choreographer," was called to supervise the movements. They practiced Unilever's contest piece "Feel the Glow of Christmas" and another Christmas song called "Happy Birthday Jesus." "We didn't have enough budget for costumes and props, so we made do with inexpensive fabrics and relied on creativity." All grade levels helped in making the Christmas symbols that would serve as props. The children's parents were also very supportive.

Winning Moments

The first elimination round was held in San Pablo City, with contestants coming from schools all over Laguna. CGMES won first place and was awarded a cash prize P25,000. "We celebrated by treating the kids to Jollibee before going home," Ma'am Doppie relates.

A week later saw the group in Tagaytay for the regional elimination. "Yung mga kalaban namin, ang gaganda ng boses, ang gaganda ng

props, kaya lang very formal sila magperform. Yung mga bata namin naman, masisigla at malilikot sa stage. Kitang-kita na nae-enjoy nila yung ginagawa nila." One parent whispered "Ang kutob ko, mananalo tayo." She was right! Before announcing the winner's name, the speaker said, "Ang nanalo, nanggaling sa lalawigan ng ating pambansang bayani!" CGMES went home with another P25,000.

The National Championship

The national level round was held in Robinsons Place Manila. Uncannily, before the winner was declared, the announcer said the same thing as in Tagaytay: "Ang mga winners po natin ay nagmula sa bayang-sinilangan ni Dr. Jose Rizal!" Everybody, including passers-by who ended up rooting for the team, cheered wildly as Ma'am Doppie and the kids ran up the stage with tears streaming down their faces. The grand prize was P150,000!

"We went to ABS-CBN for a TV spiel shoot then on to Star City to celebrate. The kids were given P500 each and we were able to help the school procure musical instruments, a sound system and other appliances," Ma'am Doppie shares.

Parting Words

What's Ma'am Doppie's secret? "I teach them how to internalize," she says. "Every piece, be it a song, a poem or speech, *dapat isinasa-puso ng bata* so they can deliver it well." She also stresses to her students the importance of humility and faith in God. We always pray before and after practices and competitions."

And what inspires her to put her whole self into coaching? "*Hindi ko malilimutan ang mga ginawa ng aking mga anak who gave their all-out support. Very cooperative din ang aking mga estudyante, their parents and my fellow teachers.*" Indeed faith, teamwork and talent make up the winning formula to succeed in almost anything! ★

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Ruth M. Floresca has BS Development Communication degree from UP Los Baños. She is currently a freelance writer contributing to various national magazines as well as a mother of four. Her two older kids study at CGMES.

Loved by all

A teacher finds her way into the hearts of many. BY RUTH M. FLORESCA

The room of Grade I, Pilot section in Crisanto Guysayko Memorial Elementary School (CGMES) is busier than others during the Christmas season. And it's not just Kris Kringle or exchange gifts, either. There's a constant stream of visitors, including grownups and students from different grades doing the traditional *pagmamano* to the lady behind the desk.

Lourdes Cierte, known to all as Ma'am Lulu, is a well-loved figure with a ready smile in this Nagcarlan, Laguna school. Fellow teachers, students and parents respect and admire her for her genuine dedication to teaching.

Over the years, Ms. Cierte has been visited by and receives many letters of gratitude from parents and students alike. "Thank you Ma'am *dabil utang ko sa inyo ang magandang foundation ng aking mga anak. Nag-graduate sila nang hindi man lang ako nabirapan* and I know we owe that to the good study habits you instilled in them," one parent told her. Of all the gifts that she has received, Ma'am Lulu says she treasures the letters and testimonies most.

"Mahigpit pero hindi mataray"

"I always tell my students that I am their second mother when in school. That I still love them even though I may get angry sometimes at their wrongdoings. *Mahigpit akong guro pero hindi ako mataray*. There's a difference in that," she says. "I also let them know that I care enough to want them to be successful persons someday."

As a teacher, she focuses not just on academics but on real-life needs. "I remember when I was teaching in another school where students were very poor," she recalls. "They would come in unwashed and untidy." Ma'am Lulu promptly prepared a big basin of water with soap, cotton and alcohol beside the classroom door. "I would wash their hands and clean their ears every morning before class."



Ang kahirapan nagagawan ng paraan. She also remembers one student who would often miss school due to lack of money: "I visited their house often, encouraging her to study. At times, I let her help in my house *para magkaron s'ya ng baon*. I always told her, '*ang kahirapan nagagawan ng paraan*. I should know because I came from a very poor family myself.'" She reveals how she grew up fighting poverty. Her school uniform was always faded from use and her shoes had large holes in the soles. "Every night, I would cut and shape cardboards to fit inside my shoes. Nothing could stop me from going to school everyday."

A few years ago, Ma'am Lulu met that same poor child whom she inspired and helped many years ago. "Teacher *na rin sya!* And she told me how grateful she was that I didn't give up on her."

"Hindi nagkamali sa piniling propesyon"

"One of my consolations too is the respect that I get everywhere I go, I am greeted by a lot of people. *Nakakatuwa!* I believe that *pag maganda ang iyong ginagawa, may magandang babalik sa iyo. Hindi rin ako matipid sa ngiti*. After all, *hindi yun nabibili so bakit mo ipagdadamot?*"

What principles can she impart to other teachers? "We are in this profession of molding children so we should give our best. *Huwag tayong maging tamad sa pagtuturo. Huwag tayong maging pala-absent. Gusto ko, pagbarap ko sa Diyos, masasabi kong hindi ako nagkamali sa aking piniling propesyon dahil ibinubos ko ang labat ng aking makakaya...*"

Wise words from someone I personally respect highly. You see, she was also my son's teacher, and I've seen and experienced how much Ma'am Lulu loves her students with all her heart. ★