



THE 2004 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR EMERGENT LEADERSHIP

BIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN ABADIANO

Benjamin Abadiano grew up not knowing the circumstances of his birth, but that hardly matters to him. What does matter is that he has long known where his heart is. For twenty years now, he has been living a life of utter simplicity focused on those whom Philippine society has marginalized, if not forgotten—its indigenous peoples.

Abadiano never knew his birth parents and until today is unclear about who they were. He was born on February 11, 1963, in the town (now a city) of Mandaluyong in Metro Manila. When he was three months old, he was taken to Maigo, Lanao del Norte, on the island of Mindanao, by Leonardo and Salud Abadiano, whom he always assumed, but never confirmed, were his maternal grandparents. They died three years apart when Benjamin was in his teens, and took the secret of his birth to their graves. In fact, when Benjamin got hold of his birth certificate for the first time, he was surprised to learn that his middle name was David rather than Flores. Flores was his grandmother Salud's maiden name, and he had used it in all his school records.

Leonardo and Salud Abadiano were a prosperous couple who owned large farmlands planted to coconut and rice. Their house was the largest in all of Maigo. It had once been the municipal hall and the town jail, and it stood across from the Maigo School of Arts and Trades, the biggest public school in the province of Lanao del Norte.

Leonardo worked as an accountant. He served as treasurer of the municipality for a time and, later, of the Maigo School of Arts and Trades. But he was also a painter, photographer, and well-rounded artist. His house had a studio and a large library where he indulged in his artistic talent. Leonardo shared his passion for art with his grandson; he taught the boy colors and art forms and how to make kites. Benjamin recalls that before he started formal schooling, he would join his grandfather at his office. "He expanded his table and I would sit on the other side. Everything was there: crayons, paper, and food. He just wanted me to be there."

Benjamin admits that he was a spoiled child. This was not surprising because, by the time he arrived in Maigo, all but two of his grandparents' eleven children had moved out of the house. It was not just his grandparents who doted on him; even the neighbors would ask if they could "borrow" him. Benjamin remembers having many toys in the big house, among them airplanes of all kinds and different materials, from steel to paper. Once a month, Salud took the boy to the city to watch an English movie; on Sundays, Leonardo and Benjamin played Scrabble or went fishing. Benjamin says that sometimes he would fall asleep while holding his fishing rod and wake up to find a fish on his hook. Only later did he learn that his grandfather had bought his "catch" from a fisherman.

Leonardo wanted the boy to experience success early in life so that he would not yearn for it later on. Benjamin believes his grandfather's philosophy helped him grow up appreciating simple joys and not hankering for excessive material possessions or money.

Abadiano idolized his grandfather who, he says, was hardworking, understanding, soft-spoken, and religious. His grandmother, in contrast, was a disciplinarian, a stickler for order who impressed upon his young mind that there should be no room for mediocrity in his life. But she was also very protective of the boy and constantly worried about what would happen to him after she and her husband were gone.

Grandmother Salud controlled not only Benjamin's choice of apparel—she assigned specific clothes for each day of the week—but also prohibited him from listening to the radio and from playing with children other than those of his grandparents' friends and his cousins in the city. Benjamin, thus, became accustomed to playing by himself and, in the process, learned independence. As he grew older, his grandfather taught him to come home from school unescorted and, when necessary, make the trip to the doctor's or dentist's clinic alone.

Benjamin's idyllic life in Maigo was shattered when his aunts and uncles—the Abadiano's actual children (with the exception of two or three of them)—began to resent their parents' affection for him. Their jealousy manifested itself in negative behavior, such as derogatory remarks about Benjamin's carefree attitude to life and his lack of promise. They liked to note, for instance, that his academic record, while not poor, paled in comparison with that of their own children. In truth, Benjamin did not put much value on studying and did not manifest any early ambition for himself.

His grandparents had long dreamed that he would become a priest. On Sundays, they sometimes invited one of their priest-friends over to lunch to give the boy some exposure to the religious life. Benjamin, however, was not attracted to the priesthood and refused to attend a seminary for high school, contrary to his grandparents' wishes.

Despite his lackluster performance at the municipal Maigo Central School, Benjamin was among ten students chosen to apply for a scholarship to the Iligan Institute of Technology. He traveled to Iligan City by himself and, without telling his grandparents, submitted his successful application.

When Benjamin was thirteen and a sophomore in high school, his grandmother paid visits to her many children scattered across the country. Abadiano believes that these visits made her realize the degree to which he had become a "problem" in the family. In order to improve her ties with the others, he says, she decided to send him away to live with Leonardo's nephew, Bienvenido Abadiano, in the province of Bohol.

The material circumstances of Benjamin's grandparents were quite different from those of their relatives in Bohol. Although he was given a room of his own, he had to be content with the simple fare on his uncle's table.

The three-year interlude in Bohol was, Abadiano says today, the darkest period in his life. His uncle could not send him to school, so he kept to himself in the house. He would cry every night, he recalls, but he never complained. Instead, he began to reflect deeply on the direction his life had suddenly taken.

Salvation seemed to come in the person of Clarita Estavas, a distant relative of the Abadianos in Iligan City who visited Benjamin in Bohol during his third year there. She saw that the boy had no future in Bohol and asked him to come back with her to Iligan. By this time, Abadiano's Grandmother Salud had passed away. Grandfather Leonardo died three years later. Benjamin, still a youth, was now at the mercy of his extended family and of his own wits.

His Auntie Clarita allowed him to continue his studies at the Iligan City High School. This time he was determined to do better and succeeded. He not only excelled in his academic subjects, he also immersed himself in campus activities. He headed the Talent Organization, the Science Club, and the Social Sciences Organization. Although he was not inclined to sports, he tried a little softball. He also played the guitar and composed music.

One of his teachers, Alma Iscandor, saw his potential as a public speaker and encouraged him to enter corporate-sponsored competitions in oratory and declamation. He invariably won first or second prize. Although his heart was not in the contests, by then he realized that he had no one to rely on except himself. The competitions were opportunities to improve himself. He also discovered that he had a talent for writing and drawing and won contests in those fields as well.

As Abadiano approached graduation, he was not worried about his future. He had two college scholarships tucked under his belt, prizes for winning oratorical contests. He was maturing fast and, with his grandparents gone, he now felt confident that he could make it on his own, free to do with his life as he wished.

Some of his teachers believed he would make a good lawyer, because he was so intelligent and articulate. His own inclination was toward architecture, the profession of several of his aunts and uncles. One day, while praying in church, he heard the parish priest talk about a "Search In" seminar for young people. Thinking it would help him decide on a course of study, Abadiano signed up. Little did he know that the exercise was designed for young men who were potential candidates for the priesthood.

It was a weekend program. He told his uncle and aunt that he would be away working on a science project. He and thirty-five other young men first took an IQ test. Only five of them did well enough to proceed. They then listened to lectures on the priestly vocation. The following week, the five took another examination. This time, only Abadiano was successful. He was told to report to the diocesan San Jose Seminary in Cagayan de Oro City.

His teachers welcomed the news. Abadiano himself was not sure he wanted to become a priest, but he decided to take the plunge anyway. His first ten months at the seminary focused on spiritual formation. Although born and raised a Catholic, he could not claim to have a particularly strong faith. Now, at a crossroads in his life and suffering from low self-esteem, he found himself asking fundamental questions about God. If there was a God, he asked himself, why was he so unfair?

As Abadiano stayed longer at the seminary and reflected more deeply on his life, he came to realize how fortunate he was to have had his grandparents, his friends, and his teachers to guide him throughout his life. "Little by little I started to regain my faith," he says, "and I started to talk to my friends, the other seminarians, and to share details about my life." He had not wanted to do so before then, he says, "because it was very painful." He now found his faith deepening, he says, and his relationship "with Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary"

becoming stronger. In time, daily prayer became a habit with him. It was a turning point in his life.

Despite his newfound faith, Abadiano did not feel completely at home at the seminary. The priest in charge of the seminarians' formation told him he was not prepared for the priesthood because he had no roots; he did not even know his true parents. At this point, his life took another turn. A relative who lived in Cagayan de Oro, upon hearing that he was at the seminary, offered to take him into her house so that he could study at nearby Xavier University, which was run by the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. Abadiano was only too happy to accept her offer. He left San Jose and enrolled at Xavier.

There Abadiano made friends with some students who were pre-novices. When they learned that he had spent some time at San Jose Seminary but had not been happy there, they suggested that he try Haggerty House, Xavier's pre-novitiate residence for young men who were contemplating joining the Society of Jesus.

Abadiano applied at Haggerty in February 1986, the second semester of his freshman year at Xavier. He was accepted and moved in a week later. As a pre-novice, he attended classes at Xavier, finishing the baccalaureate course in three years. He had planned to major in philosophy, until he met Erlinda Burton who taught anthropology. Dr. Burton belonged to the Tinggian tribe and was married to an American who had been her teacher in Pittsburgh. She was well-loved by her students for her nontraditional teaching methods. Abadiano himself admired her greatly and believed that although she was an agnostic, she was more Christian than many who professed to be followers of Christ. For her part, Dr. Burton was so impressed with Abadiano that she encouraged him to go on to graduate studies in anthropology.

In Abadiano's first semester with Dr. Burton, the class was asked to do an ethnographic study of sari-sari stores, little retail shops that are very common in Philippine urban and rural neighborhoods. The assignment did not excite Abadiano. He had become attracted to the study of the life and culture of indigenous peoples in the Philippines, of whom there are an estimated twelve million belonging to 110 ethnic groups. (Their rights are protected by the 1987 Constitution of the Philippines and the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, which Congress passed in 1997.) Abadiano asked to conduct a project that involved working with indigenous peoples, despite the short time of nineteen days given for its completion. Reluctantly, Dr. Burton gave him permission to do so.

Abadiano asked some Jesuit priests to suggest an area where he could conduct his study. They referred him to Kadingilan, a missionary area in Bukidnon Province that was peopled by the Manobo tribe. There he could work with two priests who ran a school for the Manobo—Fr. Nelson Matthew Fulam, an Italian, and Fr. John Krebs, an American.

The Manobo dwelled in a place called High Point in small bamboo or grass houses built on stilts, with floors made from tree bark. When he first arrived, Abadiano brought a lot of food with him, especially cans of sardines that he was told the Manobo liked, plus cigarettes and tobacco. But he forgot to pack a jacket, as no one had warned him about the terrible cold in Kadingilan. In the village, he was allotted a canoe-shaped wooden bed to sleep in and a liter of water daily for drinking and washing.

As he learned more about the Manobo and their lifestyle, Abadiano came to admire their simplicity and their capacity for happiness. He asked them a great deal of questions and they gave him forthright answers in the Cebuano language, which he spoke. The Manobo lived by

slash-and-burn farming. They could not grow permanent crops because the New People's Army (NPA), the armed component of the Communist Party of the Philippines, was active in the area. Abadiano himself was chased by members of the NPA who became suspicious of him when they saw him carrying two big tape recorders and three cameras.

At the close of his project with the Manobo, Abadiano went to a beach and dove into the sea to wash himself of three weeks of village life. While in the water, he says, he "realized that my life is much, much, much better than their life. I am more blessed." Still, he reflected, "their life is so beautiful." There was much to admire in their culture: the wisdom of their elders in making community decisions, their respect for the environment, their innate generosity, and their love for their families.

Abadiano counted his blessings—that he had been raised by wonderful grandparents and had been able to study in a good university—and resolved to do "something concrete" for the Manobo for having enriched his life.

When he returned to school in Cagayan de Oro, Abadiano made a radical decision. He would divest himself of his worldly goods, leaving only the barest essentials for himself. He packed his clothes—except for five T-shirts, three polo shirts, and two pairs of pants—and most of his shoes, dividing them into twelve bags. He then he took them to an area where some small makeshift houses stood beside a garbage dump. He picked an empty house at random and left the bags there.

To one of his close classmates, Abadiano intimated that he wanted to live a simple life, like the indigenous peoples he had met who were happy with just a few clothes and a bolo. He also wanted to be "a real Jesuit," he said. His model was Fr. Jess Lucas, his spiritual director at Xavier, whom he described as a "very simple, very holy man." He had also been struck by the simplicity and commitment of Fathers Fulam and Krebs, who deepened his attraction to the religious life.

After his graduation from Xavier in 1988, Abadiano applied to enter the Jesuit novitiate but was rejected without explanation. "It was painful, of course," he says, "but I told myself religious life is not the only way to help others." His teachers in social science, Erlinda Burton among them, then recruited him to help out at Saint Mary's School, a small private high school that they had opened in Cagayan de Oro. But Abadiano soon grew restless. Increasingly, his mind dwelled on his experiences with the Manobo. Six months into his two-year contract at Saint Mary's, he resigned. "There are a lot of people who can do what I'm doing here," he told his former teachers, "but there are only a few who want to work with the indigenous peoples."

After leaving Saint Mary's, Abadiano crisscrossed the Philippines visiting tribal communities and expanding his knowledge about indigenous Filipinos. One such trip took him to South Cotabato, where a Columban priest was running a full-blown assistance program among the T'boli people at the Santa Cruz Mission on Lake Sebu. Another took him to Mindoro Oriental, where his friend Joy Quiaoit was working as a Jesuit volunteer in the Alangan Mangyan village of Paitan. Abadiano had met Quiaoit while attending an archeology field school at the Ateneo de Manila University and was eager to see her again. As he approached Paitan and his reunion with Quiaoit, Abadiano continued to struggle with God's plan for his life. He was twenty-five years old and still had not discerned what the purpose of his life was.

Seven ethno-linguistic groups make up the Mangyan tribe that lives in the mountain areas of Mindoro Occidental and Mindoro Oriental—the Anonoob, Batangan, Tadyawan, Iraya, Alangan, Bukid, and Todaano. Each has its own language as well as its own practices and traditions. Paitan was declared a tribal reservation in 1935 and is almost entirely populated by Mangyan today. Many lowlanders, however, have been encroaching on Mangyan land for decades. The choicest portions have been taken over, forcing the Mangyan farther into the interior of Mindoro.

Abadiano remembers finding Paitan “a beautiful place.” It was rich in vegetation. A clean river ran through it. The people welcomed him warmly. At the time of his arrival, however, the community was recovering from a typhoon that had destroyed their crops. The people were eating only once a day. There was no electricity.

Abadiano quickly made up his mind to stay in Paitan as a volunteer. For one thing, Joy Quiaoit’s stint as a volunteer was coming to an end. This left four missionary sisters of the Servants of the Holy Spirit to form the mainstay of the Paitan mission. They were only too happy to have him. But Abadiano knew nothing about agriculture—a great area of need in Paitan—nor did he know Tagalog, the local lingua franca. The sisters encouraged him by noting how quickly he had picked up local words from the children and by suggesting that, instead of farming, he focus on the tribal young people, thus taking advantage of his youthful appearance.

Abadiano soon took over some of the work that Joy Quiaoit left behind and settled into a tiny staff house. He remembers that it was so small that its occupants had to cover themselves while they changed their clothes so that the children could not see them as they peered through the window.

Besides the four nuns in Paitan, there were also two priests belonging to the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) who ran a small high school known as the Green House, a three-story building along the river that was an extension of the Catholic high school in the neighboring town of Baco. The parish of Calapan, the capital of Mindoro Oriental, had been financing the school, but money was tight and the priests were now considering closing it down.

Abadiano was invited to make an evaluation of the school and suggest ways of improving it, to make it more useful to the community. To do so, he drew upon conversations he had been having with the community elders. When he asked them about their dreams for themselves and their children, they told him that they wanted Paitan to become a center for education, not only for their children but also for themselves. The elders were illiterate; they signed their names with thumbprints. Not knowing how to count, they often came out second-best in deals with lowlanders involving their land or local products such as rattan, lemons, and root crops. Abadiano also spoke with the young people. He learned that they were not happy at the school. It made them feel like pigs, they said, because the building itself and the school fence were made of concrete. It was clear to Abadiano that both the elders and the young people wanted a school that reflected their own culture.

But as he sat down to write his proposal for the school, Abadiano felt inadequate. Having been in Paitan for only two months, he did not feel he knew enough about the Mangyan. He told the sisters that his training was in research, not in development, and that he had not taken a single unit of education at Xavier University. Besides, in the back of his mind was a promise he had made to the priest at the Santa Cruz Mission to return and work there for two years.

One evening, Sr. Victricia Pascasio, one of the Holy Spirit sisters, encouraged Abadiano simply to write down all his observations and suggestions. At ten that evening, working under lamplight and using paper borrowed from the first-grade classroom, he proceeded to write. By two in the morning, he had a full-blown proposal. When he saw Sister Victricia the next day, he told her that he could not really claim the work as his own. "When I read it," he said, "I can't believe that I was the one who wrote it. It was really an inspiration. I don't know where it came from."

This is how Abadiano summarizes his paper: "The school has to be culture-based and the people have to be involved in the project from conceptualization to implementation. Culture has to be integrated not only in the curriculum but even in the activities. A livelihood program should be integrated [with the academic curriculum] so that the students, even if they cannot finish high school, even if they study for only two years, will have something to take with them back to their communities. This type of education can help them economically and won't be too academic, because they are not prepared for academic education. What the school will provide is something that can equip them to face the realities they are in."

Abadiano believes that culture is dynamic rather than permanent. The culture of the Mangyan, he learned, is different from that of indigenous peoples in Mindanao. For example, the Mangyans have no concept of war; they lead peaceful lives and reject the idea of doing others harm. This virtue has its downside, however. The Mangyans are vulnerable to exploitation by external forces.

Mangyan culture is reflected in the way people build their houses. The community has a big house called bahay lakoy, which can accommodate from three to as many as fifty families. One can gauge the number of families living there by counting the number of fireplaces and mats.

The house is central to the Mangyan sense of community. Everyone helps to build and maintain it. The Mangyans have no concept of private property in the Western sense. At the center of the bahay lakoy is a sunken area called the palanggan, where members of the community place all the products they gather from the fields and from which they can take what they need. Moreover, there is not one leader for a bahay lakoy but four, usually male, symbolized by the house's four central posts.

After submitting to Sister Victricia his concept paper for an alternative school for the Mangyans, Abadiano set off to fulfill his commitment to the Santa Cruz Mission in South Cotabato. But once he was there, he could not sleep remembering the Mangyans in Mindoro. Compared to the people served by the Santa Cruz Mission, they were seemed more in need, particularly in the realm of education. So after two months, he returned to Mindoro and committed himself to the Mangyan school project.

As there was not enough money to hire a teacher from the outside, Abadiano decided that he himself would be the teacher. To prepare himself, he took a crash course in agriculture at the Ikapati Farms of the University of the Philippines.

While casting around for financing for the school, Sister Victricia received a donation of seventeen thousand pesos from her SVD friend, Fr. Frank Gerry, from Australia. The note that accompanied the money simply said, "For the education of the poorest of the poor." It was the school's first miracle. Everything fell into place after that. The Mangyan elders allotted two hectares of land for the school and provided posts and other materials for the structures. As they were being built, Abadiano borrowed a local house to use as a classroom and a library.

The same house served as a dormitory for students who came from far-flung Mangyan communities.

When the school opened in 1989, it had no name. Abadiano and the other founders agreed that the name must be rooted in Mangyan culture. A consensus was reached on the Alangan Mangyan word *tugdaan*, which means seedbed. The name chosen was Tugdaan Training Center. Its first motto was “Education for self-reliance.” This comported with the sisters’ hopes to provide both formal education plus practical training in agriculture, basket weaving, carpentry, food processing, and animal husbandry as well as documentation and community organization—the latter skills being needed to protect the people against violations of their human rights. Abadiano and the sisters believed that if the Mangyan were to be self-reliant, they had to learn not only how to read and write but also how to adapt to the complex economic and political circumstances of the contemporary Philippines. The Mangyan themselves also understood this implicitly and wholeheartedly supported the new school.

Abadiano drew the logo for the school. It shows five leaves to symbolize the major aspects of human life that the school aims to develop: social, political, economic, cultural, and psycho-spiritual. There are seeds beneath the leaves with a circle around them. This represents “the bigger society where the trainees go back and play vital roles toward building a just and humane Philippine society.”

Twelve children, four boys and eight girls, comprised the first batch of students at the Tugdaan Training Center. Abadiano called them “the twelve disciples.” They came from Alangan villages throughout Mindoro Oriental. The oldest was nineteen; the youngest, twelve. They all addressed Abadiano as *Kuya Ben*, *kuya* being the Tagalog term of respect for an older brother. Since Mangyan women were not allowed to remain in the school at night, Abadiano had to take care of all the boarders himself. According to Mangyan culture, they were now his children. Since NPA rebels and armed lowlanders made Paitan an unsafe place at night, Abadiano attached cans and other noise-producing objects to the school’s doors and windows as a safety precaution.

Abadiano’s training center charged tuition of 350 pesos for one year. Besides being trained in various skills, the children were also taught English, mathematics, and science. Aside from English, classes were given in the Mangyan vernacular language, which Abadiano soon mastered.

For a year and a half, Abadiano was the only teacher. When friends came to visit, he would ask them to handle some of the classes. To help him address gender issues peculiar to Mangyan culture, he invited a Mangyan woman—Maria Bunsoy, an Alangan from Arangin, Naujan, Mindoro Oriental—to help him run the school.

Abadiano also looked after his students’ personal formation, particularly their sense of self-worth. The children began to see the value of their *bahag*, or g-string, which they had been ashamed to wear in the past. Abadiano himself took to wearing the *bahag* and, in later years, would require the other teachers to do so as well, not just on special occasions but every day. He wanted to inculcate in Mangyan young people a pride in their identity and in the richness of their culture.

Although some of the Mangyan had been Christianized, Abadiano himself never tried to convert them. He encouraged the people to learn new technologies but stressed that the new ideas and devices should coexist with traditional Mangyan ways, not replace them. For

example, with his encouragement, people in Paitan continued to practice herbal medicine even as they were exposed to Western medicine.

The sisters were very happy with Abadiano's work. They had spent twenty years wondering how to establish a successful school in Paitan, and he had been able to do it in a single year. He himself could not believe what he had accomplished. On Tugdaan's first anniversary, he says, "I was really crying tears of joy and gratitude. I couldn't believe it. I had become part of another people's dream."

In 1991, Benjamin Abadiano fell in love with a young woman who came to Paitan as a Jesuit volunteer. They made plans to marry and move to Mindanao, where they had a better chance of becoming financially stable and starting a family. The Mangyan children were saddened to hear that they were about to lose their Kuya Ben. They needed him in Paitan, they told him. The elders, in turn, begged him not to leave and assured him they would look after him and bury him on their land when he died. In the end, Abadiano chose Paitan.

Having done so, he turned his attention to setting up a high school for the Mangyan. He wrote to Secretary Isidro Cariño of the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports (DECS), informing him of Tugdaan's accomplishments, about its nonformal track alongside the formal one, and about its plans for expansion. In his reply, Secretary Cariño expressed support for the program and instructed his department's office in Calapan to assist Tugdaan. Until this time, the school had been operating without formal recognition from the department of education.

The local supervisors in Calapan, however, were not easily won over. When Abadiano showed up at their offices, they questioned his credentials and his motives. They expressed doubts about the Tugdaan experiment and noted that the school lacked a formal permit to operate. And they were outraged when Abadiano showed them the letter from Secretary Cariño, which had bypassed them. Nevertheless, they agreed to send an evaluation team to Tugdaan. The team returned to Calapan with a surprisingly positive report. Tugdaan Training Center was better than the local public schools, it said.

In 1991, Tugdaan, together with DECS, organized a national conference on alternative education in Tugdaan. Representatives from about a hundred indigenous peoples' organizations came to share their experiences and to be enriched in turn. The department itself sent some of its supervisors to learn from the Tugdaan experience.

In 1992, DECS gave Tugdaan permission to operate a formal secondary education program for the Mangyan communities. The school was renamed Tugdaan Center for Human and Environmental Development and the motto was expanded to "Education for self-reliance and community service," to reflect the school's broader perspective of helping its own community and as well as others.

By this time, the Tugdaan program had several well-defined, clearly planned components: an alternative high school that also provided nonformal education for adults; a research center for Mangyan culture, environment, and resource management; and programs emphasizing human resource development, income generation, resource mobilization, and external linkages. (Among the income-generating programs was a calamansi processing enterprise. Calamansi, a local variety of lemon, is widely grown in Mindoro, and Abadiano, seeing its potential as a source of income for the people, taught the Mangyan to produce and sell its juice.)

It did not take long for the rest of the country to learn about Tugdaan. In September 1995, DECS acknowledged it as the “best education program” in the Southern Tagalog region. And in February 1996, the DECS National Council and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) jointly cited Tugdaan’s literacy program as the most outstanding in the Philippines and Abadiano as an outstanding literacy worker.

The following year, Abadiano reached another turning point. He had become uncomfortable with all the attention and praise he was getting for the success of Tugdaan. He wanted the Mangyan to be the center of attention, not him. He thought of himself only as an instrument, helping them to realize their dreams. When he reflected on his life, he sometimes cried tears of joy. “My heart,” he says, “could not contain all the blessings God had given me. I wanted to give more.” Tugdaan was no longer enough. He felt that he was being called to do bigger things.

Abadiano reflected on his situation and wondered about God’s plan for him. One day he heard that one of his Jesuit friends, Fr. Joe Quilong-quilong, had been asking about him. Abadiano traveled to Manila to see his friend, who asked him if he was still drawn to the religious life. When Abadiano said yes, the priest took him to Arvisu House, the Jesuits’ pre-novitiate residence in Quezon City, and invited him to stay. This led to Abadiano’s decision to enter the Jesuit pre-novitiate program. After he was accepted, however, he continued to commute back and forth between Manila and Paitan, where he still served as school principal and Tugdaan director and where he explained his frequent absences by saying that he was busy raising money for the center. But he could not keep his secret for long. His pre-novitiate classes at Ateneo de Manila University soon demanded his full attention. It was time to say goodbye to Tugdaan.

Abadiano was thirty-four years old when he departed Tugdaan in 1997. The institution he now left behind barely resembled the small school he had started nine years before. It had evolved into a comprehensive learning center that boasted classrooms and meeting halls, a preschool, library, food and science laboratories, vegetable and herbal gardens, a prayer room, basketball court, carpentry shop, students’ dormitory, even a fishpond and a processing site for the conversion of organic waste into fuel. Tugdaan had also become a Mangyan cultural resource center. There were more teachers now, too, many of them Mangyan themselves, and the school’s new facilities included faculty housing.

Abadiano had raised funds for Tugdaan from local and international organizations, among them the Ayala Foundation, Metrobank Foundation, Philippine Business for Social Progress, and the Canadian Hunger Foundation. He had also established a trust fund for the school, using money from donors and sponsors as well as income from Tugdaan’s Mangyan Theater Group and local enterprises such as the calamansi project. Tugdaan also had a strong Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). Organized as a cooperative, each PTA member contributed fifty pesos a year to support the school and participated in making decisions that affected the school and their children. On Saturdays, they gathered at the campus to clean the grounds. To help manage the school, Abadiano had also instituted an executive committee and had clearly spelled out everyone’s responsibilities and duties in writing.

As he relinquished his responsibilities at Tugdaan to take up a vocation with the Jesuits, Abadiano asked the Servants of the Holy Spirit sisters to provide guidance at Tugdaan, but he hired a lay person, a former nun named Maria Consolacion, to be the head administrator. He

asked Ligaya Lintawagen, a Mangyan woman who had graduated from Tugdaan and had gone on to college, to work closely with her. (She is now the administrator.)

By his third year at the Society of Jesus, Abadiano had already taken his vows. But he had also grown restless and yearned to return to development work, in particular, with an organization with a strong religious orientation. He sought his superiors' permission to take a leave from the Society of Jesus.

His prayer was answered when he met Howard Dee, a former Philippine ambassador to the Vatican who now headed the Assisi Development Foundation. In 1998, when the El Niño drought hit large parts of Mindanao, causing widespread hunger and loss of livelihood, Ambassador Dee, together with partners from the Catholic Church hierarchy and civil society, established an organization called Tabang Mindanaw. Although it was originally designed to assist people in El Niño-ravaged areas, the organization began devoting considerable attention to the problems of Mindanao's indigenous people—the loss of their ancestral lands, the degradation of their habitat, and the appalling rate of illiteracy among them.

At their first meeting, Dee and Abadiano discussed the problems of the people of Mindanao, focusing on the victims of the all-out war that the Philippine government under President Joseph Estrada had declared against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in March 2000. A million people, Christians and Muslims, mostly in the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Maguindanao, and Cotabato, were caught in the crossfire between government soldiers and the rebels, their homes and farms destroyed. To escape the fighting, they had little choice but to evacuate to government-run refugee camps in safer areas, where living conditions were miserable.

In an article titled "People Making Peace," Abadiano wrote: "Life in the evacuation areas is as difficult as in the battlefield. According to Kadatuan Mamaluba, a forty-seven-year-old Muslim farmer, there are no exact words to describe their situation in the evacuation centers. 'Though we were safe from bullets and bombs, we were not safe from hunger and disease.'"

Dee asked Abadiano to start a peace-building program in Mindanao. Abadiano balked. He had never done anything like it before. Dee then suggested that he draft a framework for the rehabilitation of the displaced people of Mindanao. Abadiano told himself, "My God, I don't know what to do."

At this point he fell ill. The doctors suspected dengue fever, but today he says his condition must have been psychosomatic, perhaps a nervous response to the difficult challenge presented to him by Ambassador Dee. Since he was still formally a member of the Society of Jesus, Abadiano drew comfort from knowing that he could count on the Jesuits to support him. The Provincial of the Society suggested that he concentrate on writing rather than take on a new job.

And so Abadiano asked Howard Dee if he could be a simple volunteer for Tabang Mindanaw. Dee, however, believed that Abadiano could do more if he worked full time.

Abadiano's first assignment was to help out with relief operations, an assignment that brought him into close contact with the affected communities. In his conversations with refugees, they told him of their strong desire to return to their homes and their land and livelihoods. "Are you willing to take the risk?" he would ask them. When they said yes, he would reply, "Then we are willing to take the risk with you."

The armed conflict was far from over. The task of returning, resettling, and rehabilitating its victims required tremendous logistical and financial support. In September 2000, Abadiano, with Tabang Mindanaw and other advocates of peace in the region, launched the Integrated Return and Rehabilitation Program (IRRP) based on a framework of peace and integrated human development. The idea was to establish “sanctuaries of peace” that would be respected by both the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the MILF. In letters to both the AFP and the MILF, the people expressed their desire to return to their homes in peace. Negotiations ensued and the people’s petition won the support of both the military and the MILF. Barangay Nalapaan in Pikit, Cotabato, was chosen as the pilot “sanctuary of peace” for 387 families—including Christians, Muslims, and indigenous peoples.

At their community meetings, the people assessed their needs and strategies. They identified nine major concerns: housing and shelter, water, health and sanitation, peace education, livelihood, agriculture, land tenure, psychosocial intervention, and infrastructure. Participants agreed that first priority would be given to housing and shelter.

By August 2002, forty-two communities composed of 2,362 families had been declared sanctuaries of peace in Lanao del Sur, Cotabato, and Maguindanao.

In time, the various concerns identified at the community meetings were addressed: housing units and water systems, latrines, and multipurpose halls were completed; farms, schools, and a mosque were rehabilitated; peace education and training in alternative medicine were provided. People pitched in to build houses and start backyard gardens. Those who had been initially skeptical about the program became convinced that peace was possible and began to participate actively during the consultations with the community.

In an article for the newsletter of Tabang Mindanaw, Abadiano reported: “The general satisfaction over the sanctuary of peace can be best described through the words of one of the leaders: ‘We were not wrong. We were right in declaring our area as a sanctuary of peace.’”

Abadiano attributed the smooth and successful implementation of the IRRP to a number of factors: “Most notable is the tripartite effort and partnership of the affected residents, the peace advocates, and the local government units. This partnership was critical in securing the peace with the military and the MILF. The eagerness and strong desire of the affected communities to live in peace and to free their area of any armed conflict serve as a strong foundation in this effort. Tabang Mindanaw and other partners have provided the moral and logistical support, while the local government units neutralize the hostile conditions to pave the way for the project.”

At the same time, Abadiano acknowledged that the peace and order situation was still volatile in the war-torn areas of Mindanao and that it was important to continue dialogues with the AFP and the MILF.

While preoccupied with his work in Tabang Mindanaw, Abadiano had to decide, once and for all, whether or not to return to the Society of Jesus. After an eight-day spiritual retreat, he asked the Society for permission to be dispensed from his vows.

Abadiano now set out to build a community of friends who were themselves doing mission work and who shared his vision of living out their Catholic faith through “an apostolate with the poor and marginalized communities.” The result of that effort was a lay apostolic network

called the Ilawan Center for Peace and Sustainable Development, initiated in Davao City on the island of Mindanao on September 8, 2001.

Ilawan is a Filipino word that means “a bearer of light.” The group’s members define themselves as “lay men and women drawn together from diverse walks of life, inspired by the life and mission of Christ, committed to work for the promotion of peace and justice, particularly among the less privileged and marginalized communities.”

The vision of Ilawan is as “a life-giving community endowed with passion for love, service, and solidarity with others towards building a society of peace and justice.” Its mission is “to support indigenous peoples’ initiatives in building self-reliant communities by engaging in various programs that promote, respect, and enhance people’s rights to cultural integrity, to land and the capability to care for the earth and its resources, to human development, to self-governance and self-determination, and to peace.”

Abadiano envisioned Ilawan with seven core programs: (1) a volunteer program for students, professionals, and other interested individuals or groups; (2) a learning center including early childhood development, a high school, and skills training for both young people and adults; (3) an environment and resource-management initiative; (4) advocacy for a culture of peace and for ancestral domains; (5) a livelihood program; (6) a research, documentation, and information desk; and (7) a lay workers’ apostolic network. When Abadiano explained to Ambassador Howard Dee his concept for Ilawan, Dee was delighted and hardly surprised. His good friend, the Jesuit theologian Fr. Catalino Arevalo, had already told him that Abadiano had a gift for formation. Abadiano recalls that Dee responded, “I’m going to support you, whatever you wish, because I know who you are, where your heart is. Just tell me in whatever way we can help you.”

Abadiano’s response was to ask half-jokingly, “Will you allow me to do two things at the same time?” He was not prepared for Dee’s reply: “Yes, we can even offer you space here.”

Abadiano started Ilawan with no money except half of his salary from Tabang Mindanaw. He rented office space in Davao City and chose the Matigsalug tribe based in Davao as the first beneficiary of Ilawan’s programs.

Ilawan began with a two-year preschool for the children of the Matigsalug, which expanded into an elementary school and then a high school. The school was called the Pamulaan Lumad Learning Center, *pamulaan* being, like *tugdaan*, an indigenous term for seedbed, and *lumad*, a collective term for the indigenous people of Mindanao. As he did for the Mangyan’s *Tugdaan*, Abadiano also made sure that Ilawan’s projects comported with the distinctive cultures of Mindanao’s indigenous peoples.

Members of Ilawan have contributed their expertise to environmental, advocacy, and livelihood campaigns. A geologist helped out with the mapping of the ancestral domains of indigenous communities. A program for the promotion of sustainable agriculture has trained thirty-five indigenous farmers and set up a demonstration farm. Several members continue to be involved in the promotion of a culture of peace in war-torn areas of Mindanao.

Ilawan’s efforts to preserve the cultural integrity of indigenous people have already resulted in the collection of words, songs, stories, dances, and rituals of the Matigsalug, Bagobo, and other tribal peoples; the commissioning of graphic designs illustrating indigenous daily life and culture; the integration of indigenous history, life, and culture into Pamulaan’s preschool

and high school curricula; and the establishment of the Ilawan Pamulaan Training Center for the preservation of Matigsalug culture.

Abadiano has also been busy documenting the Matigsalug's language because he feels certain that someday "their culture will disappear." He is aware of the tremendous influence on indigenous people from lowland culture but is not worried about it. "The challenge is so great because the external forces are very strong," he declares. "But they have the freedom to develop in their own way. They will definitely change because culture constantly changes. But their self-identity has to be strengthened. They have to develop themselves based on where they come from. I hope that, with the programs we are implementing, they will see the richness and value of their own culture."

Ilawan's work has not been confined to the island of Mindanao. Some of its members have been providing technical support to two other schools for indigenous children: the Tugdaan Center in Mindoro and the Early Childhood Development Program for the Aeta communities in Tarlac. The United Nations Children's Fund also invited him to start the same program for the Kabihug tribe in Daet, Camarines Norte.

In September 2002, Abadiano returned to Tugdaan in Paitan to launch two books he had completed: *Kalamayan-Tipon ng mga Salitang Mangyan-Alangan*, the first Mangyan dictionary, and *Bisloyte (Little Seeds)*, a manual for the implementation and management of an educational program for indigenous people.

In more recent years, following Abadiano's recognition by the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, he has organized a university-level program for indigenous people affiliated with the University of South Eastern Philippines (USEP)—"to create culturally appropriate and relevant pathways of professional training and formation for indigenous youth and leaders"—and a "living heritage center" for research, documentation, and publication of indigenous knowledge systems, history, and culture.

Abadiano says that he is happy where he is now, doing what he is doing. He continues to be actively involved in Tabang Mindanaw, which in turn is one of Ilawan's staunchest partners. Retirement is certainly a long way off, but when it comes, Benjamin Abadiano would like to spend it training young people to be volunteers and leaders—to be, like his model Jesus Christ, lights of the world wherever they are.

Lorna Kalaw-Tirol

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