

M A G A Z I N E O F C H O I C E

ROTARY

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JULIA ONGCHOCO

Service in the Digital Age



3800 RYLA
JUMPSTARTING THE YOUTH

PROFILING YOUTH LEADERS

DISTRICT FOCUS
DISTRICT 3790

THE ZEST OF GEN Z

Philippine Rotary greets the new year celebrating the awesomeness of bright young minds. The high-school student on our cover, Julia Ongchoco, the Charter President of the Interact Club of Red Cross Youth, has changed the way Rotary does service by employing digital technology, her natural medium. She developed the web platform GiveLife, that matches donors with donees and vice-versa. While the older generation of Rotarians would perhaps organize an event like a movie premiere or a benefit dinner to raise funds for a humanitarian project, Ongchoco generates resources and patrons as well as recipients of offered goodwill through her GiveLife site. For instance, she may look for a beneficiary for a donated wheelchair or find someone who may be interested in funding a scholar needing assistance.

For this ingenious feat, she was honored last October by the Harvard Social Innovation Collaborative's "Village to Raise a Child" or VTRAC program as a Global Trailblazer. The search involved the presentation of an innovative idea or project that attempts to solve a community-wide problem. Competing with 200 entries from all over the world, Ongchoco shared the title with three other individuals from Brazil, India, and Kenya and a team of four students who were not only from the Philippines but from her school as well, Immaculate Concepcion Academy. These amazing young Global Trailblazers were flown to Harvard to present their awesome projects.

District 3800, likewise, did something innovative with their Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA). Whereas many districts still conduct RYLA as a team-building exercise, D3800 under District Governor Marilou Co with Project Chairperson Irene Besido-Garcia, charter president of the Rotary Club of Mandaluyong-Pasig-San Juan (RC ManPaSan), reserved a portion of the program for project presentations. The young participants in the two-day seminar worked on the details of their conceptualized service projects which they presented to a panel of Rotarians with the objective of getting support for their implementation.

These young creative minds belong to Generation Z, the subsequent age group to the Millennials. Though still in their early youth, they already care, have the heart to serve, and are so socially conscious. If they represent the prevailing sentiment of their generation, then the future is secure. And that is a very comforting thought to welcome another year. Happy New Year!

Chit L. Lijauco
CHIT L. LIJAUCO
 Past District Governor



The Global Trailblazers

The Global Trailblazers: Ishita from India, Team Firend (Maxine, Camille, Patricia, Alexa), Julia, Lewis from Kenya, and Patricia from Brazil with Mariana (center in white) of the Harvard Social Innovation Collaborative

Using digital technology, the medium of the Now generation, Julia Ongchoco is reshaping the face of Service

SERVICE IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

BY FRANCES MAE RAMOS PHOTOGRAPHED BY ELLY JOHN CARIG

I WAS THINKING OF WAYS TO BREAK THE ICE

with someone so young as I sat in the dining area of Club Filipino, waiting for my cover story to arrive. Julia Ongchoco's 17 years would naturally be a talking point. At that age, her CV and profile are precociously employable. Julia is the founder and President of GiveLife, a non-profit web platform linking donors to beneficiaries of wheelchairs, blood donations, surgeries, scholarships, and books.



Establishing and singlehandedly steering a non-profit is hardly universal experience for most adults. But Julia's resolve to help out wasn't to be sidetracked by her youth, even as she negotiates the rigors of pre-university high school years.

Her days are full; her schedule ahead, at the time of the interview, was about to keep rolling: she had been recently named a Global Trailblazer by the Harvard Social Innovation Collaborative and invited to Harvard University to talk about her project as a young founder.

Amid all these, how does one relax the conversation with her? There was, of course, her passion for archery. Julia is a two-time member of the Philippine Junior National Archery team and a member of the senior national pool. You'd think sports would be her distraction from the professional-level demands of running a non-profit. On the contrary, it intensified her resolve to make good on her involvements.

She cites her eye-opening experience in the Palarong Pambansa. Competing with athletes her age who were also battling the odds to participate in the sport—amid the lack of

facilities and funding—she became trenchantly aware of her position to share her blessings.

And sharing her blessings takes up her time. This wasn't to be an interview to carve out and represent post-millennial hobbies and leisure tendencies. Some kids stray from the pack and are naturally distinct from their peers, even connecting with older generations in terms of their seriousness and professionalism. Chitchat wouldn't be necessary; Julia had a story to tell and a cause to campaign for.

DIGITAL AGE ADVOCACY

She is, of course, a product of the digital age, though she seemed, judging from her interests and pursuits, blithely distant from the frivolities of social media platforms. In fact, despite the online nature of GiveLife, the digital culture engulfing most members of her generation seemed to be pinned, for her, to her advocacies. We keep social media talk off the table and focus on the now taken for granted uses of the lean website, which took a team to create.

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Hooked on gadgets; (opposite) Julia with her supportive parents

Showing off the form that has taken Julia to archery competitions as a member of the Philippine team

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me do the website after I created the mock-up.” As an incumbent and Charter President of the Interact Club of Red Cross Youth, she was able to solicit the assistance of her co-members. This was the perfect springboard for her own take on the club’s advocacies.

As of presstime, the website is in full swing, having matched close to 1,000 needs to donors and resources. She would not be lightly stepping on the gas pedal soon. The work carved out involves a lot more than tech savvy. She is focused on finding more donations and forming partnerships with schools, what with the rising demand for scholarships.

Meanwhile, the medical side, according to her, is being sufficiently addressed through partnerships with Philippine Red Cross, Hospital on Wheels, and Mabuhay Shriners Philippines.

Her grasp of leadership notwithstanding, she clinically discloses, as a youthful leader would, her need for adult assistance. And in this regard, we see her taking to heart her own privilege and gratefulness for the support of her family.

Her parents are actively involved with the Rotary Club in New Manila Heights. Her siblings are achievers in their own right, who regularly give her advice on methods and channels to which she can have recourse, aside from guiding her through the rigors of creating a website. And the everyday dinner table is a source of insightful discussion, as she updates her parents on the gaps in her platform. The triumph of familial

connectedness, it can be seen, gives special significance to the benefits of the digital age, in this case.

“Finding help for specific donations is what’s more difficult right now, because we don’t run out of people approaching us. Anytime we go on a radio or social media campaign, we get flooded with requests from people telling us what they need. And a lot of them have very specific needs. So we added this new feature in the GiveLife website that showcases unserved pending wishes from people,” she says.

Technology, in her heartfelt causes, is the most surmountable of Julia’s hurdles.

WISDOM FROM THE YOUTH

Her age is still given to the influence of her experience. I ask her about her plans for college. She is forthcoming about this uncertainty—the educational system demands clear answers, at a specific milestone, in that regard. But it is clear that, for Julia, the lessons from her advocacy will be informing her choices.

“I don’t know really yet what I want to take up. Maybe I’d want to become a doctor or work in government. Last weekend, GiveLife hosted a surgical mission of our partner Hospital on Wheels as a way to match pending requests for surgeries. And we were able to see what it was like inside the operating room—it was really cool. After it, the student volunteers were messaging, saying that they didn’t think many people needed surgeries for removal of lumps and masses. But there are so many people [needing such], and it’s so amazing

“It’s really a special feeling, getting to meet the people that you’ve helped ... Ibang klase talaga [there’s no feeling like it]”

that we were able to help them,” she shares excitedly. The medical profession would be wont to welcome this youthful enthusiasm for the industry.

Julia is a straight-A student in the rigorous STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) strand under the new K-12 system, and currently in her senior year at the Immaculate Conception Academy in San Juan City. The academic aspect of medicine and anatomy, of course, overwhelms with its technicality. But her work in GiveLife and participation in the surgical missions stanches the difficulties of acquiring knowledge for the medical profession. Seeing a tumor firsthand, for one, lays out rich possibilities for a 17-year-old in steering her own future.

“During one standard tumor removal procedure where I was allowed to assist, I got to experience looking into the layers of the skin, and I soon realized I actually understood nearly all the terms the doctors were using, like subcutaneous layer, epidermis, and dermis. Dr. Jim Sanchez even allowed me to cut out a patient’s tumor [with the patient’s consent of course!] and hold it in my hand,” Julia relates.

Her interaction with beneficiaries of GiveLife is even more striking. “It’s really a special feeling, getting to meet the people that you’ve helped,” she says, smiling. “Ibang klase talaga [there’s no feeling like it].”

A case that stands out was a girl GiveLife provided a scholarship. Julia recalls the teary-eyed moment of the grant, acknowledging the



Julia with some of her favorite instruments

contrast between one person’s unquenchable desire to study and the often forgotten aspirations of the young in education. There is also the case of a cook who was fired because of a large tumor on his face, and who was only able to return to work after the removal of the mass.

ROOM FOR MENTORSHIP

The fragility of youth rears its head regardless of the sturdy nature of its bearer. Julia herself isn’t inured to the sensitivities of her age. Sometime ago, she performed spoken word poetry in leading a campaign in her school denouncing bullying. She and her peers are caught up in a flurry of school and the culture of its halls; it can be easy to lose focus and succumb to adolescent stress.



In her own space at home with framed mementos, including favorite Broadway musicals that she has watched and musicals she has performed in

There really is merit in keeping busy. Julia’s open mien helps her get inspired by everyone’s stories, which in turn fuel her insight and action. Archery grounded her early on the workings of empathy.

One would think her upbringing in an exclusive girls’ school will fence her experience around that of people her age and social milieu. But sports enables an expansive outlook that immediately propelled her out of her comfort zone—as far as Baguio, Albay, Dumaguete and farflung areas of the country where her contemporaries in the sport are sometimes constrained to a certain level of achievement due to circumstances.

“I used to be very introverted, but I think a part of me is really extroverted...in a way that I like to talk to people and get out there,” she says in a rare and spontaneous moment of gazing at the old navel.

This extroversion is bound to run into the corner of her busy days. It is not for her to indulge the old FOMO (fear of missing out, in the language of the youth). She

could skip a birthday party here or there, the Friday nights consecrated to the proverbial hangout. She knows who she is, what she does, the sacrifices of her choosing, and how her time would be apportioned.

So perhaps she is in a less self-conscious position to proffer advice to her fellow youth. Young Filipinos, she finds, could be caught up in tradition and convention. Going beyond that will take a lot of hard work and sacrifice, in the hope that adults will participate in and understand this journey, the way Julia’s parents did. **R**

(To support or learn more about GiveLife, you may log on to www.givelife.ph.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With her love for reading, travel, and the languages, FRANCES MAE RAMOS has all she needs to hone her innate talent for writing and be a published author sooner than soon. The *Philippine Rotary* enjoys the benefit of her proficiency with words in her capacity as Assistant to the Editor.