



## *Hope Lives*

### **The Story of ASSUMPTA TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL Asia Pacific Province (Philippines)**

Inspiring stories of great organizations or schools for that matter often begin with humble roots and origins. Tenacity, perseverance, and a burning passion for who they ultimately believe in and value are cited as vital factors that propel them to move forward and grow. Such is the story of this school in the Philippines of the Asia Pacific Province.

In the 1960's, the farming community of San Simon, Pampanga, found itself in dire, socio-economic straits due to the political upheavals besetting the country at the time. Then Barrio Captain Eladio Carlos Sr. sent a request to then Superior of Assumption-Herran Mother Natividad to provide education for their children, who had nowhere to go after the elementary grades. In response to this request, and in their desire to give hope to the rural poor by providing quality Catholic education that could also help check the spread of communism in the area, Mother Natividad sent a community of four sisters of the Religious of the Assumption to San Simon. The Sisters of the Religious of the Assumption joined forces with the Mother Rosa Memorial Foundation (MRMF) – a non-stock, non-profit foundation composed of the graduates of Assumption Convent and inspired by the example of Mother Rosa Maria Pachoud, a pioneering French nun of the Assumption in the Philippines. Hence, in 1970, on a 5.2-hectare piece of land in San Simon, the Assumpta Technical High School (ATHS) was established, with the Sisters tasked with academically administering the school, while the MRMF assumed responsibility for the financial operations.

From the start, the ATHS structured itself in ways that responded to the unique needs of the community it serves. Initially, given the socio-economic conditions of the community, the ATHS administration thought that the students would not have the option or resources to pursue higher education. Hence, a vocational program was added to the school curriculum to give students practical skills with which they could make a livelihood right after graduation. Each student was required to choose one technical course from among six in the curriculum that he/she would complete alongside the standard high school academic program. At the time, the vocational-technical course choices included agriculture and animal husbandry, garment trade, food trade, electronics, carpentry and business distributive arts.

On the financial side, families were asked to pay a minimal counterpart of ₱4.00 / \$0.078 a month for their education. The students were largely drawn from the surrounding villages of San Simon, a fifth-class municipality at the time, as well as from Apalit and Minalin – the children of farmers, vendors, landless rural workers and government employees.

In the ATHS, students were expected to be social reformers within their own communities. The school was envisioned to be a community school, where a community-wide learning experience was facilitated with connections between the school and their social development arm that organized the nearby farmers into producers' and credit cooperatives. This experience was seen as contributing to the mutual enrichment of the student and the community – the community by the immediate awareness of what the students were taught, and the students by the immediate awareness of the needs of their wider communities.

For the ATHS' first 25 years, the MRMF relied on donations in order to fully subsidize the quality education of the deserving poor. The MRMF Board of Trustees however had envisioned the school as eventually evolving into a self-sustaining institution within 25 years. Over the years, the school embarked on a series of livelihood projects to help sustain itself. At various times in its first 20 years, the school operated a piggery, tilapia fish ponds, a garment factory, a carpentry workshop and an Integrated Development Farm of over three

hectares. However, these efforts proved to be insufficient for the school's financial needs, especially after the series of lahar floods sparked by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo repeatedly inflicting its damages.

The school initially required a monthly contribution of ₱ 4.00 / \$0.078 from its students. Over the years, this amount gradually increased to ₱ 20.00 / \$0.39, ₱80.00 / \$1.60 and finally to ₱650.00 / \$12.75 a month which amount suddenly and automatically deprived our original clientele of Assumpta education. This caused a lot of discomfort among stakeholders who pursued further study of the situation. By 1996, with educational expenses continually skyrocketing and with many of the school's benefactors experiencing donor fatigue, it became clear to the MRMF Board that something had to be done to make the school more self-sustaining.

In 1996-2000, the 60-40 scheme was implemented, in which 40 percent of the incoming freshmen students had to pay collectively and in verifying amounts according to each one's capability, at least 50 percent of the total cost of education while the rest paid the regular tuition fee. In 2000-2004, the socialized tuition fee scheme was implemented. Under this scheme, the tuition fee accorded to every student was based on the financial capability of the family, with the ₱650.00 / \$12.75 maintained as base. The administration and faculty opposed the decision, as this would mean abandoning their target clientele of rural poor families and ultimately altering the mission and nature of the school.

In the face of worsening financial crisis, ATHS embarked on a DISCERNMENT PROCESS in April 2004 to determine whether to close ATHS or not. It was composed of the MRMF Board of Trustees, ATHS R.A.'s Past/Present Principals/Superiors, ATHS Core Group, ATHS Faculty/Staff, ATHS Student Board Officers, ATHS Student Homeroom Officers, ATHS Parent Teacher Association Board Officers, ATHS Alumni, Local Government Units Representatives from San Simon, Minalin, Apalit Communities and Representatives – Aguman ng Kababaihan ng San Simon Incorporated and Church Leaders (PPC). The discernment process took five months, April – September 2004 and included focus group discussion (FGD), interviews, gathering of empirical data and analyzing several possibilities. The result of this long process led to the decision to continue operating the school with major shifts in financial management. ATHS is now a regular paying school with a large scholarship base – an attempt to establish a community where the full paying and the less paying stand active partners in creating a learning community of equals. A compromise was reached. The socialized tuition scheme was continued, but the base was reduced from ₱650.00 / \$12.75 to ₱250.00 / \$4.90 based on actual interview especially of tricycle drivers to accommodate families in real need. The tuition fee accorded to every student was based on the “rainbow scheme” which meant that fifty percent of the students' tuition ranged from ₱250.00 / \$4.90 - ₱1,000 / \$19.61 a month, while the tuition of the remaining 50 percent ranged from ₱1,050.00 / \$20.59 - ₱2,100.00 / \$41.18 a month. This system is still in place today.

The administration of the socialized tuition fee scheme requires the combined effort of the whole school. The school prepares a paper to guide its selection of payment options for the family, based on a matrix of various socio-economic levels. Using this form, the admission staff visits each family on a yearly basis in order to assess and validate their paying capacity. The Admissions Committee then selects within a range of ₱100.00 / \$1.96 increments beginning with the base rate of ₱250.00 / \$4.90 a month to the highest rate of ₱2,100.00 / \$41.18, a decision then subjected to negotiations with the families. Prior to admitting students, the school administration determines the minimum number of paying students required to cover operational expenses. Care is taken to always maintain the divided ratio of minimally-paying students and the ones paying the highest rates. Systems are also in place to check and reflect on how to maintain the school's values and climate of simplicity, sacrifice and self-giving within a campus of students of mixed economic backgrounds.

Parallel with the sustained effort of the school to strengthen its finances, the alumni also took on the responsibility of shouldering a fraction of the operations budget of their Alma Mater each year. They have pledged a minimum of ₱500,000.00 / \$9,803.92 every year for this purpose.

Today, the Board contributes less than one percent or (0.9%) to the annual operations budget, ₱66,102,893.02/ \$1,296,135.16. The main source of funds for operations is raised by the school from tuition fees, school-based income generating projects, and donations from local sources. The Board, however, continues to fund major expenses such a construction projects as the school continues to expand and develop, as well as other capital expenditures that go with the steady increase of the school's population.

As a testament to the school administrators' vision, innovativeness and commitment to the school's mission, the ATHS was granted Level 3 accreditation by the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU) since 2009 up to the present, the highest level of distinction held by only a select group of 17 original high school awardees in the country. In fact, the ATHS is the only technical school and foundation institute able to attain this distinction in the country. The Level 3 accreditation reflects the ATHS' attainment of the status of an excellent school in terms of its fulfillment of its own vision, mission and objectives.

In 2011, the Socialized Tuition Fee Scheme that is being implemented won for ATHS the Excellence for Educational Transformation Awards on Administrative System and Process for Financial Sustainability.

### **The ATHS Today**

Today, the Assumpta Technical High School is a recognized leader in the field of basic and secondary education in the country. From its first batch of 59 graduates in 1974, the school has grown over the years and has produced a total of 5,327 graduates. The best graduates of the school, those belonging to the upper 10 percent, compete and do well as scholars in well-known colleges and universities in Metro Manila and in the region. Even those graduates who did not study after high school generally acknowledge and appreciate the human and spiritual formation, skills training, orientation to service and decision-making capacity that the school has instilled in them.



In fact, many of the graduates return to their communities and become actively involved in improving the lives of the people as civic and community leaders.

The PAASCU itself has been recognizing the outstanding work produced by the ATHS since 1983. The ATHS is the first PAASCU accredited school in Region III, the first accredited vocational-technical high school in the Philippines, and the first accredited Assumption school for the poor. The ATHS administration has also received positive feedback on the performance of its graduates who are now studying in well-known schools such as the Ateneo de Manila, St. Scholastica's College, Assumption College, the De La Salle University, and the University of the Philippines, as well as some state colleges and universities.

The ATHS and the effort of the Religious of the Assumption and the MRMF have also received national recognition as an effective agent of change worth emulating. In fact, then President Corazon Aquino once held a cabinet meeting at the ATHS in San Simon, and challenged her cabinet officials to study how to replicate the San Simon Project in every region in the Philippines.

The greatest testimony however to the success of the ATHS in fulfilling its vision and mission is the experience one gets when visiting the school and observing the practices and traditions of the students, faculty and staff alike. Visitors have reported witnessing students cleaning and maintaining the immaculate state of the school grounds—the ATHS survives with only a few janitorial staff. There was also a time when the school received a donation of shoes, which were sorely needed by most of the students. Unfortunately, there were not enough shoes to go around, so the administration allowed the students to decide among themselves who would receive the donated shoes. With admirable maturity, the students who had a little more willingly gave their shoes to their classmates who needed the shoes the most.

Today, Assumpta is “owned” not only by the Mother Rosa Memorial Foundation and the Religious of the Assumption, but by the lay faculty and staff, the students and their families, and the 44 batches of alumni who are now making their living in various geographical and professional areas. A sense of solidarity unites them, as well as the shared values of academic excellence, service to the community and faith in God that their years in ATHS have instilled in them. ATHS now thrives in a community that continues to flourish. It has become a symbol of hope for people who dare to dream and hope for a brighter future.