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MUSEUMS AS PART OF THE COMMUNITY.

God dag (go da!) good day!

When I first learned through email from Ms. Elisabet Olofsson, about winning the Hans Manneby Award for Museum Development, I was caught by surprise and I had mixed emotions of happiness, excitement and amazement.

Amazed because the thought of getting international recognition for work I have been doing in a place so far away and so unknown, even to many Filipinos, had never crossed my mind.

Nevertheless, I read the email over and over again and it was for real. I then read all about Hans Manneby, an extra ordinary man in the museum world and I started to get nervous.

I am a fiber artist by profession, I weave tapestries using non-traditional materials, like weeds, dried leaves, discarded ropes and threads , waste wood, twigs, seeds , and pebbles. My museum work started when I did an installation work in our very first museum in our island called Negros. Negros is one of the 7,100 islands of the Philippines. The Philippines is located in Southeast Asia, near Hongkong, Japan and China.

Working in the Negros museum, in charge of exhibitions, made me realize a lot of things about museums. In our country, museums are not places of choice to visit especially for the local people. Museums have to compete with shopping malls, and movie houses. Museums for the most part are visited by children during school field trips and then forgotten until the next school year comes along. Our museum was a stand -alone institution, you come and visit and you leave, our exhibits are there for us to keep. Something had to be done about the situation.

Since most of our visitors were children, almost half of the population of our Island is below 25 years old, and majority of them are from the underprivileged sector of the community, we started our Sponsor a Museum Visit for Public School Children. This program expanded to sponsor a craft workshop, to an art workshop, and even to a reading workshop. One can only imagine the effect these workshops have on building the children's confidence and wellbeing. The satisfaction we felt (the museum staff and me) on seeing how happy and confident these once shy and timid children have become after these workshops are more than words can express.

In 2003, when I was invited to help put up a museum for children, I was more than convinced that truly and to quote former US Pres. John F. Kennedy "Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future."

I was so excited about the opportunity to develop new and innovative programs for children. The staff was all very interested and saw new challenges coming and sometimes wondered whether we really could do what we wanted, the way we planned it. I felt like a child, so eager and sometimes impatient to see it completed. With the coming of the new museum, our work doubled, we all were multitasking especially come opening day. I guess you can say, in a sort of way, like Hans Manneby, I wanted and worked to revitalize the concept of museum.

I wanted a museum for children where they can enjoy as they grow and gain the ability to develop and make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of other people when they come of age especially in matters concerning their marine environment.

The Museo Sang Bata Sa Negros (The Children's Museum in Negros) is a hands on and interactive marine museum for children. It is located right beside a 32,000 hectares marine protected area in Sagay City, Negros Occidental. It is about 2 hours by bus from the capital city called Bacolod and where the Negros Museum (where I first worked) is located.

This museum is focused on the marine environment and its main program is on marine education for children. Sadly, marine education is not part of our school curriculum and to think that ours is an archipelagic country, a cluster of islands surrounded by water, teeming with marine life. And Sagay City where our museum is located is known for its rich marine environment. About half of its population depend on the sea for their livelihood. A livelihood that is in peril due to destructive fishing practices and overfishing because of increasing population and environmental pollution. So, how does one engage a community to be interested in museums, when people are struggling to make ends meet to feed their families?

We started our museum work by inviting the members of the community to a dialogue. Most of them had no idea about museums at all. They thought it useless and a waste of space and money to have such an institution in their community. We told them what the museum is all about, that it is directly related to their life, being fisher folks and that their children could come and play while discovering the beauty and richness as well as the importance of the marine environment. These kinds of dialogue took place several times and the number of attendees decreasing each time. Until only the children came, because they were the only ones not busy. Many times we all felt discouraged and the morale among the staff was very low, yet we continued. How can something good not bring good results? After all, it was for the community that we were doing such work.

One of our most successful program is the Museum Junior guide program. Children ages 8 to 12 years old are invited to be trained to become museum junior guides. They come voluntarily to the museum on weekends, to see, touch, discover and learn about the museum exhibits and listen to stories about the marine environment. These junior guides have become so good at what they do, that people come to the museum to see and hear them. Slowly the community have become interested in the museum. The parents and their relatives have started coming too.

Another program that has gained the respect of the community is the yearly celebration of “Children’s Day”. During this day, the museum holds a native games, songs and dances competition, craft making competition, traditional cooking competition. We find these activities very good in fostering good relations between the elderly in the community and the children because the children learn from them the techniques of the disappearing games, songs, dances, crafts, and recipes. Not only does it bring families and the community together, It encourages respect and helps develop pride of place, and love of country. Preparations for Children’s day start months ahead of the big day, so you can imagine the community working together for that event.

For museums to become part of society, it must have relevance with the community. A museum must work closely with people of the community; it must have an on-going dialogue with the society it aims to serve. Exhibitions and programs have to be developed creatively with the needs of the society in mind.

In 2004, when our museum had the opportunity to join Alas (Asia Latin America, Africa and Sweden) under the Samp Network, in our Museum staff and I have experienced first-hand, learned and Appreciated the diversity of cultures and the importance of sharing Experiences and knowledge across borders and being open to change. In Alas, the meaning of equal opportunity for all to be heard and listened was not only something we discussed but was practiced to the max. These were values we took home and made our own. I guess you can say, our museum was developing in Hans Manneby’s spirit, with great energy and enthusiasm to connect with museums across continents and building global networks.

Flexibility is another characteristic that museums must have in order To be relevant to today’s Society. Sometimes we have to do things using new ways of thinking or looking in order to achieve our goals. When we started our community coastal clean-up program in the museum, the community was so negative about it. During our

dialogue, the members of the community didn't like the idea of cleaning up garbage brought by the tide to the shoreline because it wasn't their garbage. The day of the clean-up, few people (adults) came, only the children were there to help. However, on the next clean up schedule, even the number of children decreased. But we continued the activity and it was there I noticed that most of the children were untidy and several had dental problems. So our basic hygiene program was born, all the children who visited the museum had to be neat and clean before they could come in. We taught them how to brush their teeth properly, how to keep themselves clean. A most surprising thing happened after this, when the children were clean, they also wanted their surroundings to be clean. The same with the parents, they didn't want their children to get dirty so they started cleaning around their houses too and the shoreline as well. We had hit two birds with one stone, our coastal clean-up activity our basic hygiene program.

All these programs however, could not be accomplished by only one person or one institution. A dedicated museum staff, a supportive local government, teachers, who volunteer their time for free and an enlightened community have all worked together to get where we are now. This Hans Manneby Memorial Fund award for Museum development is an award for the City of Sagay, the museum board and staff, our volunteers and the Community of the Museo Sang Bata Sa Negros especially the children. To all of them I am most grateful and I look forward to more fruitful cooperations while keeping the legacy of Hans Manneby alive.

Thank you! Tusen Tack!