

expat

Travel & Lifestyle
Philippines

SPECIAL *Anniversary Issue*
Celebrate 30 years of Expat Life!



PHP 150 | USD 3.50 | GBP 2.20 | EUR 2.60
9 771 90 864 30 02



Laurence Ligier: The Woman Behind Chameleon

Text by RAYDON L. REYES Photo courtesy of Laurence Ligier

French national Laurence Ligier first came to the Philippines in 1992 as a missionary assigned in Aklan, Visayas. Together with a group of French volunteers, she worked to build additional classrooms within an old public school in the area. For the next six months, she would immerse herself deeply in Aklan's rural community before spending the remainder of the year doing the same in Iloilo. It was at the latter location where she would eventually discover the great need to help abused girls in the island commonly known as the "Heart of the Philippines."

"I was assigned in Iloilo to take part in an educational program for the poor children of Barrio Obrero. Living in the squatters area and being in contact with poor urban families and street children made me understand better their needs, and I began to think how I could help them in a more concrete, effective and professional way," Ligier narrates. "That's when the idea of putting up a center for street girls came along."

Ligier's vision finally bore fruit in 1997 when she founded Chameleon Association. For the past 14 years, it has continually improved the street children's situation during and after their stay in the organization by

providing vital intervention and support for girls who suffered from sexual abuse. Accredited and licensed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Chameleon finds the girls who need help through referrals made by public social services.

With the promise to deliver medical, psychological, educational and legal aid, Ligier's team comprises aid workers, surrogate mothers, child psychiatrists, among others. "Apart from the management level comprised of the Executive Director and Program Officer, the program staff are social workers, house-mothers, community development workers, administrative and utility staff. The services of child psychiatrists and the psychologist are sought externally," Ligier says. "Chameleon personnel are composed of 25 staff, all Filipino nationals. It is through their joint and harmonized efforts that we can assure the recovery, well-being, and development of the girls."

Introducing the concept of 'fun' back into their lives is very important. The "Circus Therapy" introduced by the Zanzibar Circus to the organization fills this need by using both art and exercise to cheer up the girls. She asserts that public performances

on stage give an incredible boost to their self-confidence and self-esteem, something that has been shattered for a long time. "It certainly gives them physical strength and stamina, supports their development and growth, but moreover it reconnects them with their body – they start to accept and love their body and embrace themselves they are," Ligier says.

But Chameleon does more than just take care of the basic and security needs of the girls. What serves as the light at the end of the tunnel for these former victims would be the ability they would gain to integrate themselves back into society long after their stay in the organization. And so, they are organized in such a way that they all share responsibilities for themselves and for others. These include daily tasks, house-chores, and taking care of the younger girls. "Furthermore, with numerous trainings, seminars, retreats, and extra-curricular activities, the girls revisit and learn more about values, they acquire skills (cooking, sewing, art, jewelry making, manicure/pedicure, computer usage) and knowledge useful in their daily life. They also learn about resource management, budgeting, and good decision-making," Ligier points out. ■