



Cameleon and the French Crusader

A story of a French woman who knew nothing about the Philippines at 20, joined on a missionary trip to Aklan province in the Visayas, which has exposed her to a serious social problem. Privileged and sheltered, little did she know that the trip would change many lives.

Text by Agnes M. Abrau

When French national Laurence Ligier signed up for volunteer work in the Philippines while on school break, she saw an enormous need to help that eventually led to a new calling: starting a non-government organization that cares for sexually-abused girls, helping them overcome their ordeals.

That was in 1992, when she was only 20 years old and a law student at a law university in Dijon, France. The immersion program brought her to Aklan province, where she lived with a family in a squatter area under the auspices of a local missionary group called the Association Missionary of the Assumption.

"I lived with them, saw the hardship, and discovered there were many things these people needed. I experienced their struggles. Then the organization approached me if I could help them. I told them that I'm going back to France to seek for more aid and support and promised to be back," she said.

In France, Ligier explained to her parents that she wanted to help the abused girls, put up a center, and if she could, take a year leave from school to do volunteerism. Seeing herself as not qualified, she changed her course to learn about the rigors of running a center. She graduated Bachelor of Sociology and Anthropology with honors, then pursued a Master's in Management and Development with a specialization in Marketing and Development in Asia, all of these while continuously seeking for more aid that brought her to Belgium, where the government gave her a grant, giving her two thirds of the amount she needed to build a center. The remaining one third she was able to get donors in France.

Back in the Philippines, Ligier traveled around the island of Panay looking for a place to organize the center. "I met Mayor Jesry Palmares of Passi City, Iloilo. When I told him my need, he immediately offered the 3,000 square meter land in Passi where I can put up my organization," she said. Almost 15 years later, the center called Cameleon Association Inc. has expanded to 1.2 hectares that has been helping 900 girls

cope with the trauma and whose self-worth remain unsullied by the ravages done to themselves. A total of 410 of whom remain at the center.

"We call it Cameleon because chameleon is a reptile that changes its color depending on the environment, so like chameleon, we want to change the lives of the girls who are victims of violence and are abused. Cameleon is a place that will provide them with humanitarian aid they will need," Ligier explained.

Ligier worked with Zanzibar Circus France to help the girls come through their ordeals, using circus training as therapy for the girls. And for a few years now, she has worked with the prestigious Ecole National des Arts du Cirque, one of the major national circus schools in France. It's the same group that performed with few of the surviving girls who have experienced sexual abuse in their first show ever held in Manila in May and in Iloilo.

She is not someone who toots her own horn. "I didn't come here to save the world. Someone asked me to come here," she stressed saying that she was touched by the kindness of the community.

Cameleon is accredited by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and is the only organization that runs a facility, specifically for abused girls.

Ligier's efforts and that of Cameleon Association Inc. have been recognized locally and internationally. Last year, she received the Legion d'Honneur, the highest French National Award. She also received the Knight of the National Order of Merit given by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and the Award for Civi Spirit and Devotion by another French president, President Jacques Chirac.

While the issue of sexual abuse remains taboo and too horrible to confront, Ligier, a privileged foreigner who has no relation whatsoever to the Philippines, has not turned a blind eye to the survivors. ■

