Our Small Drop in the Bucket: Honoring the Life of a Peace Educator

by Theiline M Cramer

“Something’s happened... He’s dead,” rang out a tense, yet disarmingly calm, voice from the front of the van. In a mere moment, the din of our previously rowdy vehicle was reduced to silence as it continued to hurtle down the dark and winding turns of a lonely highway somewhere in Central Mindanao.

Or at least, that’s what I thought I’d heard over a dissipating chorus of 13 (that somehow fit into a van meant for ten) laughing voices. My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach and I twisted my ear to see if I could figure out exactly what was going on. The previously palpable elation of the group morphed into eerie silence, and we waited with eyes wide in the shadowy night, wordlessly wondering what exactly had happened. And it was as if I knew before the details were communicated back to me, that something very bad – something that couldn’t be undone – had occurred.

In order to understand the whole story, I’d like to take you back to the activities of the group – the participants of the 2015 “Challenges to Peacebuilding in Mindanao” course – of the previous day.

It was our first day in Central Mindanao. We were visiting the areas within and around the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the community of Pagagawan was our very first stop. Driving into the center of the country was a far cry from our arrival to Davao, the bustling capital of Mindanao. Little by little, the stores advertising Lechon, a Filipino pork specialty, disappeared while brightly painted minarets began to crop up as we continued down the lush, palm-lined roads.

We pulled up alongside a variety of rusted and paint-peeled trucks, parking next to a group of men, smoking nonchalantly and sitting in an arched semi-circle. We were to spend the day with the local municipal leaders, community members and key civil society leaders of the Pagagawan, nestled in the outskirts of the Maguindanao province. Many consider Maguindanao to be the heart of the Muslim community in Mindanao, though it is also the home of Christian and Indigenous People (IP) alike. Maguindanao manifests the dark underbelly of the economic inequity of the Philippines – for a myriad of complex reasons it is severely behind compared to the rest of Mindanao and the country as a whole.

As we piled out of the clunky van door, we were directed toward a large open-air barn-like structure and took a seat along two long gnarled wooden benches running parallel against the shed’s walls. There was a whiteboard at the end of the structure
with various organizational structures, posters and diagrams hung up behind it. Key community members sat around it – eyeing us, as we eyed them and filed in.

It was hot, stiflingly hot; sweat dripped down our temples and we made fans with our notebooks in a futile attempt to cool ourselves down. The barangay captain, equal to that of a small town mayor, stood at the front and began to introduce the situation of the community and the work they were involved with. All the while, a group of men were sitting around the periphery of the structure, just watching; as we posed questions to the other participants and community leaders. This was our first time interviewing a community and it seemed as though we barely had time to hit all of the points we would have liked to ask them about. While someone in our group posed a question, the predominantly male members of the Pagagawan group returned with answers and questions of their own. It was interesting to note the reaction to our big group of predominantly females: they wanted to know how old we were and if we were married, single or otherwise. There were a small number of local women present, but as we directed our questions to the local leaders, we hardly had time to directly converse with them and the women remained in the background throughout most of the meeting.

It wasn’t until a small man with crinkly dark eyes and a wide smile stood up that something changed. This man, in a bright green polo, introduced himself to us as Ruben K. Alameda and began excitedly telling us about his work with peace education in his community as the principal of a local Pagagawan school. He praised the work of the local NGO in supporting his school to implement peace education. Up until this point, my pet topic in these interviews had been peace education, so understandably my ears perked up and I began asking more questions.

He shared his feelings about peace education and how it came from his religious values, his spirituality as a Muslim. Alameda believed that teaching young students was crucial in spreading peace in his school and community. When we asked if his school had been declared a school of peace, he replied that it had not. He wanted outside recognition from the centralized Department of Education to acknowledge this important work. “Would it not be weird if we declared ourselves as a peace zone?” he wondered.

Alameda stated with animated hand gestures, “For three consecutive years, I have received educator excellence awards, primarily for my work with peace education.” He was working to fully incorporate peace education, with buy-in from teachers and parents as well as the adoption of conflict resolution techniques such as peace tables (where children sit around a table and discuss their differences) into his classes. He spoke proudly of how, as a Muslim, he strove to incorporate Christian teachers who travelled to work in his school.
from neighboring communities. And, as Alameda spoke, his colleague, one of these Christian teachers, smiled comfortably and nodded in agreement.

At the end of the meeting, I spoke with Mr. Alameda further and exchanged emails. He was very enthusiastic to hear that I was also a teacher and that I wanted to know more about his work with peace education. It was clear that he was an innovator and driven to push the boundaries of the conventional notions of education. He was someone that was eager to share his knowledge and make contact with other educators, to add to his own notion of peace and what it means to teach it.

Back in the van, I heard someone whisper, “The principal’s been shot, he’s dead.” The lights of the surrounding countryside became very dim and the blue-black of the nothingness outside of the window suddenly very noticeable. In fragmented bursts of narrative, the story of the principal’s death was communicated throughout the bus, in an odd telephone-game fashion of whispering from row to row.

Alameda had gone to the town of Pikit that morning. His son was away studying in the university, so the principal had driven to wire him money. Before he stepped out of his vehicle, an unknown person gunned him down. The principal bled out onto the seat of his car and died right there in the middle of the street, in broad daylight.

And for what reason? Professional jealousy. We were told that he had risen too quickly in the education world; he had angered just the right people with his accolades and accomplishments.

Before leaving for Maguindanao we knew the distant risks. We knew the stereotypes and the assumptions and we knew that any post-conflict area might suffer from its intended and inevitable share of violence. Yet this man hadn’t died because of the religious dimension to the conflict in Mindanao, he hadn’t died from an easy-to-identify terrorist attack or rido - spurred (clan based) violence. He had been shot because of his love for his work, in which he had expressed such pride. He had been shot because he stood out.

It’s hard not to look back on that day and romanticize the role of the principal. Realistically speaking, his death affected our group in a very superficial way. We met him for a few hours, in a situation that was admittedly uncomfortable for some of us a first time researchers. We weren’t his family; we weren’t his friends. We wouldn’t have to help his widow find a steady livelihood; we wouldn’t have to pay for his son’s university expenses. We wouldn’t be their shoulders to cry on, we wouldn’t provide trauma counseling. Yet, his death profoundly affected our group.

That night, in the van, the silence extended and morphed into a different way of thinking about how to look at the conflict in Mindanao. It shaped the rest of the trip and affected how I saw myself in this conflict. It affected how I saw the individuals that we interviewed. We were suddenly much closer to the fragility and violence in this region. The ubiquitous nature of guns was real. The violence and death that we had read about and asked about now had a face.

In an instant, the reality of where we were, what we were doing, became undeniably real. For the first time, despite the professionalism we intended to carry ourselves with, it was clear that we were immersed in something for which we may have been emotionally unprepared and ill equipped. Classroom lectures can’t create the feeling of being overwhelmed, out of your element, feeling that you shouldn’t be there, questioning whether you are wrongly dabbling in a subject that has everyday consequences unfathomable to nearly every person on that van. You question your commitment, your purpose, and your integrity.

The very next day we went to the town of Pikit, where he had been gunned down. We passed the very spot where he had been murdered as we continued to our various meetings that day. As busy as we were, he was in our hearts and minds, and we knew we wanted to honor him. We needed to honor him by continuing our project and our interviews. We had to move through the doubt and shock and fear that a killing like this can instill in all of us, and do our small part to highlight the work of Mr. Alameda and the many others working to bring peace to Mindanao.

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