

Social entrepreneurs

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

By BOO CHANCO

And so, Mr. Cruz, I did not stop being a journalist when I wrote about Tony Meloto and Gawad Kalinga. As a journalist I am committed to report on what is new and as a Filipino, on what is good for our country. I saw both in Tony Meloto and Gawad Kalinga.

I had written about social entrepreneurs in past columns. They are people who take it upon themselves to organize a solution to a social challenge. Social entrepreneurship is nothing really new as a concept. But it is understandably easily misunderstood.

There are those who would say that anyone who creates an organization to address a public good is a social entrepreneur regardless of whether it is for profit or not. There are those who insist anyone who claims to be doing social development work must have no other interest and should probably even take a vow of poverty.

I have always taken the view that the most effective social development workers are those who are social entrepreneurs in the more inclusive sense. They would have the motivation, stamina and determination of a for-profit entrepreneur, except that they have a goal in mind that is larger than themselves. They are able to mix profit and public service well so as make the social benefit they work for a continuing concern.

I bring these things up because I received a disturbing e-mail from a reader, a certain Lorenzo Cruz from San Francisco, California, who chided me for letting my usual journalistic skepticism down in writing about Tony Meloto of Gawad Kalinga. "Journalism 101," he wrote, "is not taking the person's press releases, self-promoting talk etc. as gospel truth."

Mr. Cruz lamented that my "recent column seems to suggest that Gawad Kalinga is the Tony Meloto Family Foundation. He is no Bill Gates. Tony Meloto is a salaried employee of Gawad Kalinga. A simple visit to the official website of GK shows that it is the social arm of Couples for Christ (CFC). It even shares the same offices in Greenhills."

He said other things about members of Tony Meloto's family that need not be repeated here. I think Mr. Cruz is one angry man who seems to have an axe to grind against Tony Meloto. I don't even know if Lorenzo Cruz is his real name. And I am tempted to dismiss his angry words as one more expression of crab mentality to be expected in any successful Pinoy venture. Still, I want to explain my take on Tony Meloto and simply put, I think of him as one of the more outstanding social entrepreneurs of our time.

The way I see Tony Meloto is simply, he saw a problem (lack of affordable housing for the poor) and he decided to do something concrete about it. He developed a concept, presented it to his organization (Couples for Christ) and using the marketing and management skills that earned him his living in the past, he came out with Gawad Kalinga.

I do not begrudge Tony from earning a living while doing this social development project. After all, there is a passage somewhere in the Bible where Jesus Christ himself said God's workers also deserve their compensation. If anything at all, I envy Tony in his being able to seamlessly merge his duties to his family with his life mission.

"There are millions of CFC/GK workers who have done more sacrifices and they do their work quietly, Mr. Cruz says. Tony Meloto could only agree. Tony goes on to explain that "while I am embarrassed by the attention, I have learned to deal with it if it means more people helping our country, more land donated, more houses, more schools, more volunteers — to help the poor out of poverty. I have no doubt that more of this type of good news will find their way to media, because the heroism of our people is like a light that should not be hidden under the bed."

And to assuage the suspicion of Mr. Cruz about Tony's ulterior motives, Tony declares that "I have no profit motive, no grand dream of personal greatness and I will never run for public office. I am just a 57-year old in search of my soul as a Filipino and a father who wants to help build a legacy of a beautiful, squatter-free, slum-free, first world country to my children together with many other parents who want the best for the next generation."

In fairness to his children, whose motives were also questioned by Mr. Cruz, Tony says "of my four children serving in GK, only Jay is receiving a modest salary for setting up GK in 43 calamity sites in Bicol. He left his life and his job in Southern California to do this. Anna, my eldest, left Nestle in 2004 a month before she was to be sent to Switzerland for training, to be a fulltime volunteer for GK. She does not receive compensation from GK. Wowie, our second daughter, also does not receive any compensation from GK. Camille, a La Salle graduate, is also a volunteer with GK and receives no compensation.

"As for Dylan, he's not only my son-in-law but a GK Partner that all of GK is happy and proud to have. To date, he remains to be the single biggest contributor for homes to Gawad Kalinga — he has built villages in San Jose Del Monte (Bulacan), La Carlota City, Concepcion (Tarlac), Isabel (Leyte), Maasin (Southern Leyte) and together with DSWD, helped fund 250 homes for Muslim communities in ARMM.

"He jumpstarted our work for food sufficiency and productivity with a substantial fund that is now providing livelihood to so many GK communities throughout the country. His greatest contribution, however, is the inspiration he has evoked in others, especially Filipinos abroad, and how those he inspired have translated their awakened feelings for the motherland in terms of direct material support for GK communities."

And so, Mr. Cruz, I did not stop being a journalist when I wrote about Tony Meloto and Gawad Kalinga. As a journalist I am committed to report on what is new and as a Filipino, on what is good for our country. I saw both in Tony Meloto and Gawad Kalinga. I saw more than a social entrepreneur. I saw a successful social entrepreneur. That, I thought, was worthy of being written about. And if he gets compensated for doing good, so much the better. That's a model career young people should aspire for.

"My hope," Tony Meloto wrote me, "is that we can rise together as a people and see the good in each other." That's exactly my hope too. And if Lorenzo Cruz is proven right about "the other side" of Tony Meloto, I would still be happy to have supported Tony Meloto the social entrepreneur, for the very visible results he has delivered to our people. Petron in Guimaras

I saw what I saw in Guimaras. I saw the signs that warn one and all not to swim or eat fish from there. And if it is true that Petron is doing follow through work there, it is not widely known. At the very least, Petron has failed to inform its various publics, including this columnist, that they have not abandoned Guimaras. During my time in Petron, failure like this isn't going to look good in my annual performance appraisal. Wonder how it is now.