

## RHODA A. NOCUM

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*Dangal ng Bayan Awardee, 2006*



**R**esearch says that when a person loses vision or has a special disability, he already loses 80 percent of his learning capacity. But Rhoda Nocum, special education (SPED) teacher for 17 years, has defied this claim.

Nocum was an agriculture education major who taught elementary science before she handled children with special needs. *"Wala po ito sa plano ko,"* recalls Nocum. But the summer of 1992 changed her, and that of her future stewards', life when she attended a training program for SPED teachers sponsored by the Department of Education and the Resources for the Blind Inc. (RBI).

Soon after training, she returned to Bagong Silang in Caloocan, eager to hold a class for the visually-impaired. Bagong Silang is a thickly populated resettlement area; most of the residents are poor. Due to poverty and what they deem as debasing physical disabilities of their children, parents in their community are reluctant to send their

kids to school. Apart from uncooperative parents who felt that sending their disabled children to school was just a waste of time, people around her were also unsupportive.

Said her co-teachers *"Kung ang mga dilat na dilat ang mga mata ang hirap turuang bumasa, mga nakapikit pa kaya"*. The discouraging situation and dispirited comments failed to dampen Nocum's firm resolve to teach those with special needs. *"Kaya rin ng mga batang may kapansanan ang kaya ng ibang mga bata basta mabigyan lamang sila ng pagkakataon at sapat na panahon,"* she explains.

That schoolyear, she started holding classes for seven partially blind children, aged 9 to 15. It was the first time for these kids to enter the classroom. She started the SPED classes without added compensation while teaching science in the regular class.

Mark Lester, 14, a visually-impaired student of Nocum, says, *"Magaling magturo si Ma'am. Matiyaga, malinaw magturo at pinapaliwanag niya ang mga pinapabasa sa amin.* With 15 other visually-impaired

students, he studies daily under Nocum, from 12 noon to 2 p.m., after which he will attend the regular school as a grade six student. Mark proudly discloses that Nocum had also taught them how to operate a talking computer.

*"Seven years na po naming SPED teacher si Ma'am Nocum. [Mark Lester] can now read and write Braille. Magaling din siya sa Math using abacus,"* said Thelma Ete, Mark Lester's mother. *"Malaki pong tulong sa amin si Ma'am. Bukod sa natuto po ang anak ko, naturuan din niya kaming harapin at tanggapin ang buhay may kapansanan ng aming anak,"* she added.

*"Four years na namin siyang kakilala, mabuting guro siya. Itinuring niya na parang mga anak ang mga bata,"* said Merlinda Fallore whose daughter, Maricris, has been a student of Nocum. Her daughter's right eye was inflicted with cataract while the left eye became totally blind from measles. *"Tinutulungan niya kaming lumapit sa RBI foundation para makapag-aral ang anak ko. Alam niya na [mahirap] ang kalagayahan namin. Ni singko wala siyang tinanggap na pera mula sa amin. Minsan siya pa nga ang nagbibigay,"* she added. Maricris now knows how to read using Braille.

Year after year, more students enroll in the program, the hearing-impaired included. Soon after, the SPED program was integrated into the school's academic offers with more teachers now designated for the SPED class. Eventually, in 1998, a building for the new school program in Bagong Silang was constructed. *"Unti-unti, namulat ang kamalayan ng mga tao sa aming paaralan na kahit may kapansanan ang isang bata, [siya] ay may karapatang makapag-aral [din] tulad ng ibang mga bata,"* said Nocum.

Today, Nocum is already a full time SPED teacher. She was promoted from Teacher I to Master Teacher II. In June 2007, Nocum also started teaching under the Transition Program for the intellectually-impaired which include those with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and autism, so that despite their situation they would still be capable to land jobs.

Her competence and passion earned for her the *Dangal ng Bayan Award* from the Civil Service Commission (CSC) in 2006 in recognition of her exemplary behavior and conduct in the years of service as SPED teacher. *"Isang malaking bonus po ang makatanggap ng parangal mula sa CSC. Hindi ko po akalain na ang isang simpleng gurong tulad ko ay maging isang awardee ng CSC,"* she says.

Had Nocum been after financial gain, she could have gone to the United States as a SPED teacher and receive an average pay of P150,000 a month, given the demand for her expertise abroad and a ready recommendation letter from the SPED Program Director of PNU. But she decided to stay on to serve the multihandicapped visually-impaired students in the Philippines. *"Masaya po ang marangyang buhay kapalit ng pagtuturo sa abroad ngunit panandalian lamang iyon. Isa pa, walang ibang totoong magmamahal sa mga Pilipino kundi kapwa Pilipino rin,"* Nocum said.

When asked what she feels now after both the hardships and the awards, Nocum says she is so fulfilled that many special children are now able to attend school after she started the SPED program. *"Wala sa materyal na bagay ang tunay na kaligayahan kundi nasa pagtulong natin sa kapwa nating mga nangangailangan." •*

