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One library at a time

National Book Store Foundation in partnership with international bestselling author Mitch Albom opens the first disaster resilient DRY Library in Palo, Leyte

by Angelo G. Garcia July 3, 2015

Many people saw the devastation of super typhoon Yolanda after it hit Eastern Visayas in November of 2013. Most structures were flattened to the ground by the strong winds and raging waters of the storm surge. This included the small library of Pawing Elementary School in Palo, Leyte. Its library was just the size of regular classroom but it housed important books the students needed. After that fateful day, everything was gone, not a single book saved.

"It was totally washed out. It had more than 5,000 books and everything was gone," recalls Pawing ES principal Loreta Gulariza.



Images by NOEL B. PABALATE

After one year and seven months, the school of 761 students is still struggling from book shortage. Books were donated to the school, coming from various organizations, but not enough for its entire population. The good news is, the school has a new library that opened two weeks ago, housing almost 2,000 new books and a space students can safely study in.

"When we opened after the storm, the books that we had then were only kept in cartons, that was our library. Now, we have an actual library that students can use in their studies," Loreta says.

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This is no ordinary library, however, because it contains a special collection of books that are donated by international bestselling authors like Stephen King, J.K. Rowling, Stephen Chbosky, Suzanne Collins, John Green, John Grisham, Sophie Kinsella, James Patterson, Amy Tan, Michael Chabon, among others. Some of the copies are even from the authors' personal collection and most of the books are even signed!

Called the DRY (Donated Reading for Youth) Library, the idea of building these libraries came from New York Times bestselling author Mitch Albom. The author visited the Philippines in February of last year and saw the damage brought by Yolanda. What he saw during that time devastated him but likewise inspired him to make a difference. So he called out to fellow authors and started to raise funds. His author friends immediately heeded his call and donations started pouring in, from books to money. He pledged \$160,000 needed for the construction of the libraries and as of today, 90 percent of the amount has been achieved. Through the National Book Store Foundation and Mitch's A Hole in the Roof Foundation, they aim to build 10 libraries in Eastern Visayas, in areas hit by the super typhoon, which include Ormoc, Eastern Samar, and Iloilo.



SAFE AND SOUND Habitat for Humanity Philippines built a library that is disaster proof and is very conducive for learning.

Mitch personally visited Pawing ES during his short visit in February and chose the school as one of the sites of the project.

"I have never been more impressed with the character or strength of the people I've met around the world as when I visited Tacloban," Mitch says in a video message. "What I saw there devastated me yet inspired me with the love of learning that went on these tattered areas after the storm."

The award-winning author is scheduled to return to the Philippines for the inauguration of the 10th DRY Library. Mitch has been hands-on with this project, overseeing every detail. He says that he is proud that his name is associated with this project because of the difference it has and will create. He also reveals that his love for the country is so great that he mentioned the Philippines in his upcoming book due this fall.

"I remember saying that I needed to do something about it," he says. "From that sort of comment to the idea of maybe I will call some of my friends in the States who are

writers; maybe we can get books donated, donate some money, and build some libraries. The maybes of life that turned into realities are what make life worth living and this is one of those cases," says the Tuesdays With Morrie author.

What makes the library totally different from others is its structure. Built by Habitat for Humanity Philippines, it utilizes the monolithic dome design that has been proven to withstand strong winds and earthquakes. It likewise is much more conducive to learning, it's made of concrete for better insulation, it has vent on the roof and multiple windows that maximizes air flow, and it's painted white to keep the building cooler during hot days. With hope, Habitat for Humanity Philippines CEO and managing director Charlie Ayco explains that people should begin to realize the importance of this kind of structure in a world that is quickly changing.



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“People has to think differently, because we live in a different time. Hopefully, we start with the library, then we build bigger structures,” Charlie says. “First, students would get curious, why is this building different from the rest? Then it begins the process of discussion. You can talk about climate change, it’s no longer business as usual, we have to talk differently. What’s important here is to create awareness. You cannot have the same old solutions to new problems.”

The two-dome structure is divided into two spaces, an area for younger students with storybooks, comfortable sitting, and colorful puzzle rubber mats. The other space for older students that has the more sophisticated collection of books from the authors with titles such as, among others, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *Insurgent* by Veronica Roth, Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* series, and of course Mitch Albom’s bestselling titles like *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *For One More Day*, and *The First Phone Call from Heaven*. The library also has its own toilets.



National Book Store managing director Xandra Ramos-Padilla with students of Pawing Elementary School

The National Book Store Foundation intends to finish all construction of the libraries early next year. It is actually the foundation’s first time to build a library from the ground up. Previous library projects only required the foundation to refurbish existing structures and filling them up with furniture and books. They are open to doing this more of the need arises.

“This is our first time to build from the ground up, usually we just fix the inside of an existing structure,” says NBS managing director Xandra Ramos-Padilla. “If we see the need (to construct libraries), why not? Whatever we can do, we will do.”



A student reads a Mitch Albom classic.

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