

SEI@30: Recognizing champions, partners

By **Stephanie Tumampos** - October 22, 2017



In Photo: Dr. Nestor Acala (second from left), a former scholar of the Department of Science and Technology's Science Education Institute (DOST-SEI), receives a certificate of recognition from DOST-SEI Director Dr. Josette Biyo (left) and Science Secretary Fortunato T. de la Peña. With them is Acala's wife, Reca Arbolonio Acala.

Story & photos by Stephanie Tumampos

Almost everybody was misty-eyed after watching the video of the hardships he had early in life. The sixth among 11 children, he had no *baon* (school lunch), but this did not deter him from going to school. He even had to walk long distances having no money, too, for transport fare.

And like National Hero Dr. Jose P. Rizal, he patiently studied his lessons at night with the aid of a *gasera* (gas lamp), or a candle, when his mother would dissuade him from consuming the kerosene from the lamp.



Sen. Paolo Benigno A. Aquino IV delivers his message during the 30th anniversary celebration of the DOST-SEI.

No, this was not your usual afternoon telenovela. It was the life of Dr. Nestor Acala, a former scholar of Department of Science and Technology's Science Education Institute (DOST-SEI).

Born from a poor rice-farming family in Marawi, Acala never knew his life would change.

"I was born poor and we had a hard time finding money to feed ourselves, what more for education," Acala said in Filipino in his testimony about his life struggle and success during the 30th

anniversary of the DOST-SEI last month at the Philippine International Convention Center.

The event, a recognition program for the institute's partners, was the third of the three-day celebration with the theme "Service. Excellence. Innovation."

Scholarships transform lives

Acala's life was transformed when his teachers urged him to take the DOST-SEI scholarship when they saw his potential.

"When I took the scholarship exam of the DOST-SEI and passed it, I had the chance not just to go to college but also had the means to help my family back home" through the allowance he had received.

He took his undergraduate and masteral studies in mathematics at MSU-Marawi, and eventually, a doctoral degree. Now with a PhD in mathematics, Acala is an assistant professor at the same university.

"Ayaw kong lagi lang kaming nakabuntot sa kalabaw [I don't want us to be forever tailing the carabao]," Acala said in his testimonial during the anniversary. Nobody among Acala's 10 brothers and sisters have graduated from high school. His father reached just Grade 4, while his mother is illiterate.

"Our family's difficulties became instrumental to make me strive to study hard," he said.

Being a former scholar and having earned a doctoral degree, he added that he could have worked in a private company to earn more.

"But I see my former situation among the students in Marawi," whom he wanted to help. "I hope they will also be given a chance just like the chance given to me."

He said: "I am proof that giving a scholarship to even just one student of a poor family breaks the chain of poverty." One of his nieces he has helped send to college has already graduated; thus, she is currently helping her family.

"Because of the DOST-SEI scholarship," he added, his "outlook on success has changed." He is now less materialistic and puts more premium in helping others.

The story of Acala—whose experience as a scholar was the highlight of the celebration—is just one of the thousands of scholars who have successfully achieved academic excellence and success through the aid of the DOST-SEI in its various undergraduate and graduate scholarship programs.

“The DOST-SEI has been at the forefront in building our future leaders. Some of them are actually leading their respective fields right now. To date, we are proud to have produced almost 40,870 scholar-graduates through the various undergraduate and graduate scholarship programs the institute offers,” Dr. Josette Biyo, DOST-SEI director, said in her speech.

Reached 95 percent

The DOST-SEI scholarship services began when former President Corazon Aquino signed Executive Order 128 on January 30, 1987, as part of the reorganization of the then-National Science and Technology Authority.

Biyo said they plan to have 7,000 to 8,000 new scholars by 2018. “But more than the number, it is the high quality of these graduates that we are most proud of,” she added.

She said the DOST-SEI has reached almost 95 percent of the country in getting in touch with students to obtain a scholarship, and will try to realize the “100-percent goal” in the nearest time possible.

In his speech, Acala said he “will volunteer to reach the rest of the 5 percent Filipinos” so that, like him, “their lives can also be changed through the help of the DOST-SEI.”

He added his dedication toward paying it forward will continue by helping in giving more opportunities to Filipinos in obtaining DOST-SEI programs, such as scholarships.

3% of GDP for R&D

Biyo lamented the sad fact that “we see our neighbors in Southeast Asia who have started to eclipse us [Philippines] as we suffered severe decline across many economic sectors.” These could be attributed to low research and development (R&D) spending, brain drain and other factors.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) said, “Sustainable Development Goal 9 calls on governments to promote sustainable industrialization and innovation by ramping up spending on R&D and increasing the number of researchers.”

The Unesco has recommended 3 percent of GDP as the target for the budget for R&D for every country. In the past years, the Philippines has only 1 percent or less of GDP for R&D budget. The pending House Bill 4581, called the Science for Change Program Act, is proposing to have R&D spending of 2 percent of GDP by 2022. The proposed law aims to help accelerate science, technology and innovation development for the country’s goal to keep up with current global technology and innovation.

Biyo added that the sustainable strategy is the institutionalization of the science and technology (S&T) Scholarship program “that will strengthen our competencies, help us solve pressing problems and improve our innovation potential by producing quality people in multiple fields.”

Science Secretary Fortunato T. de la Peña agreed with Biyo, and said in his message that the SEI is not only supporting scholars but “its programs help in promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics [STEM], and in innovating for STEM education and teaching it has also produced outstanding results that oftentimes can’t be seen in the usual metrics.”

Recognizing S&T champions, partners

The DOST-SEI has achieved many of its goals with the help of its partners, who have helped contribute in promoting its programs and in informing the public of its services and accomplishments.

Biyo said the handing of recognition to SEI’s champions and partners was just a simple gesture of gratitude, a “give back,” to the organizations and individuals who have helped in fulfilling its mandate of producing a critical mass of scientists and engineers, from the Filipinos whose lives have been impacted positively due to the many programs they co-implemented.

The awardees came from the private, academe, non-governmental groups, the media and government sectors. Recognized as Scholarship Champions were Science Secretary de la Peña, Science Undersecretaries Dr. Rowena Cristina Guevara and Dr. Carol M. Yorobe, and former SEI Directors Dr. Ester Ogena and Dr. Filma Brawner.

Partner Individuals were Alicia Asuncion of the SEI Scholarship Division, Dr. Aletta Yñiguez of the University of the Philippines (UP) Marine Institute, Dr. Rogel Mari Sese of the Philippine Space Science Education Program, May Pagsinohin of the Philippine Foundation for Science and Technology, Dr. Segundo Joaquin Romero Jr. of the Ateneo de Manila University, Creselda Doble of Ateneo de Manila University, Dr. Geraldo Petilla of the National Research Council of the Philippines and Regina Paz Lopez, managing director of ABS-CBN Foundation Inc., and journalists Angelo Palmones of *d3RH*, Lyn Resurreccion of the BusinessMirror, lawyer Melvin Calimag of Newsbytes.ph, Melly Tenorio of the **Philippine Broadcasting Service** and Ruby Shaira Panela of Rappler.

For the Partner Institutions, recognized were organizations that have served in the science education landscape. They were the AdMU, De La Salle University, University of San Carlos, National Bureau of Investigation, Land Bank of the Philippines, Department of Education-Division of Taguig City/Pateros, Mariano Marcos State University-College of Teacher Education, Bicol University-Regional Center for Science and Mathematics Education Development, Department of Education (DepEd) Ilocos Region, DepEd Central Luzon, DepEd Bicol Region;

DepEd Western Visayas, DepEd Northern Mindanao, Indigenous Peoples Education Office-DepEd, Resources for the Blind Inc., UP-Diliman, Central Luzon State University, Philippine Normal University, Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, West Visayas State University, UP-Marine Science Institute, DOST-Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration, Mathematical Society of the Philippines, UP-Los Baños, Commission on Filipinos Overseas, BPI Foundation Inc., Hari Foundation Inc., Goethe-Institut Philippinen, Goethe-Institute Thailand and Philippine Science Centrum.

More opportunities for S&T in the country

The push for S&T in the country would not have been realized without the efforts of people behind science policies.

Sen. Paolo Benigno Aquino IV, the keynote speaker, emphasized the role of S&T in the country as it strives for development.

Aquino highlighted the science and education policies and reforms that have been passed and others on their way for passage into law.

“We will ensure that we hit our development goals,” Aquino said.

Aquino added that the free tuition law on tertiary education in state colleges, which became a law in August and will be implemented in 2018, will help the DOST-SEI in funding more students who are less privileged but have the potential to be future scientists and engineers who could further help the country.

Biyo said, “Thirty years have breezed and our experiences only fuel us even more.” The experiences, learning and forged partnership “will make us stronger and even determined to bring service to the people in the name of science education.”

For de la Peña, the human resources development program of the DOST-SEI “has immeasurable impact,” noting that the scholars were not the only ones who have been supported by the department but also their respective families, such as in the story of Acala.

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