

Damag Agri

A woman's profile is shown in a purple top, looking upwards. Her hair is styled with a crown of purple and white flowers and green leaves. A tattoo of a tree with roots is visible on her neck. The background is a textured, greenish-grey pattern.

Kababaihan sa Agrikultura
I PINAGMAMALAKI KA NAMIN

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Juana

IKAW AY KAHANGA-HANGA

Tuwing buwang ng Marso, ipanagdiriwang ang kahalagahan ng mga kababaihan sa iba't ibang sector kabilang ang agrikultura. Ang mga kababaihan ay hindi lamang tumatayong mga ilaw ng tahanan. Bagkus, ang kalinga at pag-aaruga ay kanilang ibinabahagi sa loob ng tahanan ay iyo ring makikita maging sa pagsasaka. Lalo na sa mga panahong tulong nila'y kinakailangan para sa kanilang pamilya at komunidad, si Juana ay iyong maaasahan.♥



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DA sustains production support efforts to cushion impact of El Niño

Remaining steadfast in addressing the possible negative impact of the prolonged dry spell being experienced by some areas in the region, the Department of Agriculture in Ilocos set-off its Regional Disaster Risk & Reduction Management Office (RDRRMO) for the tightened monitoring of reported El Niño affected areas.

DA-RFO1's Field Operations Service in the region is pro-actively addressing the concerns of the affected farmers as it now started validating these reported areas and positioned various interventions in the form of irrigation facilities and equipment like pump and engine sets as well as giving several inputs such as hybrid and registered seeds and the rehabilitation of small-scale irrigation facilities like solar power irrigation systems, diversion dams, and small farm reservoir.

Sustaining these efforts is the continuing info dissemination about the El Niño phenomenon using quad media in support to the planned briefings and planning workshops and regional summit to be conducted that shall be participated in by the Local Government Units of the four provinces together with the DA's partner-agencies.

Based on the partially reported drought affected areas in the region consolidated by the RDRRMO as of Feb. 20, 2024, a total of 1,174.95 hectares were affected. These areas located in the provinces of Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, and Pangasinan, were planted with rice, corn, legumes and lowland vegetables.

Rice which is one of the most vulnerable crops, registered a total of 1,072.98 mt loss in production valued at Php59.75 million. A total of 573.21 hectares production area was damaged

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DA convenes LGU partners for consultation, assessment on aggie performance in the region

Municipal and city agriculturists from the provinces of Pangasinan and La Union were gathered on separate schedules and venue for a consultation and assessment meeting to discuss agri program updates of the various banner programs of the Department of Agriculture and be updated on their respective province's production performance output for CY 2023.

The meetings were held simultaneously for Pangasinan and La Union participants on March 6 and 7, 2024 at the DA-PREC, Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan and at the DA-RFO I Conference Hall in San Fernando City, La Union respectively.

Marking the change in production performances in various agricultural products particularly on rice, corn, high value crops and livestock in CY 2023, the Philippine Statistics Authority shared a report on how well each province fared in their contributions to the production growth of some major commodities of the region.

For Pangasinan, production

increment was recorded for palay at 1.04%, corn with 0.73%, and mango at 1.28% increase in production. However, decrease in production were recorded for ampalaya at 3.89%, tomato at 3.85%, eggplant at 6.43%, and peanut at 2.66%.

For the Province of La Union, production increment was recorded at 1.53% for Palay, 0.99% for Corn, 1.01% for ampalaya, and 11.80% for tomato while decrease in production were reported for eggplant at 3.08%, peanut at 8.21%, and mango at 9.58%.

Meanwhile, Ms. Leah P. Coloma, Regional Rice Focal Person shared a report of the Rice Banner Program where rice production performance of Region 1 increased in 2023 with an average yield of 4.84 metric tons per hectare as compared to 2022 with an average yield of 4.68 metric tons per hectare, keeping the region as the top 4 largest contributor of rice production in the national scene with 1,990,286.88 metric tons production last year.

Corn production yields at

594,405.16 metric tons with Pangasinan producing 62% or 371,563 metric tons of the total production of the region, keeping Region 1 within the top 5 major corn producing regions in the country.

In livestock and poultry, provinces shared an increase in production of hogs by 29.06% and chicken by 5.52% in 2023 as compared to 2022 with a decrease in the production of goat by 5.26% and duck by 11.31%.

To aid production growth in livestock and mitigate the effects of animal diseases such as the ASF (African Swine Fever) for hogs, and the Avian Flu for poultry, programs such as the Unified National Artificial Insemination Program (UNAIP), National Livestock, Poultry, and Dairy Feed Enhancement Exploration and Development (NLPD-FEED) Program, Maintenance and Upgrading of Government Stock Farms, and the Animal Health Improvement Program (AHIP), are continuously implemented with expected better results for 2024.

Various programs such as the irrigation, fuel, fertilizers, and stipends were also discussed along with the requirements in acquiring said benefits implemented to help lift the weight off from partner farmers who are the backbone and reason for the different DA programs.

The Municipal and City Agriculturists Consultation and DA-Program Assessment conference is quarterly held to assess the states of the different banner programs and jointly strategize to better help farmers and fisherfolk where concerns are raised and numbers are improved for the strengthening of partnership of the Department of Agriculture with the hardworking Local Government Unit partners.

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affecting around 900 rice farmers in the region.

For corn, a total of 583.30 hectares was reportedly damaged (131.82 totally damaged and 65.53 partially damaged) from the provinces of Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur and Pangasinan affecting a total of 1,288 corn farmers or equivalent to 982.29 mt in production valued at Php23.69 million.

Lowland vegetables as well as legumes, fruits and other high value crops were also affected by the drought which registered a total of 18.44 hectares with only 0.5 hectares declared as totally damaged from the province of Ilocos Norte owned by a total of 102 farmers with a volume of production loss totaled to 61.01 mt valued at Php3.5 million.

Meanwhile, to provide updates on the effects of El Niño or the prolonged dry spell, here are some information about it, its effect in the agri-fishery sectors including some necessary actions that farmers may consider in dealing with the possible negative impacts of this phenomenon.

DA-RFO 1 kicks-off 2024 women's month celebration



The Department of Agriculture Regional Field Office 1 (DA-RFO 1) has kicked off the month-long celebration of Women's Month 2024, with the sub-theme "Lipunang Patas sa Bagong Pilipinas, Kakayahan ng Kababaihan Patutunayan". This theme aims to highlight and harness the full potential of women and girls, showcasing their capabilities in contributing to national growth and development.

Led by DA-RFO 1 RED Annie Bares, the kick-off event also included a cheque awarding for the 2023 outstanding rural women regional winner, Ms. Lilian Guillao, who also shared her inspiring testimony.

As part of the 2024 National Women's Month celebration, the Kadiwa ni Ani at Kita was also launched with around 15 women and youth agripreneurs from the region participating. This five-day activity provided them with

a platform to sell a variety of affordable agri-fishery products at very affordable prices.

In addition to these activities, the month-long celebration will also include training sessions on value-adding, food processing, and labeling of agricultural commodities for women. There will also be sessions on Serbisyo para kay Juan at Juana-Good Animal Husbandry Practices and Good Agricultural Practices cum provision of services, and Basic Life-Support-Child and Infant Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation Training. These sessions are designed to help close the gender gaps and enhance their capability in providing products and services and further equip women with the skills and knowledge they need to excel in their respective fields.

Adding to the activities was the participation of DA-RFO 1 employees in the RAGE-1 fun walk held on March 8.



Php 30M agri-trading center to rise in Bataac

Addressing one of the most crucial parts of the food value chain which is marketing, the Department of Agriculture, in partnership with the Provincial Local Government Unit of Ilocos Norte and the City Government of Bataac, inaugurated on January 17, the Php30 million worth of trading center located in Brgy. Billoca, Bataac City, Ilocos Norte to be known as the Ilocos Norte Agricultural Trading Center (INATC).

The project will serve as a central hub that is expected to meet the marketing requirements of farmers, promote agricultural and agri-based products of the province and help lessen transport expenses of farmers in bringing closer their products to consumers.

Funded by the Department of Agriculture, the trading center not only aims to improve the current marketing systems as it reduces traders and middlemen's involvement in the marketing operations but also ensures

higher income of farmers by 15 to 25 percent.

Situated in a 10-hectare land near the Bataac City Public market donated by the Bataac City Government as a counterpart to the project, the trading center is expected to be completed by August 2024.

Of the P30 million project cost, P26 million was allocated for the construction of the building, P3.5 million for the hauling and delivery truck and P500,000 for the purchase of marketing equipment such as heavy-duty digital weighing scale, plastic crates, plastic pallets, jack lifts and other equipment.

Ilocos Norte Governor Matthew Joseph Marcos Manotoc, in his message during the event, recognized the importance of the project to the farming community in Ilocos as it will not only help farmers become better entrepreneurs but to ensure that they are protected and prioritized through

the project. "If this project doesn't help farmers, it doesn't work," he said.

Meanwhile, Bataac City Mayor Albert Chua and SB Member Mark Christian Chua both expressed their gratitude to DA-RFO I and the Provincial Government of Ilocos Norte for choosing Bataac as recipient of the project recognizing how the project would help bring socio-economic benefits to their constituents.

Likewise in her message, DA-RFO I Regional Executive Director Dr. Annie Q. Bares also thanked the partnership and support of the PLGU and MLGU in realizing the project. She encouraged the proper use and management of the facility so that it could fully serve its purpose in helping lessen the post production expenses of farmers, eliminate unnecessary marketing layers that reduces income of the food producers, and create a competitive marketing for Ilocos Norte's local agricultural produce.



PGS Pangasinan Philippines Inc., DA-RFO1 awards 1st organic certification to inspected farm

The PGS Pangasinan Philippines Incorporated (PPPI), along with DA-RFO1 Regional Executive Director Annie Q. Bares, awards its first PGS Participatory Organic Certification (PGS POC) on January 8 to Ms. Marlene L. Inasoria, owner of the J.M.S. Crops Farm.

Located in Brgy. Warey, Malasiqui, Pangasinan, the organic farm spans an area of 2,000 square meters.

As inspected by PPPI, crops cultivated in Ms. Inasoria's farm includes hot pepper green (green and red), turmeric, tomato, eggplant, string beans, pechay, okra, and taro.

This certification attests that Ms. Inasoria and her listed commodities comply with the current Philippine National Standards for organic agriculture, the internal standards of PGS Pangasinan Philippines Inc., and other applicable regulations for organic agriculture.

The certificate is valid until November 2026.

PPPI is the first accredited Participatory Guarantee System Organic Certifying Body by the Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Agriculture and Fisheries Standards (DA-BAFS) in Ilocos Region.

Receiving its Certificate of Accreditation in May 2023, PPPI is authorized to provide organic certification services for crop and animal production to individual farmers of Pangasinan who wants to avail organic certification.

RPAB1 OKs proposed Rosales slaughterhouse

Members of the Regional Project Advisory Board (RPAB) in the Ilocos Region approved the proposed establishment of a slaughterhouse in Rosales, Pangasinan on Wednesday, January 10.

The subproject has a proposed funding of Php 81,871,831.55 under the Philippine Rural Development

Project Scale-Up (PRDP SU) and will be established in Brgy. Cabalaoangan Norte, Rosales, Pangasinan.

"Iyong slaughterhouse namin noong pumunta kami, hindi na po kaaya-aya gamitin. Hindi na po safe at maganda," shared Rosales Mayor William Cezar.

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Proposed Alcala onion cold storage joins other RPAB-approved SPs for PRDP Scale-up funding

The proposed construction of an onion cold storage in Alcala, Pangasinan, received approval from the Ilocos Regional Project Advisory Board (RPAB) in a meeting last week, February 14th.

The cold storage has a total project cost of Php193.6M, with 80% sourced from World Bank loan proceeds and 20% funded by the Department of Agriculture and the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Alcala.

The subproject (SP) was proposed by the LGU of Alcala to address constraints in the value chain for onions in the municipality. Some of these include small-time farmers' lack of access to onion cold storage, the high cost of transporting their produce to the storage facility, and expensive storage fees in privately-owned cold storage plants.

According to the feasibility study conducted for the SP, the nearest storage facility to the area is in Bayambang, Pangasinan, which is 9.2 km away. Others are in San Fabian, Pangasinan, approximately 52 km away, and in San

Jose, Nueva Ecija, which is 63 km away. Alcala farmers would need to travel these distances if the nearest establishment cannot accommodate their harvest.

Meanwhile, in the results of the expanded-vulnerability and suitability assessment (E-VSA) on onions, Alcala ranked 3rd among other municipalities in Pangasinan in terms of area harvested at 355.1 ha and volume of production at 5,526 MT in 2018. These results show that Alcala has a competitive position for onion production within the province.

E-VSA is a GIS-based PRDP tool used to assess the suitability of a specific commodity in a particular area, combined with its vulnerability and socio-economic conditions.

Once established, the cold storage is expected to directly benefit 640 onion growers, including the Alcala Onion Rice Corn Multi-Purpose Cooperative, an existing group in the area supported by PRDP.

Ilocos Region is currently the 3rd

onion producing region in the country.

Establishment of cold storage facilities all over the country is among the top priority agenda of DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel to help farmers gain higher income from their produce.

Present members of the RPAB during the meeting include DA-RFO 1 Regional Executive Director Annie Q. Bares, DA-RFO1 RTD for Operations Dennis I. Tactac, DPWH Representative Engr. Vilmaflor Gascon, DILG Local Government Operations Officer Mr. Pedro D. Gonzales, DAR Pangasinan Provincial Office Representative Atty. Tristan Juveñino U. Adviento, RAFC Chairman Mr. Benjamin Y. Campañano, DENR Planning Division Chief Mr. Bernard B. Quiros, and DTI Assistant Regional Director Merlie D. Membrete.

The RPAB consists of seven member-agencies, chaired by DA-RFO1. The board reviews and approves subprojects (SPs) at the regional level and provides advisory and guidance to improve project performance.



Ilocos region takes home five awards in PRDP North Luzon cluster general assembly

The Philippine Rural Development Project - Regional Project Coordination Office 1 (PRDP-RPCO1) on Tuesday, took home seven plaques of awards in appreciation of its outstanding performance in 2023.

The RPCO was recognized as the most efficient region in I-PLAN accomplishment, achieving a 78% accomplishment rate based on the I-PLAN target versus output.

Another plaque was awarded in honor of its achievement for having the highest number of provinces

with climate features integrated into commodity investment plans (CIPs). CIPs serve as the basis for identifying necessary infrastructure and enterprise development subprojects that can be funded by PRDP with counterparts from the local government units (LGUs).

Ilocos was also recognized as the most compliant region in procurement planning using the World Bank – Systematic Tracking of Exchanges in Procurement (WB-STEP) web portal.

A special award was given to the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the RPCO for having the highest number of reports generated and submitted.

Meanwhile, the Province of Ilocos Norte was awarded a certificate of excellence for its exemplary efforts in building collaboration and partnerships.

The awarding ceremony was held on February 27-28 in Subic, Zambales.

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With the sporadic cases of African Swine Fever still existing in the region, the establishment of the facility will assure trading of safe and quality meat.

“It will be an income-generating para sa bayan. Hindi lang po bayan ng

Rosales makikinabang diyan kundi pati na rin ang mga kalapit na bayan,” said Mayor Cezar.

Upon completion, the slaughterhouse is expected to benefit more than 9,000 farmers and fisherfolk.

RPAB members present at the

meeting were DA-RFO1 Regional Executive Annie Bares, DTI Regional Director Grace Baluyan, DILG representative Mr. Pedro Gonzales, DAR representative Ms. Lorensa Sevilla, RAFC Chairman Mr. Benjamin Campañano, and DENR representative Mr. Bernard Quiros.



DA, ATI and partners converge for organizational workshop to workout AFFREDN

Goodbye RRDEN and RAFEN, hello AFFREDN!

Agricultural Training Institute's Center Director, Mr. Rogelio Evangelista thus enthused in his message during the Agriculture and Fisheries Resources, Research and Extension for Development Network (AFFREDN) Organizational Workshop held today at the DA-Regional Field Office I (DA-RFO I) 5th Floor Conference Room in San Fernando City, La Union.

A meeting organized by the DA-RFO I's Research and Development Division led by Dr. Gilbert Rabara, several members of agricultural research agencies and institutions including the academe and the local government units in the region were apprised on the general provisions of the converge Regional Research for Development Network (RRDEN) and the ATI's Regional Agriculture and Fisheries Extension Network (RAFEN) now called the AFFREDN.

Aimed at harmonizing programs and services to make bigger impact in modernizing the agriculture and fishery landscape through development research and innovations, the AFFREDN likewise ensure the proper generation, dissemination and scaling of agri-fishery technologies, thus eliminating duplications of research proposals for endorsement to funding agencies and institutions resulting to the maximum utilization of resources.

Introducing the AFFREDN, Dr. Rabara shared the composition at the national level which shall be led by an Undersecretary or Assistant Secretary (as designated by the DA Secretary) with the Bureau of Agricultural Research (BAR) and ATI Directors as Co-Chairs. Included as members at the national level are the DA families with R4D&E mandates, the Philippine Association of Research Managers and the Philippine Extension and Advisory Services Network.

In Region 1, the Regional AFFREDN shall be chaired by the DA-RFO I Director, co-chaired by the DA-

RFO I Regional Technical Director for Research & Regulations. The Vice-Chairman according to the guideline shall be the RTD for Operations and the Co Vice-Chairs shall be the Chief of the Research Divisions and the ATI's Center Director. Identified as members in the regional AFFREDN are the Field Operations Division, regional research and experiment stations, state colleges and universities, provincial LGUs, ATI accredited private extension service providers, association of ATI-accredited learning sites for agriculture civil society organizations as well as business enterprises that involves in R4D&E programs and activities.

As initial convergence activities of the AFFREDN, several meetings are on set this year with the P1 million fund support from the DA-BAR which include among others the screening and reviews of proposals as well as capability buildings and technology promotions and investment to work on possible partnership and collaborations by among the AFFREDN member-partner agencies.



1st EdSecom meeting held; economic development projects discussed

Keeping the 43-Economic Development Sectoral Committee (EDSECOM) member-agencies updated on the programs and projects for endorsement to the Regional Development Council (RDC), the Department of Agriculture in Ilocos, as the Committee Head, hosted the 1st Quarter Regular EDSECOM meeting at the DA-RFO I 5th Floor Conference Room, San Fernando City La Union today, March 8.

An activity that aims to harmonize and complement effectively the resources as well as capacities of each of the member-agencies while drawing out solutions for every issue and concern in the implementation of proposed and on-going development projects and interventions, the meeting also served as an avenue to discuss matters relative to resource allocation, monitoring and project evaluation.

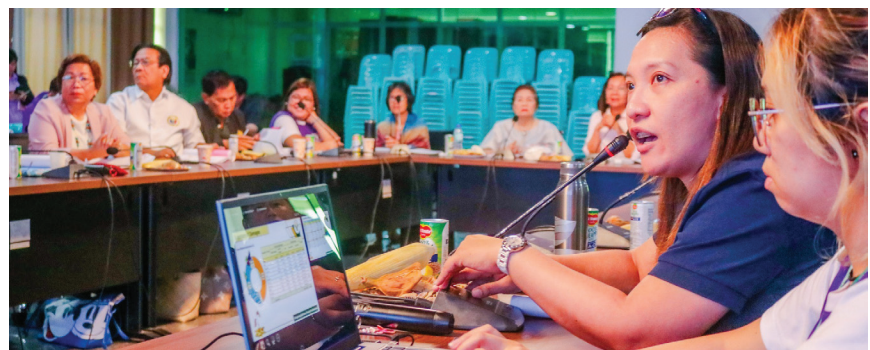
Presided over by the Committee Chair, Regional Executive Director of DA in Ilocos, Dr. Annie Bares, the meeting provided an avenue to discuss the PRISTINE project or the Promoting Research and

Innovation to Strengthen Transformation of Industries and Enterprises of the Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) in Batac, Ilocos Norte in partnership with the Department of Trade and Industry, the 3-year infrastructure project of the Cooperative Development Authority, the legislative agenda on salt industry, the product innovation of various Japanese medium and small enterprises, status of the El Niño Mitigation Action Plan as well as the digital payment updates of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas.

Of the topics discussed, the PRISTINE project presented by Dr. Bjorn Santos of the

MMSU through DTT's Regional Director, Dr. Grace Falgui-Baluyan requested for the immediate endorsement of the Committee to the RDC.

However, National Economic Development Authority Region I Director Ireena Ubungen suggested for the conduct of a small group meeting prior to the endorsement to further discuss details of the project with the inclusion of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) while the 3-year infrastructure project of the CDA was immediately endorsed by the Committee.





La Union's YFC winner 'finds luck in duck'

Emerging as one of the young entrepreneurs in Ilocos Region is Ms. Geneva Gañalon, 24 of Purok 7, Sipulo in Bacnotan La Union with her G's Duckery Food Production and Processing enterprise.

A licensed Bio-Systems Agricultural Engineer, Geneva finds her calling in duck production enterprise towards the end of pandemic in 2022 when she happened to watch a Tiktok video about a Chef cooking meat binagoongan.

Bagoong, a common condiment in the Ilokano dishes made of shrimp paste is abundant in Ilocos. Inspired by the tiktok video, Geneva's inquisitive mind then run and thought of using meat duck to be a perfect pair of the



binagoongan that she watched in the Tiktok.

Inspired by the many health benefits of duck and the potential business enterprise that the duck binagoongan could provide for her family, Geneva started to plan how she will be able to start the business in mind.

Financially challenged at that time, the YFC or the Young Farmers Challenge program of the Department of Agriculture (DA) came around just in time for Geneva as she came across on the announcement about the program sometime in 2021 through the DA's facebook account.

The DA's YFC program is a project that provides financial grants to encourage young farmer entrepreneurs and business enthusiast to practice farming business, may it be into production, processing or agri technology innovations.

Without second thought, she immediately inquired about the

program and passed the necessary documentary requirements.

However, Geneva faced failure on her first attempt to qualify for the program due to her incomplete documentary requirements.

But this did not dampen her spirit and took another chance to propose her agri-enterprise for the second time. This time, she succeeded and was qualified to present her business proposal on duck production and processing.

Armed with confidence and determination, the business plan that she presented paved the way for her to make it in the regional finals after topping the provincial level in 2022.

Here, she took home P50,000 under the provincial level and P150,000 in the regional level which she then used as start-up capital in her business.

From the initial two heads of

duck that she bought from a farmer in her barangay, Geneva is now raising more than 300 heads nested in a 1,500 sq.m. production area.

In raising her ducks, Geneva employed various natural farming practices especially on feeding her ducks. Azolla, rice bran, golden snail or kuhol, now considered as destructive pest in rice plants are now being used as a good source of protein and other nutrients for her ducks. Black soldier flies were reared in her farm for their eggs as they are also good feed ingredients for her ducks.

True to her business plan, Geneva did not only venture into production but also in processing with her duck binagoongan.

Introducing her duck binagoongan in the community is quite challenging for Geneva. Ducks, unlike chicken is quite unfamiliar in the community as it is only known for "pulutan."





However, with her patience and persistence to have a free taste of the product during trade fairs she attended, the consuming public got curious of the taste and learn to accept the product and continued on to patronize Geneva's duck meat binagoongan.

Demands on her product became high and the famous hotel like Shangri-La also signified to order but Geneva could not yet meet the required volume demand with her current production.

In fact, Geneva is now producing 25-300 bottles of her duck binagoongan per month (equivalent to 40 heads of ducks slaughtered) while orders via online and big hotels and restaurants are also being accommodated. Sumago Philippines, one of the exporters of Filipino products and a key partner of the Department of Trade and Industry started ordering for her products for export, pending the issuance of the

Food and Drug Authority's (FDA) certification.

According to Geneva, the FDA certification can only be issued upon completion of the production and processing facilities which she has proposed under the Up-scale Program. With the proposed P3 million project cost, Geneva also sought funding requests to the LGU-La Union and initial discussions were made with regard to the proposal.

While waiting for the approval of the proposed project, Geneva is doing her processing activity at the Don Mariano Marcos State University's FDA-certified shared facility for free located in Rosario, La Union, quite far from her place in Bacnotan.

To continually improve her products, Geneva busied herself in attending various training programs on product innovations while acquiring more knowledge and skills

in business enterprising in the various seminars, workshop that the DA, Department of Trade and Industry, DMMMSU and the Department of Science & Technology are conducting.

In return, she shared these business skills and information for those aspiring entrepreneurs in La Union as she was often invited as presenter and Trainor in various fora and seminars locally.

Indeed, young entrepreneur Geneva has now come a long way in her journey of becoming a successful producer and processor of duck in La Union.

With all these triumphs that she is now reaping, she is most grateful to the DA, particularly the Agribusiness Marketing Assistance Division because through the YFC Program, she is now realizing her dream of being her own boss.

Four species, one bait: Young agri-challenger **HOO**KS in success

To build a bridge or to wade the waters below, 27-year-old civil engineering student Roy S. Uson of Bongalon, Labrador, Pangasinan, found himself in a choice of which path to take in life. Roadwork or reels? Construction or crab? His heart chose the latter, but it led him to both. A pond of passion and a dam of dreams, Uson built his venture in the waters that raised him.

Uson is the only son of a fisherman whose primary source of income was the fish he watched over as a tenant and caretaker in Pangasinan. Both Uson and his father saw opportunity and income in aquafarming, and so they were driven by the currents of desire in managing their own fish farm, believing that new technology and innovative systems of aquaculture farming would make a difference that could help his fellow fish farmers increase their income, all the while harnessing their hometown's richness in space and bodies of water.

Tapping into the community's rich resources, Uson utilized the locale's abundance of water and availability of production inputs for fish farming. Starting from a 200-square-meter crab-fattening fish farm, the Uson Polyculture Farmstead





Aquafarm flowed smoothly into expanding to a whopping 2.3-hectare fish farm with two grow-out pens measuring 15m by 20m by 3m and containing not just one, not two, but four different species: milkfish (bangus), rabbitfish (samaral), white shrimp, and crabs. These were raised together in an aqua-polyculture system, living symbiotically, which allowed Uson to have four different means of cash flow within a singular space.

As easy as shooting fish in a barrel, Uson's fish farm netted Php 345,000.00 in gross sales and a total of Php 240,000.00 in net income from

his crab and rabbitfish enterprise last December. For March this year, he estimated a harvest with a gross sale of Php 321,000.00 and a net income of Php 243,000.00. As of the present, the Uson Polyculture Farmstead Aquafarm is raising 2000 pieces of milkfish, 40,000 pieces of rabbitfish, 150,000 pieces of white shrimp, and 5000 pieces of crab. And there goes the first catch: income, but it doesn't end there.

Aside from profits, Uson also wanted to help his fellow locals. He caught business partners in local buyers and exporters from the Magsaysay Market of Dagupan City,

as well as restaurant owners and individual patrons. His commodities have a limited supply; however, being high-value species, his products remain in high demand, making it easy for him to sell them at an acceptable price. Not only does he look out for his customers, Uson also paved the way for fellow fisherfolk to adapt and easily replicate his polyculture technology, serving as a model that others can imitate and even improve upon. After all, they are not competitors, just the same fishermen boating in the same waters. From patrons to fisherfolk, to the locals he hired in his enterprise, Uson caught another big fish with one bait:



giving back to the community.

The currents seemed to be within his favor as came flowing his way was the Young Farmers Challenge Program. Armed by his dream of helping his parents and owning his own business, Uson cast his net of chances, catching the win in the YFC program as well as essential entrepreneurial skills and technological advances in his industry. With a total grant of Php 230,000.00 garnered from being the provincial and regional awardee of the YFC program, Uson expanded his farm and invested in product development like processing crabs into crab paste and drying rabbitfish.

His next plan is to hook in a rabbitfish hatchery section on his farm and to net the fishing market of the entire Region 1.

In that fishing line, Uson stated that the YFC program gave him hope for not only becoming a successful entrepreneur but also a responsible son who could provide for his parents. Now doing what he loves in aquaculture, Uson continued his studies in engineering, making him realize how fortunate he is to be one of the program's grantees, allowing him to catch his third and fourth big fish: helping his family and himself.

For a final reel, Uson

encouraged his fellow youth and all the aspiring agri-preneurs in the country to be courageous in venturing into agri-business because the Department of Agriculture, especially the Young Farmers Challenge Program, is continuously providing support and assistance right from the starting point of a business down to marketing and promotion of commodities.

To build a bridge or to wade the waters below, in the aqua polyculture scene, fisherfolk would ask, is it too much to ask for both? Through innovation, hard work, and determination, Uson raised four species in one farm, just as he hooked four successes in one bait.

DREAMS, DROUGHT & DIGITALIZATION

Cracked soil and inflated prices of agricultural commodities, the future of farming was looking grim for the power couple Ar-Jay A. Ballaco (26) of Bacsil Bangui, Ilocos Norte, and Aisha Uddon (26) of Pagudpud, Ilocos Norte, whose dreams of establishing their own farm are in dire jeopardy of drying out. .but not all is without hope.

Compassion in their hearts and a community to change, the couple used their separate fields to till the soils of success. Using Ar-Jay Ballaco's degree in Computer Science to integrate technology into farming, and Aisa Uddon's background in social work, their goal of establishing their own farm and utilizing technology to ease the burdens of fellow farmers was sprinkled into existence through the "Natural

Vegetable Farming Automated Water Drip Irrigation System."

This power couple advocates for growing crops naturally and automatically through digital agriculture, and so, their enterprise utilizes its solar-powered automated water drip irrigation system to produce natural grown variety of leafy vegetables such as lettuce and pechay. The device has built-in WiFi access, a soil moisture sensor, a soil temperature sensor, a data monitor of moisture and temperature, and an on and off switch for the water pump and irrigation via cellphone control, allowing easy access whenever and wherever. With this device, farmers no longer need to irrigate their crops manually, as the device automatically waters the soil according to the

moisture level that is being detected by its sensors. This not only decreases labor costs, the device also sprinkles more assurance that nutrient depletion, water wastage, will not be a problem, leading to the growth of the farmers' crop production and profit.

Blessings rained their way through their device, which they shared among fellow interested farmers. Offering installation services and the equipment itself, the couple ensured that innovation was not gatekept, and rather offered to farmers at a lower and more affordable price than that of those available in the market.

Water as their ally, the drought drying their dreams seem to turn away, but the weather is ever-



changing. Ballaco and Uddon found themselves in the middle of a brewing storm when a lack of finances held them back. What of their dream farm now? Fortunately for them, the digital world was on their side. Just as their moisture of hope is losing, life's sensors triggered a spray of opportunity when a batchmate mentioned the Young Farmers Challenge Program, followed by Ballaco's discovery of the Department of Agriculture's Facebook post. Wasting no time, he immediately inquired.

The sensor rang up alarms, and the couple accepted the challenge just a day before the deadline. With nothing to lose and everything to win, the Natural Vegetable Farming Automated Water Drip Irrigation System was watered with a Php 230,000.00 grant price. Showered with promotions, market linkages, trainings, seminars, financial, and motivational support from the YFC Program, their dream farm grew into fruition, improved further by their automation ideas that turned into

reality.


No longer drying out in the drought, their enterprise is as green as their hope in the future of automated agriculture. Spreading the word and sharing their innovation, their irrigation device has reached the attention of schools around Bangui and Pagudpud as they plan to transform their farm into an agricultural learning site in the near future, as well as connecting to other farmers in embracing the digitalization and automation of agriculture.

Nowhere to grow but up, their dream farm is slowly coming to fruition. With a fully constructed farm house and greenhouse equipped with solar panels, a deep well, and water reservoirs, plus the installed automatic water drip system, their 1,260-square-meter farm production area yielded a total of Php 13,000.00 in sales in just the first and second weeks of their harvesting and marketing period through pick-and-pay from individual

customers. They are projecting an estimated PHP 40,000.00 after the first month of harvesting. The couple is now planning to establish a vermicomposting section on their farm, and they will also be stepping forward to product development, which involves processing their produced pechay into pechay kimchi and chips.

In the ever-changing weather of life, there will always be harsh sun rays and dark clouds threatening to call rain. One must be ever-ready to hold on when the drought has come, to wait for life's sensors, and to take the chances when they come flowing. As a last sprinkle of encouragement from this power couple who weathered through, they reminded that farming and agriculture are not low-class jobs; they are careers that not only give profit but are a way of helping the community via food security, and this is what made them thrive as one of the awardees blessed with rains by the Young Farmers Challenge Programs.





Dream it, and do it: A young farmer's small dream put into a successful reality

Mergene Ferrer, a business administration graduate, found himself at a crossroads, deciding between an office job and venturing into farming. Inspired by his late father, a farmer, and the hardships of life, Mergene dreamed of owning his own business one day. Thus, he chose the path less traveled by young generations today, and embarked on a farming journey, seeing it as an opportunity to develop their land.

In 2017, Mergene started his quail production, but the unexpected arrival of the pandemic forced their operations to halt. It was a setback, but Mergene was not the type to give up easily. Hope was reignited when he learned about the Young Farmers Challenge (YFC) Program from a friend's Facebook post, a program of the Department of Agriculture to encourage young people of today to embrace agriculture as a business career.

Although he didn't make it to the first batch due to incomplete requirements, he didn't give up and

didn't lose hope. In 2022, he submitted his business model canvas and emerged as one of the provincial awardees. Thus began the humble beginnings of Kahit Munti Integrated Farm, his enterprise.

Kahit Munti Integrated Farm is a 3,000 sqm area farm situated in Brgy. Nilombot, Mapandan, Pangasinan. With a cash grant of P50,000 as initial startup capital, he set out to realize his vision. His luck continued when he later got chosen as a regional winner, receiving an additional P150,000 cash grant. He used these funds to develop his farm further. The following year, he was again one of the lucky contenders to win in the YFC upscale and received a P300,000 grant.

With the cash grants, Mergene's innovation shines through in his diversified farm where he grows not only pinakbet vegetable but hydroponically grown lettuce, free-range chickens, and processes calabash into various products such as calabash fruit drink, juice, tea, and wine and even fabricate incubators that he also sells. He turned an underutilized local resource, calabash into a thriving business, helping his community not just by buying the fruit from them but also those suffering from various ailments, as calabash is also known as miracle fruit.

Driven by his do-it-yourself spirit and a passion for innovation, Mergene crafted his own range of incubators, offering quality products at an affordable price ranging from P6,000 to P180,000, depending on the capacity. From small-scale to commercial, his made-to-order creations found homes as far as Caticlan in Aklan province.

Through the Young Farmers Challenge, he not only received financial aid but also gained recognition on a national scale as it helped him expand his business and broaden his market reach, catapulting his products into households across the Philippines. He now sells his products through the Kadiwa stalls, online platform like Shopee and Lazada,

as well as their Facebook page.

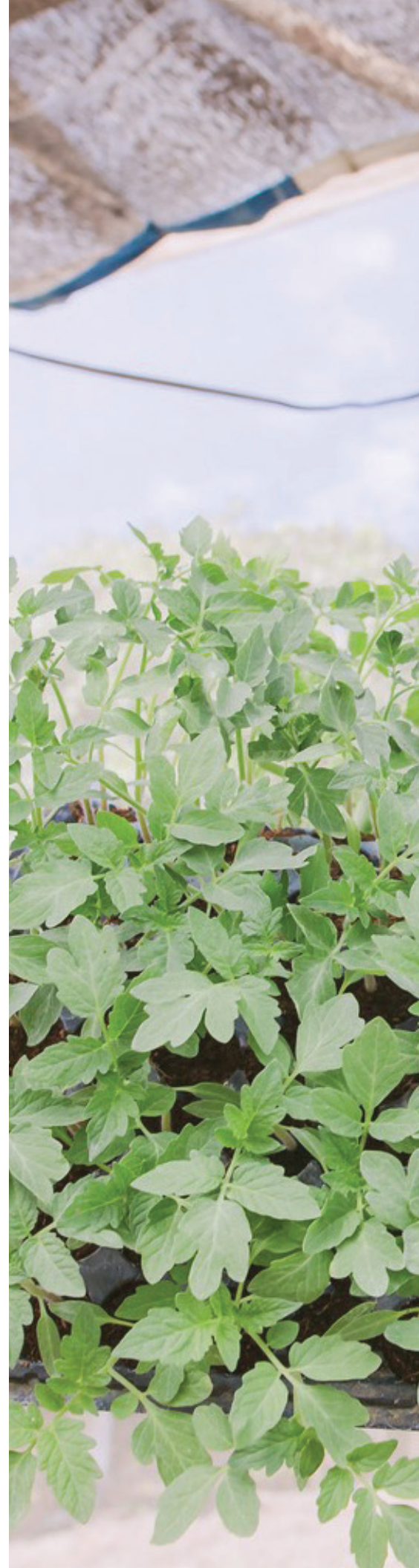
Today, Mergene's farm yields him a monthly income of P40,000 to P50,000 thousand pesos. Yet, his ambitions soar higher as he envisions his farm by 2028 as an agricultural learning site for young farmers like him, a leading technology innovator, advocate of integrated farming, and enterprise development hub towards the promotion of sustainable and profitable agriculture in Region 1. He also hopes to export his products internationally someday.

Now as he awaits the completion of the processing area he is constructing, he is working towards getting his products approved by the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) and is collaborating with the Department of Science and Technology for product labeling.

Though his agribusiness journey faced setbacks due to the pandemic, Mergene's passion for agriculture never faltered.

Reflecting on his journey, Mergene acknowledges that the Young Farmers Challenge program has been instrumental in his success. Without it, he might have been an employee instead of an entrepreneur and a business owner. The program not only helped him establish his business but also provided a stable source of income for his family while allowing him to spend time with them every day. His business also creates jobs in his community, helping others in the process.

From a dream of having a small farm with various crops to making it a reality - that's the story of Mergene Ferrer's integrated farm! His journey serves as an inspiration to many, proving that with determination, innovation, and a little help, dreams can indeed become a reality.





Instant dinengdeng: A trio's tale to the taste of home

An adventure as that of young adult novels, three friends: Franz Justin B. Dancel (21), Efanna Felice D. Casil (21), and Althea Victoria A. Cainglit (21) from Ilocos Norte opened their doors on the path to success by bringing the CUPSD Instant Dinengdeng to the table. Past lessons behind them and the strive to move forward, strap in for their story of taking the taste of northern tradition to every home.

The dinengdeng is one of the key dishes in the Ilocano cuisine. It is comprised of different easily-grown vegetables that one can find in their own backyard and with the addition of the bagoong isda, it is a healthy yet tasty signature dish worth bringing to the table in a matter of seconds. This is the driving inspiration of the trio to introduce the CUPSD Instant Dinengdeng, a freeze-dried product that needs only hot water to transform into a fully cooked dish. Paired with a good old cup of rice, CUPSD offers an instant hearty meal of the northern region.

As Bachelor of Science in Agriculture majors, a trio of friends, Dancel, Casil, and Cainglit, joined hands to put their skills and knowledge to the test, taking on the call of the Young Farmers Challenge of the Department of Agriculture.

Urged and supported by the faculty of the College of Agriculture, Food, and Sustainable Development, or CAFSD—of which their product name, CUPSD, alludes

to—at Mariano Marcos State University, these friends set out on a journey to create something that will reach the masses as a serving of culture in a cup.

“It was two birds with one stone,” stated Efanna Felice D. Casil when asked why they decided to embrace the opportunity at the Young Farmers Challenge. According to her, the idea was to fulfill the goals of the faculty as well as to start their own livelihood as young adults. True enough, backed by the encouragement of their peers and mentors, these three 21-year-olds forged through their plan for a business centered on agriculture to not only add experience as new-age agriculturists but also, to help contribute as young adults who are starting to stand on their own feet.

“Opportunities come and go,” Franz Justin B. Dancel emphasized. Rare are those that open the door when chances come a knocking; however, not only did they answer the call of the Young Farmers Challenge, they also stepped out of their comfort zones, paying the toll with blood, sweat, and tears, to create their product, further challenging themselves by changing from their freeze-dried selves to a fully made, warm dish they can be proud of. As Althea Victoria A. Cainglit would have it, “We want to prove something for ourselves.” And prove it they did.

While the Instant Dinengdeng can be served in a matter of minutes, the journey before its success was not so instant. Like every story, the trio first had their fair share of struggles. Unlike their







product, which needs only hot water and a few minutes, their process was filled with time, trials, and tears. From the inconsistency in raw materials, their academic schedule, the process, the correct taste, to the secret recipe, ‘instant’ is a word that cannot be used to describe their conflicts. Yet, the trio did not give up.

One of the lessons they learned was patience, the realization that not everything can be rushed. Finding the perfect formula was an arduous process these young agriculturists had to wade through, especially when pressure, time, and weaknesses were against them. It took analysis, careful inspection, and outsiders’ critique for them to figure out what works, and what will work even better.

While in some stories, the individual differences would be the breaking points of the main characters, their trials only enforced the strong bonds they already have. Through communication and understanding, the trio learned to use each other’s strengths and make up for each other’s weaknesses, that though their fields of agriculture differ, they managed to incorporate their separate knowledge into the product. Like ingredients of a dish that are completely different yet go well together, this trio of friends found their groove and strived to move forward because they are not done yet.

The adventure is still in play with the trio continuously improving their product. Down the road of research and development, these three friends are still finding ways to perfect their instant dinengdeng before they officially launch it to the public.

Addressing concerns such as expiration dates and nutritional value, the product is continuously improved every day that the time to serve it on the public’s tables is drawing even closer. Soon there will be patents and partner farmers toward an easier flow of production as well as a way of giving back to the community.

They have found a formula that works, the next step is to make it better, and for them, there is nowhere else to go but perfection. As marked by the words of Efanna Casil, “Papunta pa lang kami sa masayang part.”

The story continues to unfold as the trio continues on, embarking on a journey that will change not only their lives but of those around them. Now facing the test of time and more challenges, three friends, Franz Justin B. Dancel, Efanna Felice D. Casil, and Althea Victoria A. Cainglit, carry on along the roads beyond their comfort zones, walking the trails to bring the taste of the northern tradition to every home.





From employees to entrepreneurs

Veberly Jubilo and Frederick Uyaan, a young couple from Balaoan, La Union, were once employed by the government and a private company, but amidst the pandemic, they made the bold decision to resign from their jobs and return to La Union to venture into mushroom farming. With a strong belief in the potential of agriculture and a vision to bring about change in their farming community, they established Vel Seirra Integrated Farm on September 7, 2020.

Originally known as La Sierra Mushroom Farm, their farm started

small with just 100 fruiting bags of fresh oyster mushrooms. The couple saw an opportunity when they came across the Young Farmers' Challenge program on Facebook, which offered start-up capital to young individuals interested in agriculture or agribusiness. They seized the opportunity by entering their mushroom farming enterprise and started crafting their business model canvas and necessary documents for the program.

With determination and hard work, Veberly and Frederick progressed through the competition, receiving cash grants

that they put back into developing their mushroom farming business. Their efforts paid off as they emerged as provincial and regional winners and were among the top 15 finalists at the national level in the Kabataang Agribiz Competition of the Department of Agriculture. In addition, they were also one of the three winners in the Regional YFC Scale-Up category.

As novice entrepreneurs, the journey of Veberly and Frederick was not a smooth one, as they encountered challenges such as the adverse effects of climate change on their production volume, and the



unfamiliarity of their local community with oyster mushrooms.

Nevertheless, they saw these challenges as an opportunity to educate their community and introduce them to the benefits of oyster mushrooms. The couple started introducing various processed mushroom products and even offered free tastings within their neighborhood to change people's perceptions. Gradually, they gained acceptance and support from their community.

With their teamwork, Veberly and Frederick overcame these hurdles and received assistance from various entities, including the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Trade and Industry, provincial and local government units,

the Agricultural Training Institute, and DMMMSU-ATBI. Through this support, they were able to enhance and expand their farm.

To expand their market presence, they participated in trade fairs and Kadiwa to showcase their products. Their efforts yielded results as oyster mushrooms became popular locally, resulting in increased orders from consumers. As their farm grew, they utilized online platforms like Lazada to expand their market reach, allowing them to deliver their products to places such as Palawan, Davao, and other parts of Mindanao.

Their success did not end there. The couple's innovative mindset and willingness to experiment led them to diversify their product offerings. They started producing

and selling processed mushroom products such as mushroom nutriwine, mushroom chili garlic oil, mushroom alamang, mushroom kropek, mushroom chicharon, mushroom tempura, mushroom dinakdakan, and mushroom tocino. They also delved into rabbit farming, poultry production, vermicomposting, and even onion production – a first in their area. They now have four types of onions: red and white onions, spring onions, and lasona, all of which are well-suited in their area. This diversification not only increased their income but also contributed to the sustainability of their farm.

In their mission to transform the farming system and assist fellow farmers in discovering alternative income opportunities, the Uyaans also include microgreens that can be grown in small



spaces and strawberries, which are under research to assess their feasibility in Balaoan.

Their farm currently serves as a learning site accredited by the Department of Agriculture - Agricultural Training Institute, facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and technologies with other farmers. They have become mentors and advocates for sustainable agriculture, inspiring both young and old individuals to explore the potential of the sector.

Despite facing social challenges and personal struggles, the Uyaans persevered, improving the quality of their products, expanding their operations, and providing livelihood opportunities to their community. Starting from scratch, their entrepreneurial spirit and efforts

began to bear fruit as they witnessed their mushroom farm grow with the help of the YFC Program.

Today, Vel Seirra Integrated Farm boasts more than 5,000 fruiting bags housed in a concrete structure, with an additional 2,000 fruiting bags sold to other mushroom growers each month. The couple has also invested in equipment like manual and electric baggers, as well as buildings like growing house facilities, a receiving area, and a training area.

From their initial 100 fruiting bags to a flourishing enterprise generating a monthly gross income of P50,000 to P70,000, the couple is now helping their community, albeit not permanently, but providing livelihood opportunities to out-of-school youths, mothers, 4Ps members,

and relatives who wish to earn and learn.

As they look forward to the future, the couple envisions Vel Seirra Integrated Farm as the leading producer of fresh mushrooms and fruiting bags in Region 1 by 2028. They also aspire to make their farm a model within their municipality, inspiring other young entrepreneurs to venture into the field of agriculture.

In the midst of the global pandemic, Veberly and Frederick Uyaan courageously dared to dream, took risks, and ultimately reaped their sweet rewards. The name “La Sierra,” which translates to mountain ranges, encapsulates the couple’s journey - a challenging climb towards a deeply fulfilling achievement. Truly, success is within reach.

Side by side: In storms and in sunshine

For better or for worse ...

It was the year 2000; twin typhoons had just left half of the Philippines in disarray. Houses blown away, trees uprooted, and hopes taken as another storm rushes toward Luzon. All over, there was nothing but devastation as Florence Mendoza, with her husband, Ferdinand Mendoza, looked around their mango farm—or what's left of it. Their livelihood, their source of income, just gone.

The dark clouds still loom over the Mendoza couple when the hit of debt and misfortune came to Ferdinand's head, causing his illnesses to flare. Again and again, they were hit with harsh rain and rough winds, problem after problem, one loss after the other in their mango orchard. To get up every morning was a chore, and to keep fighting felt like an upward battle. . . one Florence and Ferdinand fought against all odds.

In sickness and in health. . .

Starting from the bottom once again, Florence resold fruits and vegetables in the market to get by while Ferdinand, ailed with diabetes, high blood pressure, and enlargement of the heart, still stayed by her side, and she, with him. Together, determined to rise back up again, the routine trudged day by day. One day, Ferdinand noticed something: that all the fruit seeds were simply rotting away in the markets, going to waste. With an idea in mind, Ferdinand asked for those unwanted seeds he later planted in a nursery. From those seeds sprouted what would be the couple's first ray of sunshine after the storms.

Ferdinand found his healing through his ever-striving wife and the plants they grew from the ground-up. Serving as his exercise and therapy just as much as his livelihood, Ferdinand played an active role



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in nurturing their seedlings. Florencia, aided by the Department of Agriculture, planted ten seedlings of lanzones in their 1.6-hectare land. Every day, they tended to their trees, making sure that everything was natural and healthy. This time around, they were determined to brave the storms. To further encourage himself from the breakdowns and the past hindrances, Ferdinand had bravely said, “Dapat dito na ako yayaman.” Compost beneath the land, the past behind, endless possibilities ahead, and them together, side by side, they took on the challenges of the world.

It took them two years to feel the sunshine that warmly shone over their lands. Eventually, plants grew, flowers bloomed, and fruits bore. Rambutan, guyabano, and lanzones, Florence saw more blossoms and profits under their new organic blueprint. This included buying cow manure from fellow farmers and relatives, helping others as they grow for their organic farm. With the support of the Department of Agriculture, especially in giving compost apart from the one their farm already produces, they were able to grow abundant harvests, as if the clouds of

their past hardships had simply been blown away.

For richer, or for poorer . . .

Storms still came, but through organic farming, they were able to keep going. Miles different from their past livelihood of spraying fertilizers on their mango orchard, Florence attested that even their two years of organic farming yielded better results than their seven years of mango farming due to everything being natural and healthier. They sold



their harvests through the Kadiwa stall in a local mall paid for by the Department of Agriculture. It was not long before they were challenged by the PGS, or Participatory Guarantee System, a system in which small farmers or fisherfolk are certified in engaging in organic agriculture.

“Kaya ko kaya?” Florencia asked herself when faced with the opportunity. But after all they’ve been through, why on earth would they stop now? In a whirlwind tale, Florencia’s Farm was unexpectedly visited by Dr. Marvin Quilates, the Agricultural Center Chief II of DA-RFO1, giving her no time for preparation at all as she was not even there, only her husband. But this only goes to show that there was no need for manipulation, and they had nothing to hide when the Department of Agriculture ascertained the farm’s purely organic ways. This paved the way for a certification from the PGS that Florencia’s

Farm is indeed organic.

The accreditation not only served as a testament to their organic way of farming but also as a mark that this couple was willing to share their success with other farmers. Members that practice organic farming share experiences amongst each other. The goal is to not only reach the people of the City of San Fernando but also in other municipalities. “Kung paano ko ginawa, mga natutunan ko sa PGS, ituturo ko rin sa kanila,” affirmed Florence Mendoza, willing to pass on the rays of sunshine that saved them from their storms.

From this day forward . . .

While content with the blessings from their organic farm, Florence and Ferdinand Mendoza still have big dreams for their farm. Aside from rambutan,

calamansi lanzones, and guyabano, they also started planting avocado, little by little, growing toward their goal of having every fruit-bearing tree available, and if chances sprinkle some rays of light on it, they are also planning to add pili-nuts.

The organic farm was their rise from adversity; while the trees grew and fruits bore, they found recovery and healing in the healthy ways of organic farming.

Thankful for the DA-RFO1, the City of San Fernando, PGS, and ATI, Florence and Ferdinand Mendoza swear by organic farming with the line, “Lalaban pa rin tayo, dito lang tayo sa organic.” Holding hands and determined, they vow to face the world standing on organic ground, side-by-side, in storms and in sunshine.

Dear Ursula – the lovely owner of Arwana Mountville

Upon knowing that we will be visiting your farm, to be completely honest, I immediately thought of the fictional character from Disney's Little Mermaid. The Agriculture Office representative mentioned that you were living alone in this mountainous part of the city, and I keep thinking that you might have similarities to the Ursula I knew of—the villain. Perhaps, you were lonely, grumpy, and somewhat difficult to communicate with.

Upon reaching your lair filled with huge trees - some of which I couldn't even name - various crops, seeds, livestock, and some cobwebs, the ambiance somewhat felt eerie. Would you be like the one I've been picturing in my mind? An evil sea witch? I mused.

But meeting you at first sight, I already knew I was wrong.

You were a woman of smiles. With those sparkling round eyes and a cheerful voice, you warmly welcomed every one of us. Those lines in your face seemed to tell a story of someone who often expressed gratefulness and awe. You were also a great storyteller.

The complete opposite of the Ursula, I thought of and known by many.





Knowing Ursula

In her productive years, Ursula worked in Bahrain as a maid, and simultaneously served as a tutor to a rich family's house not until the Gulf war happened in 1990-1991. "Bumabagsak ang mga missiles doon," she recalled.

She had wanted to go home during that period, but as life was immensely difficult for Overseas Filipino Workers back then, her employer wouldn't let her go unless she financed her own plane ticket going home. Left with no other choice

but to endure, Ursula stayed until her contract ended in November 1991.

But three years after going home, a stroke hit her. "Akala ko mamatay na ako. Binigyan ako ng Diyos ng pagkakataon para mabuhay muli," she shared. "Halos three decades na."

This experience made her appreciate the beauty of life, which is evident in how she handled her farm, she fondly calls Arwana Mountville. A fish and a mountain. Water and land. In Ursula's own words was a juxtaposition of two words bearing

different elements but in farming, both are needed in order for plants to thrive.

"Kaya iyon binabalik ko lang sa nature at sa Diyos ang pagpapala na iyon. Lahat ng gawin mo ay blessed by God. Pag nables yan ni God lahat ng imposible nagagawa mo na ng posible. Ayun ang tumatak sa isip ko," Ursula shared.

"Either tao, hayop, halaman, lahat ng aruga at pagmamahal ay ibigay mo. Kasi kung maibigay mo iyong unconditional love, 'di ka mamimili, walang boundaries. Lahat parang biyaya o parang pinagpapala,"



for healing. It became a witness, and at the same time, proof of her determination to see what more she could do with whatever she had, despite her physical limitations.

“Almost 30 years na since nastroke ako pero buhay pa din kasi organic iyong kinakain ko. Kahit na may limitations ako, namaintain ko iyong kalusugan ko, at nakakapagtrabaho,” she added.

Joining the organic cooperative

In 2018, Ursula joined the City of San Fernando Organic Cooperative through the help of the city government’s Organic Agriculture focal person, Ms. Josefina Sacnit. This step paved the way for her to increase her knowledge on organic farming. “Lalong dumami iyong kaalaman ko sa organic farming, kahit na sa umpisa pa lang ay iyon na ang pinapraktis ko,” she explained.

In her own organic farming practice, she learned that planting a variety of crops is necessary. In one area, she cultivates sitaw, kalabasa, saluyot, patani, sweet potato, java ginseng, and alugbati. And in other parts, there are various kinds of chili,

in different shapes and sizes.

Ursula also noted that doing your own research as a farmer is a must. “Subukan mo ding tingnan kung ano ang angkop na itatanim mo. Kasi hindi lahat dito pwede mong itanim.”

Know what to plant depending on the season. Ursula emphasized that, even in farming, timing is very important. “Kapag tag-ulan, magtanim ng nangangailangan ng tubig. Sa summer na mas konti ang tubig, mag-aadjust ka din. Parang sa cassava. Hindi nangangailangan ng tubig. Nagtathrive iyan hanggang sa pagdating ng ulan.”

I was taken aback by the depth of Ursula’s stories in organic farming, a subject I might never have appreciated had I not had the chance to visit her.

“Ang pole sitaw, twice a year na pwede magtanim and magharvest. Depende sa climate kasi nagbabago na din. So parang iyong sili. Kapag mainit na, nangungulubot iyong mga dahon kaya naglalagay ako ng net. Kaso kulang. Kaya nagtanim din ako ng cassava sa tabi niya. Parang lilim

described as a life free from toxins and the toxicity that came with urban living.

“Noong nasa baba ako, lahat bibilhin mo kaya kailangan meron kang trabaho o ibang pagkukunan ng pera. Pero kapag nasa bundok ka, malaya ang hangin. Ang ganda ng sikat ng araw,” she shared. “Ang gandang mamasyal. Doon parang pakiramdam mo ang lusog lusog ng iyong katawan.”

In time for her much-needed recovery from a stroke, Arwana Mountville became Ursula’s place





niya,” she continued to explain.

During the dry season, she uses Java ginseng and sweet potato as cover crops to maintain soil moisture.

“Kapag hands-on ka pala sa pagtatanim, doon ka matututo. Kasi iyong theory na tinuturo doon sa trainings, hindi lahat ma-iaaply mo. Kailangan mo imodify. Kailangan mo gumawa ng konting deviation para magthrive ang halaman mo,” she shared.

At present, Ursula is among the other Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) certified organic farmers in the City of San Fernando, La Union. Others include Manuel Acosta of Ibit’s farm, Jameson Quines of James 578 farm, Florence Mendoza of Florence farm, and Randy Jubilo of Jubilo’s farm.

But more than just being organically certified, it is her purest intention of helping people consume safe food that kept her zealous about her natural farming methods.

“Gusto kung mapromote iyong organic food supply. Kaya nga maraming nagkakasakit dahil sa chemicals na ginagamit. If you go healthy, go natural, go organic. Siguradong hahaba ang buhay ng tao. Tapos ang food supply, mas sustainable,” said Ursula. “I-aim po natin na madami ang pagkain na sariwa at healthy.”

Such a mindset has inspired great admiration in me for Ursula and her generosity. To farm and share with people, a life-giving gift instead of poison. And in everything she does, she does it with the intention of simply giving back everything in grateful appreciation for what she considers her blessing, her second life.



Agricultural Engineer fulfills dream via YFC

Young entrepreneur June Batao-ey, 25 of Brgy. Vicente, Galimuyod, Ilocos Sur once dreamed of becoming an engineer, a dream that his parents also want for him for they don't want him to work under the scorching heat of the sun and till the land like what they do as farmers.

Indeed, fate has been good for young June as he lived his dream and became an Agricultural and Biosystems Engineer in CY 2021 after passing the Board exam. However, much as he wanted to pursue his career in the corporate world, fate had taken him to apply his acquired skills and knowledge in his own farm when he had chosen to follow the footsteps of his batch mate Engr. Geneva Gañalon, one of the recipients of the Young Farmers Challenge (YFC) Program of the Department of Agriculture.

YFC is the DA's latest program for the Filipino youth to run their own agricultural businesses by providing them financial grant assistance.

Seeing the big opportunities that the YFC Program to young farmer-entrepreneur like him, without second thought, June sought the assistance of the Local Government Unit of Galimuyod as he also prepared immediately the needed documentary requirements of the Program.

Luckily, he was chosen as one of the provincial winners and topped the regional finalists with his J's Capsicum Greenery Fruits and Vegetables Farm enterprise under the YFC Start-Up Entrepreneurs in CY 2023.

Starting his business enterprise was a challenge for June. But, he was able to successfully establish his project through the help of the YFC program as it provided him capital where he no longer needed to acquire loan from the coop in their barangay with 18 to 24 percent interest rate.

From the Php80,000 grant he received as a provincial awardee

which he used to buy farm inputs like seeds, fertilizer and diesel for irrigation and plastic mulch, he was able to start his enterprise and it changed him to what he is now, a determined, passionate, and innovative young agri-preneur.

J's Capsicum Greenery Fruits and Vegetables Farm is a 2,500 sq.m. lot nestled in a remote area of Brgy. Bitong. Here, various varieties of pepper such as Green Bell pepper, Sultan F1, Django F1 and Red Hot F1 were planted which provided June and his family a generous income. As to why he chose pepper to plant, June considered the accessibility and availability of the market on this commodity. Sacred Heart Savings Cooperative, one of the most successful coops in the region (where he is a member) is engaged into contract growing with the Jollibee Foods Corporation as consolidator of bell pepper and onion in Galimuyod.

Having this institutional market, it offered June a real good price for his produce. With the 2,500 kilos of pepper being absorbed by Jollibee per week, June and his fellow bell pepper producers in Galimuyod enjoy a premium price for their commodity.

Aside from the accessibility to market and the good price on his commodity, June, as a member of the coop, was given access to trainings and seminars to update his farming knowledge and skills, especially on Good Agricultural Practices that he applied in his own farm.

For June, farming is a risky business. But having armored with faith in God, diligence and a desire to bring change, he effectively managed his time and effort to work things out

in his chosen field.

Problems on pests and diseases, lack of capital and climate change as well as natural disasters were properly managed with his resiliency and adeptness to practice new farming techniques. He is all indebted to the YFC Program as he was able to widen his horizon by establishing good networks and linkages to people and organizations that have somehow helped in realizing his potential as a young farmer-entrepreneur.

“Napakalaki ng tulong ng YFC sa akin kasi noong nahirapan akong maghanap ng trabaho, saktong dumating itong YFC. Ito na ang naging trabaho ko, full time employed ako sa sarili kong farm,” he said. (YFC has greatly helped me because when I was having a hard time looking for a job, YFC came along and now I am full-time employed in my own farm.)

Sharing his thoughts why he is so grateful to have learned the YFC program, June said that it has opened wider opportunities for him to become a well-rounded business-minded farmer.

On his impact to the community, June being the source of inspiration to his neighbors and barangay-mates, he was then elected as the third councilor in their barangay during the recently held barangay elections.

Indeed, June has now come a long way. He may have missed the opportunity to fulfill his parents' wish to work away from the scorching heat of the sun, but he will never regret pursuing his passion in farming. And if he is to choose between being employed to a routine 8-5 pm office work or

Pipiliin ko pa rin sa farm kasi dito mas healthy, mas presko ang hangin. Masaya kasi yung nakikita mo ang paglaki ng mga pananim mo, hanggang sa paghaharvest, pagdidilig..masarap sa pakiramdam. Pag may mga challenges, unti-unti mong nasosolve. Napakavaluable na marami kang learning thru experience.

that of farming, without second thought, he would still choose to stay in the farm with 'his peppers'.

“Pipiliin ko pa rin sa farm kasi dito mas healthy, mas presko ang hangin. Masaya kasi yung nakikita mo ang paglaki ng mga pananim mo, hanggang sa paghaharvest, pagdidilig.. masarap sa pakiramdam. Pag may mga challenges, unti-unti mong nasosolve. Napakavaluable na marami kang learning thru experience,” (I will still choose farming because it is healthier, with fresh air. I am happy when I see my crops growing, from watering them to harvesting, it feels really good.) he said.

Having this in mind, June is now planning to make his farm a well-known agri-tourism farm in Ilocos where he could display some innovative farming technologies such as drip irrigation and precision farming that are in line with his expertise as a licensed agricultural engineer.

Truly, the YFC program serves as a vehicle for progress to the most deserving young agripreneurs who wanted to realize their dreams and aspirations.





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