I spent 19 days to stay and live with the indigenous people (IP). With them, I had my firsthand discovery of a different dimension in my spiritual life, something I have never experienced before. It was a short period, really. But those 19 days have changed my life.

I was in second year college when I first encountered the Manobo people in Bukidnon, Mindanao. There, I was humbled and deeply struck by the simplicity of the Manobo’s way of life. They were materially poor. They live in houses with floors made of pieces of wood tied together. They had nothing else inside except a kaserola (metal pot) for cooking and an itak (bolo). Yet, they were so generous, and willing to share what they have. I saw how they live and practice Christian values in a way I have not seen before, without even knowing or talking about them. After my stay with them, I returned to the city with a changed heart. I decided to let go of the material things I valued most, keeping only a few pieces of clothes and a pair of slippers, so I can live a life without trappings. Just like the Manobos, I began to live a simple life.

I grew up in Maigo, Lanao del Norte, where my grandparents brought me up. Even though I do not know exactly who my parents are, the love and values of my grandparents shaped the person I am now today and all the things I have been doing. It was the wise words of my grandfather that have stayed with me for the longest time: to grow up fulfilled.
and content in life. So my growing up years, my days with the Manobo people, and my grandfather’s words have guided me all along to the life I have chosen. At 21 years old I decided to offer my life to my country’s katutubo, the indigenous people (IP).

I started to travel across the country, visiting every IP groups. It became a spiritual journey. In the final leg of my journey in 1988, at 25, I went to Paitan, Mindoro Oriental. I volunteered among the missionary sisters of Servants of the Holy Spirit, who have been doing mission work among the Mangyan-Alangan people. I stayed with them for nine years. Sr. Victricia Pascassio, who later became my mentor, asked me to focus on the community’s basic needs and I proposed a program on literacy.

I first started this school with only 12 students, teaching them inside a small hut where I also stayed. I became both as a teacher and a principal. I raised funds from my friends in Manila to run the school. Over the years, the effort I initiated has gradually evolved. We built classrooms, meeting halls, a library, a science laboratory, a preschool and a Mangyan cultural center.

Today, this is the Tugdaan Center for Human and Environmental Development. Here is the school shaped by the Mangyan people’s dream. Tugdaan is an Alangan Mangyan word which means “seedbed”, as this school is the seedbed of the community’s efforts and aspirations. It now trains nearly 200 students of all ages, and half of its teachers are Mangyans. I encourage them to speak their language and wear their native clothing. Along the way, I studied their language, which led me to compile the words, and finished a Tagalog-Mangyan dictionary.

The foundation of Tugdaan lies in its sensitivity to the dynamics of the Mangyan culture. The work has revolves around research, documentation, and regular community consultation. All these have helped us integrate the Mangyan people’s various cultural values and traditions into Tugdaan’s program philosophy, structures, methodologies, and activities. Working with the Mangyans have empowered them more to use their own visions and perspectives in life and use their capabilities. There is also a living spirit of volunteerism and social service in the program. Christian virtues and Mangyan social norms both inspire strong value formation among students, as they are encouraged more to bring back their services and acquired knowledge for the benefit of their own people. Also, these works have been replicated even at other far-flung communities.

Mangyan-Alangan people are one of the subgroups of Mangyans in Mindoro. I have learned so much from them, in the way they view life, the self, and the world. I have felt with them their struggles on surviving every day, and the longing for self-determination. I have heard their stories, their realities, their obstacles, and the perils they face on protecting their ancestral lands, culture, and way of life.

The success of Tugdaan led the Department of Education (DepEd, formerly DECS) to formally recognize its basic education program. After four years, it was awarded as the country’s outstanding literacy program. It became the school the Mangyan-Alangan people dreamed it to be, run by their community leaders as an educational institution.
Along the way, I thought that the entire work was so overwhelming. But the work was rather so simple, I later realized. At first, I had the hard time gaining their trust. The IP leaders once questioned my sincerity. I could not blame them, for they had negative experiences with other groups reaching out to them. But along the way, they have seen the consistency of my words and actions. They began to trust and love me as one of them. Such is the love that I learned from them. To lead people, truly, is to share with their lives and hold their aspirations as my own. It’s not what I can achieve, but how I can touch them through simple but loving ways of service.

Then time came when I thought of returning to the path of priesthood, of becoming a Jesuit. I thought that was it. In 1997, after nine years, I left Tugdaan assured, knowing that the people I have helped are independent, skilled, and self-reliant. I went back to the seminary, but after a while I felt bored. Though I knew then priesthood was a wonderful vocation, I felt it’s not really for me. I deeply owe to the Jesuits my formation and the value of service, which I believe have shaped my personal mission. Still, I longed for experiencing spirituality more outside the seminary. I could practice more deeply when I’m out there. I’m more alive!

When I got out, I looked for opportunities where I could serve more, and not necessarily getting a job. In 2001, the Assisi Development Foundation started their efforts in Mindanao, to help its people rebuild their lives torn by civil wars. I met Ambassador Howard Dee, who also later mentored me in this work. I became the executive director of its program called Tabang Mindanaw. Since peacebuilding effort is central to this, we integrated aspects of social welfare, governance, and livelihood to make the program relevant to the lives of the people. I coordinated with the people involved: military, local authorities, clergy, armed insurgents, and most importantly with the locals themselves. I got in touch more with the Lumad, the indigenous peoples of Mindanao. I also worked with Muslim communities. Together, we founded the Ilawan Center for Peace and Sustainable Development. In Filipino, ilawan means “light-holder” or “center of light”. It became a center for culture-based education, similar on how Tugdaan was built.

In 2005, I had a chance meeting with Julieta Ortiz, then president of the University of Southeastern Philippines (USEP) in Davao. Over lunch, we came up with a new idea—setting up a college for the IPs, to help IP youth develop leadership and competence. The next year, we founded the Pamulaan Center, the first of its kind, an institution solely dedicated to IP education. It offers full-degree programs, which are all aligned to the indigenous needs: BA in Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development, BS in Indigenous People’s Education, BA in Peace Building and Multicultural studies and BS in Indigenous Agriculture. Pamulaan is a Lumad-Matigsalog word, which also means “seedbed”, as it follows the meaningful legacy of Tugdaan. Linking it to my experiences with the Mangyan people, I adopted the Tugdaan Center’s symbol of a young plant with strong roots planted in a seedbed as the emblem of the new Center. And over time, Pamulaan has always been true to its intention of providing an intensive community-service learning program to truly prepare its graduates in helping the IP communities.
The crucial key in my work is listening to the IPs. I just listened to their dreams and aspirations. Listening to them has guided me on what steps to take. That’s why I have always put strong emphasis on the importance of genuine empathy in my work. IPs may be materially poor, but they are culturally rich and proud. I have learned not to impose my agenda on them. I have learned not to step on their toes. I’m not here to profit, but to serve the needs of their community. I don’t make promise of success to them. To me, success is about them, how they see it, and not mine, because it’s their vision I’m working for. I’m always faithful and confident that through this work, God always provides.

It is now 2018, and if I have a choice, I would rather stay with the IP communities. Yet I am happy to know that there are now so many IP youth leaders emerging, both from Pamulaan and Tugdaan. Knowing this, I have already multiplied myself through them. With their strong community service formation, IP leaders are now able to integrate their communities with government and non-government institutions. This integration gives the IP communities their voice. Today, while in Manila, I am mobilizing resources among my friends and organization who have come to trust in the work I have done for the IP communities. It’s not enough to educate the IPs, we must also provide them the opportunities to create sustainable development mechanisms on culture-sensitive social enterprises and development for them to truly thrive.

I became the chair of Assisi after five years of working with them. Later, I was blessed to receive the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership in 2004. But to receive this award is not my honor, but it is for the people I have always served. This is for them: the Mangyan Alangans, the Lumads, the Muslims, and every IP in the country. I deeply thank them all. They have affirmed that a life truly worth living is a life dedicated to others. In being loved and cared for, I have learned the love that serves.