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## BATANG TRANSFORMERS BUILDING A PEACEFUL NATION

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### Sa Bukid ni Pepe

Last October 24, the PILG conducted a four-day one-of-a-kind bonding seminar among Filipino youth leaders from all over the country. It was held at the sprawling 16-hectare Antipolo farm of Philip Pestano Sr. who co-sponsored the activity. "Don Pepe" is also known as the father of the late Philip Pestano Jr., who as a young Navy officer, fresh from the rugged terrains of Baguio, home of the country's premier Military Academy where he graduated, was forever silenced by an assas-

sin's bullet. The young Philip then discovered that the Navy ship where he served as cargo officer was loading dirty stuff like illegally cut logs from Mindanao and prohibited drugs. The young idealistic officer wanted to stop and correct this wrong. Unfortunately, a lethal bullet beat him to the draw and felled him first before he could expose the evils. Philip and the Mindanao logs may have been felled, but today, at Don Pepe's farm, stand erect a forest full of

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### Batang Transformers: vital agents for change

Banking on a strong belief that today's Filipino youth play a vital role in transforming our nation and its the people to become better citizens, the Pimentel Institute for Leadership and Governance (PILG), conducted the first-of-its-kind four-day youth leadership and bonding seminar at the sprawling 16-hectare Pestano Farm in Antipolo City last October 24 to 27.

Aged fourteen to seventeen years who are

mostly third and fourth year high schools students, fifty-two young male and female Filipinos chosen by their schools for displaying potential leadership skills, camped for four days to learn how they can be effective agents of change for the good of the country.

The seminar highlighted the ethnic distribution of the young participants half of which was composed of Muslim youths, one third, from the Chris-

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November 4, 2013

## **REPORT** on the bonding seminar for Muslim, Christian and Lumad youths.

### **Organizers:**

1. The Pimentel Center for Local Governance, College of Governance and Public Policy, UMaK;
2. Pimentel Institute for Leadership and Governance
3. The Mindanao State University;
4. The Philippine Society for Public Administration, and
5. The Young Moro Professionals Network.

### **Duration:**

October 24 - 27.

### **Venue:**

Phillip's Sanctuary, Pestano Farm, Antipolo City.

### **Participants:**

Originally planned to involve 50 high school boys and girls **with leadership qualities** between the ages of 14 to 17, it eventually had 53 partakers.

### **Places of Origin:**

1. Tawitawi;
2. Sulu;
3. Zamboanga-Sibugay;
4. Maguindanao;
5. Lanao del Sur;
6. Lana del Norte;
7. Marawi City;
8. General Santos City;
9. Cagayan;
10. Isabela;
11. Kalinga, and
12. Santiago City.

Regrets were sent in by invitees from Region VII due to the recent earthquake that devastated their areas.

### **Basic challenge**

The seminar challenged the participants with the question -

WHY SHOULD A RELIGION OF PEACE  
(Islam) WAR ON A RELIGION OF LOVE  
(Christianity) AND VICE VERSA?

More specifically, its objectives intended to:

- (a) **Positively:** Build bridges of love, trust, understanding among the youths of the land coming from our diverse cultures, and
- (b) **Negatively:** Demolish walls of hatred, misunderstanding, and discrimination among them.

Its **overall stress** was on Youth Leadership for individual, human and communal development.

### **Corollary**

A major corollary to the main topic of the seminar focused on the utter irrelevance of violent conflict arising from cultural and traditional differences.

The seminar underscored the **commonality** of belief that Muslims, Christians, and Lumads are children of the same God, and therefore:

- (a) While we may pray in our own ways, whenever appropriate, we can and should pray together;
- (b) We should love one another, respect whatever differences our respective cultures and traditions we woke up to, help develop our communities, and country; and
- (c) We should forswear the use of violence in the settlement of those cultural and traditional differences.

### **Two components**

The seminar had two major components: 1. mind and spiritual stimulation, and 2. physical invigoration.

The mental & spiritual messengers included:

- (a) Bai Rohaniza Sumdad-Usman;
- (b) Bai Nassreena Sampaco-Baddiri;
- (c) Dr. Macapado Muslim;
- (d) Dr. Alex Brillantes;
- (e) Dr. Rey Echavez, M.D.;
- (f) Archbishop Oscar Cruz;
- (g) Koko Pimentel;
- (h) Pauline Bautista, and
- (i) Pastor King Flores.

**Workshops**

After the messages were delivered, workshops followed to stimulate discussion among the participants.

The workshop facilitators - recruited by Dr. Alex Brillantes - included Mark Gervasa, Bai Rhohaniza Sumndad-Usman, Bai Nais Sampaco, and co-facilitators Nikki Reyes, Sheryll Sani, Madz Vincent Ibrahim, Bernadette Fernandez, Antonio Salido, Joel Advincula, Kabaitan R. Bautista, Almira Alonto and Anna Bancolita.

The Center's facilitators: Dr. Norma Camunay, Liza Ting, and Pastor Hugh Nguyen, also lent the boys and girls their vast experience in the academe and NGO-life, and innate gentle guidance throughout the seminar.



Advisers (L-R) Pepito Sumaya, Gwen Gana, Norma Camunay, Liza Ting, Melba Angni, Clarisse Aquino and Macabangkit Ati.

**Boot camp activities**

The physical exercises of the seminar were supervised by Master Sergeant George Ropero, a former Philippine Army and foreign military trainor in jungle survival. The boys and girls ran obstacle courses, did trekking in the surrounding hills of the camp site, rafting, canoeing, and swimming in the pond in addition to sundry other drills. Incidentally, it merits mentioning that the workouts were also purposely designed to bring out the relevance of the mental messages to the lives of the participants.

The Master Sergeant described the kids as the most disciplined group that ever did a campsite seminar at the Pestano Farm.

**Sundown events**

Evenings were devoted to cultural presentations, bonfire bonding activities, and reflections.

One evening highlighted the native dances, songs and music of the individual groups of participants. The activity proved so infectious that for the first time in my rather long life as an observer of certain developments in our nation I watched teary-eyed as all the boys and the girls jump with glee, sway with grace, and keep up with the tempo of the gongs of the Kalingas!

It was truly a scene of a life time!

The great Mindanaonon singer, Joey Ayala, further enlivened the proceedings with some of his original compositions.

**Media coverage**

Some television outlets covered certain days of the seminar that were subsequently shown by their TV stations.

It was unfortunate that a dozen or so print media journalists who said they would go and do a look-see of the affair backed out at the last minute.

Nonetheless, the seminar was recorded on TV tapes by the professional firm of Perry Pimentel.

**Transportation**

One commercial bus engaged by the Center ferried the participants from the Center at UMak to the Pestano Farm on October 24, and brought them back to the UMak Center on October 27.

UMak graciously also made available the use of one mini-bus to transport the facilitators from the Center to the Pestano Farm on October 24, and back to the Center on October 27.

**Medics**

The Pestano farm had a stand-by medical staff for any contingency. And thank God, only one boy had his nose busted from a collision with another boy in a scramble to get possession of a ball. The minor injury did not need any extensive medical intervention, and, thereafter, the boy merrily got back into the groove of their fun games.



One other boy complained of a side stomach pain. He was brought to the nearest hospital. And it turned out to be a minor case of intrauterine infection that was medicated by antibiotics prescribed by the hospital doctor.

Perhaps, to prove that they are, after all, the stronger sex, not a single girl complained of any ailment for the duration of the seminar.

Incidentally, no one from the medical staff of Umak could join the seminar to provide medical services to the participants. Their unavailability was understandable: it was a live-in seminar that would have taken at least four days of their precious time.



(L-R): Anton Salido, Mark Gervasa, Nikki Reyes, Macabangkit Ati, Nene Pimentel, Bai Nais Sampaco, King Flores, Alex Brillantes, Kaan Bautista, Gwen Gana, Sheryll Sani, Almira Alonto, Badette Fernandez, Bai Honey Usman, Amer Mitmog, Madz Ibrahim and Joel Advincula.

### Assessment

The participants, the facilitators, the staff, the resource persons and other concerned individuals unanimously lauded the seminar for successfully accomplishing its main objectives as cited above.

The accommodations and outdoor facilities were good. The food suited the culinary taste of the participants and respected their religious dietary requirements.

### Eden-like

MSUs Dr. Macabangkit Ati, Professors Melba Angni, and Pepito Sumayan took the lead in describing the campsite as “eden-like”. Its natural environment contributed immensely to the success of the seminar.

More expansively, Professor Angni tagged the Batang Transformers seminar, a “very wonderful experience ... a noble vision that inspired many young souls.” And she pledged that “we will keep the light glowing in the hearts and minds of the Mindanao Batang Transformers. We will not allow your noble intention to end with the closing program last October 27. We will ignite the light of peace and brotherhood in the hearts of other Filipino youths.”

The Pestano Farm is a fully forested 16-hectare lot with ponds, springs, and a small river running through it in the foothills of Antipolo City. It is indeed, a Shangrila for the pollution-weary urban city dwellers as well as for the rural residents whose forests have been denuded by ruthless loggers, and whose rivers, ruined by pesticides and other toxic chemicals.

It is a tribute to the Pestano couple’s commitment to ecological balance that their farm is now literally a “sanctuary” from the polluted world outside. In the words of Liza Ting, it was precisely the kind of

environment that the boys and the girls who joined the seminar needed

*“where their infant dreams could be birthed and cradled, shielded from prejudice and harsh criticism. You provided a sanctuary where their mentors could help bring them to the point of transformation, and appreciate them as they go back to their communities laden with fresh life-giving ideas and inspiration, to be like butterflies, gentle agents of change.”*

The facilities of the Pestano Farm were offered free of charge by the generous owners, Pepe and Nene Pestano, parents of the martyred Naval Ensign Phillip Pestano. In fact, the farm has now been adopted as the National Headquarters of the Batang Transformers of the country.

Other observers applauded not just the site but the whole concept that underlined the bonding seminar.

Bishop Ping Sorra of Catanduanes gave it a left-handed compliment. He said that it was a pity that the Catholic Bishops Conference Commission for the Youth of which he had been the chair for a number of years had not undertaken a similar project.

Pete Gamba, a public school teacher said that the seminar “will forge better relationships among the Muslim-Christian-Lumad youths.” He added the wish that someday his “students could also join it.”

Al Santoli, an American who is deeply committed to helping the marginalized especially in the Muslim areas of Mindano sent in his congratulations particularly “on the theme of “Mind Melding” for the Youth seminar in Antipolo.”

In his inimitable way, Santoli, a former foreign policy adviser of a member of the House of Representatives of the US congress, described the seminar as “a great Mr. Spook type of reference from Star Trek. He added his regret that he could not share any funding for the activity due to other priorities - which incidentally we did not ask for.

From Zoe Vidal, an insightful netizen, came this positive compliment: “... this is a very concrete way of (re)building God’s House on earth.

*“Stone by stone (like Peter, the rock, and the Lord, himself, the Cornerstone) – one young person at a time.”*

*“God,” Zoe said, “invites us to build, not to destroy.”*

From Susan Grace Rivera: “Congratulations on this transformational initiative.”

Even our irrepressible Archbishop Oscar Cruz could not contain himself. He called up on November 5 to congratulate the Core Group of the Center for the bonding seminar which he said was a great experiment.

The appreciation of the participants, themselves, of the bonding seminar was made manifest not only by the sensible insights they offered during the discussions on the messages of the resource persons, but also by the incredible bursts of their youthful energies which they un-leased during the physical phases of the seminar.

They verbalized their common sentiment that the four days of the seminar were not enough. The copious tears that flowed silently down their youthful cheeks and the sorrowful sobs that sometimes cracked out of their collective throats on parting day demonstrated how dearly they valued the bonding seminar that brought them newly found brothers and sisters from near and far in the same country about which they realized they did not really fully know.

In our view, however, the fact that they have to go back where they came from and there, try to make a difference in their lives and in the lives of others by the grace of God was more than enough to jolt them once again into reality that as Batang Transformers, they have a mission to fulfill even in their tender age.

### **Expenses**

Obviously, the youth bonding seminar incurred unavoidable expenditures for food, hand-outs, honoraria, gasoline, drivers gratuity, etc. Those were shouldered by donors who will be furnished a no nonsense accounting of the expenses of the seminar.

Parenthetically, upon learning that one of the participants had to rely on the goodwill of his classmates, and the meager earnings he makes from cleaning the lawns of his teachers or doing laundry work, the organizers of the seminar awarded him a

scholarship fund that covers his tuition and other incidental expenses, plus a little stipend to help keep body and soul together. It is, of course, expected that he would keep a respectable grade level that would merit the continuation of the scholarship assistance until he finishes the teaching course he aims for.

Other savings, if any, will be spent on the acquisition of other devices needed to modernize the equipment of the PILG to enable it to cope with the demands of a fast moving, high-tech driven environment.

### **Commitment**

Hence, barring insurmountable complications, the UMak-based Center and the PILG would like to continue holding Batang Transformers Bonding Seminars with the kind support of our collaborators, not only in the Pestano Farm, but also in other suitable sites in the country.



PILG Staffers (L-R) Nelson delos Santos Jr., Carla Caringal, Maelyn Calizo, Clarisse Aquino and Gwen Gana.

### **Selfless Staff Support**


The commitment is made easier by the priceless sacrifices of the Staff of the Center, and the PILG, coordinated by Clarisse Aquino. Staffers Maelyn Calizo, Carla Caringal, Nelson de los Santos, Ben Cabatuan, and Tony Alarba gave time and effort above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the success of the first BT seminar.

To all who did their bit to make the Batang Transformers bonding seminar at the Phillip’s Sanctuary, Pestano Farm in Antipolo a fulfilling experience, our sincere thanks, and apologies if anyone has been inappropriately omitted.

The Lord Almighty, we beg, will make up for the omission.

God bless.

Respectfully submitted,

  
**AQUILINO PIMENTEL JR.**

## Sa Bukid

From Page 1

trees, planted side-by-side in military precision, by the tireless, bare hands of a fallen hero. The farm, once the site of bald and barren mountain, now sits atop a lush of vast greenery --- a shining example of genuine transformation. It stands as an eternal testament of a father's undying devotion to a son.

Liza Ting, a PILG Fellow who was among the facilitators of the seminar, scribbled in a journal her observations of Pepe, his farm, and a father's love to a son like no other...

**Journal: Oct. 27, 2013**

**Venue: Phillip's Sanctuary, Antipolo City**

By Liza Ting

Today is the birthday of Tito Pepe Pestano, and so the campers rose at 4:30 am for a pre-sunrise serenade at his cottage. We thanked him for the wonderful venue that has been our sanctuary for the last three days and for the coming day too.



Pepe Pestano, engages young participants, future leaders, in a pep talk, and shares his inspiring story of pursuing justice for his son, the late Phillip Pestano, and how he kept his memory alive by developing the 16 hectare farm that hosted the four day seminar.

Travelling long hours by bus from Northern Luzon, plane and boat from the Southern islands, the young leaders came together to begin their walk together in the Journey for Peace. Last night Tito Pepe was witness to the camper's 'Peaceformances', their heart's expression in song, poem and dramatizations of their own quest to make the this nation a peaceful sanctuary where all can live together and

prosper, regardless of differences in religion and culture. And this morning he repeated his gracious invitation to the 'Batang Transformers' to make this private sanctuary their headquarters for Luzon camping activities. He shared that he believed that soon we would be hundreds or even thousands, working together with the same desire for true peace and development nationwide.

As dawn broke, most

of the campers and facilitator's made the uphill pilgrimage to visit Phillip's Museum, and there Tito Pepe shared with us all the story of a young man, his own son Phillip, whose moral fiber was as living, tough and great, as the tall hardwood trees of Mindanao. These trees Phillip had considered as part of the heritage of the Filipinos, and to him were precious living resources for the future generations of our



Pepe Pestano (2nd from left) and his wife (far right) share a moment with Bing Pimentel, Arch Bishop Oscar Cruz, and Melba Angni.



Pepe's Farm is also called Phillip's sanctuary, in memory of his son who was killed apparently for refusing to kowtow to unlawful activities of the Navy, an institution the young Pestano chose to serve..



**Pepe Pestano shares with participating youth leaders some of the memorabilias left by his son Philip in which have been stored in the Pestano Farm in Antipolo City.**

peoples and not just for the mansions of greedy military officers.

Phillip had been a nature advocate and as a young man still in Military academy, would conquer some of the bare mountains of Antipolo, with his agriculturist father; by planting trees, seeding dreams and hopes for a bright future.

Like a butterfly, perhaps Phillip's earthly life was meant to be brief, but his shimmery wings, his legacy of planting trees, his personal excellence, discipline and youth leadership and his example of

moral courage in the face of dangerous opposition live on, still communicating to us, continuing to inspire us.

In a few minutes, we will all trek to another mountain and plant trees. We've been journaling and sharing our most personal thoughts and ideas. Then we will fertilize the individual trees with a piece of paper on which we have written our hopes, dreams and visions for the future of peace. Today, we mark the start. We know years later we can look back to see where we planted a



**The Farm has a twin pool where visitors can cool themselves while enjoying fresh the breeze of air in the farm that is surrounded by trees planted by Philip when he was alive.**

seed of a dream. The journey will be long and we can look back to this point to see where we began to stop the cycle of violence and conflict in our own lives, then in our communities. Even though some circumstances will be happy, some will be sad, we realize that just like Phillip, there are some legacies that can live on beyond us.

Thank you Tito Pepe, for providing butterfly plants. These young leaders needed an environment where their infant dreams could be birthed and cradled, shielded

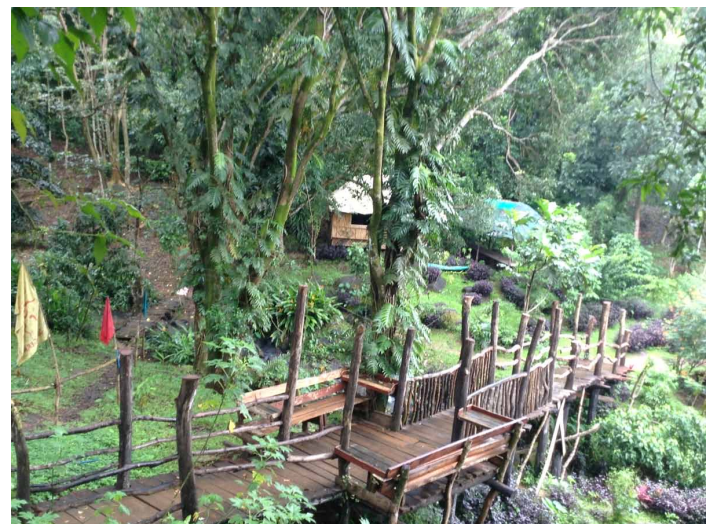
from prejudice and harsh criticism. You provided a sanctuary where their mentors could help bring them to their point of transformation, and appreciate them as they go on back to their communities laden with fresh life giving ideas and inspiration, to be like butterflies, gentle agents of change. Hopefully, in season, we will hear of and see that their short stay here has borne great fruit.

Happy Birthday Tito Pepe! Happy Journey 'Batang Transformers'!

Carry your seeds and build the future of Peace for our nation!



**Participants never lacked facilities to enhances their skills with available amenities at the Pestano Farm.**



**The Pestano Farm is a perfect site for holding seminars and team building because nature serves as a willing ally to entice concentration among participants.**

## Batang

From Page 1

tian sector and the rest composed of Lumad youths and other tribal minorities.

The participants came from all over the country particularly in Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, the Visayas, Cordilleras, and Kalinga in Luzon.

The ethnic distribution was significant in attaining the main goals of the seminar which was to build bridges of love, trust, understanding among the youths of the land coming from diverse cultures.

The activities of the seminar aimed to demolish the walls of hatred, misunderstanding and discrimination, which prevails in many sectors of Philippine society.

The seminar stressed on harnessing the youth leadership potentials of the participant for human and communal development.

Breaking the barriers that contribute in dividing our nation was a focal objective of the seminar.

The messages inculcat-



The seminar was a revelation as participants shared the richness of their respective cultures.

ed in the four day affair among participants were:

We are all children of the same god and therefore: We pray in our own ways and, whenever appropriate, pray together; we should love one another, and help develop opportunities; and there is no need to shot one another.

Young expert facilitators from Ayala Foundation volunteered to drive home the seminar's objectives to the participants through their workshops, group sessions, and physical challenges fittingly

provided by the amenities of the Pestaño Farm.

Among the activities the participants joined in were: survivor's challenges, swimming, coping with toxic waste, learning the ways of trust, and camp fire sessions.

The seminar was also highlighted by inspiring and challenging talks by former Senator Aquilino Q. Pimentel Jr., Chair of PILG, Senator Aquilino Koko Pimentel III, retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, CHED Commissioner Alex Brillantes Jr., Dr. Macapado Muslim, Nass-

reena Sampaco-Baddiri and Bai Rohaniza Sumdad-Usman.

The participants were housed in two large cottages, one room each for the male and female participants.

The Pestaño Farm which co-sponsored the affair provided the amenities in the farm which included the clubhouse, used as venue and other facilities for physical challenges that were related to the mission of the seminar of fostering unity, and trust and dependence among the participants.



The spacious farm enabled the participants to fully grasp the objectives of each workshop handled by facilitators.



There was even a bonfire in the evening, an activity that capped a long day of intense training.



# THE TRANSFORMATIVE MAGIC OF EDUCATION

Dr. Macapado A. Muslim, President of the Mindanao State University System, gave insights on the value of education from the view point of Islam, in a his lecture during the four-day “Batang Transformers Leadership Training” held at the Pestano Farm in Antipolo last October 24, 2013.

Dr. Muslim emphasized the need “to develop future Muslim, Christian and Lumad leaders in the Philippines who are good inter-cultural or inter-faith leaders – leaders who provide good governance for all constituents or citizens.”

Citing the significance of education in the world today, he said, “For the youth leaders to survive and succeed in the competitive knowledge-based world economy, they must equip themselves with the right, globally competitive education.”

He stressed the primacy of education in the Islamic way of life.

He echoed the sayings, or quotes from Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) related to the importance of Education:



Dr. Macapado Muslim, President of Mindanao State University, was among the invited speakers, who shared the importance of education among our youth in order to be competitive in the global arena..

- “The search for knowledge is compulsory upon every Muslim, male or female;”
- “Superiority in education is better than superiority in divine Service”; and
- “The ink of a scholar is mightier than the blood of a martyr.”

Dr. Muslim highlighted that education is critical for peace building and inter-faith cooperation and understanding among our

people, particularly the youth.

He said “ in a multi-cultural country like the Philippines, the promotion of inter-faith and inter-cultural cooperation and understanding is indispensable.”

He recognized that the right policy to be adopted by government is multiculturalism.

“All citizens whether Christian, Muslim and Lumad, are first class citizens,” he said.

Dr. Muslim cited the fact that the multi-faith or multi-cultural composition of the human race is a Divine plan

Quoting the Qur’an Dr. Muslim said “Allah says, “O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other. Verily the most honored of

you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)”[HQ, 49:13].”

At the same time, he emphasized to the participants, majority of whom were young Muslim students the duty of Muslims to be active peace workers.

He reminded that Islam is a religion of peace and non-violence.

“To be a Muslim means being peaceful,” he stressed.

It is not enough for a Muslim to be peaceful or non-violent in his/her relations with others (Muslims and Non-Muslims alike), he noted.

“A Muslim must be an active peace advocate and peace worker,” he stressed.

Dr. Muslim was among the speakers invited during the four day leadership seminar.



The participants pose for a photo opportunity with guests speakers and leaders and Fellows of the Pimentel Institute for Leadership and Governance.

# PICTURE PICTURE PAG MAY TIME!





