**Michelle Tolentino**

Words by Richard Murphy with Edwin Estioko

**In a dark and overcrowded part of the Philippines’ capital, Manila, lies the district of Balitao, a grubby part of town that people are afraid to enter.**



24-year-old Michelle Tolentino knows the challenges faced by families here. “It is normal to see neighbours fighting, half-naked men drinking liquor and women gambling while their children play on the dirt very near the open sewers,” she explains.

Michelle grew up surrounded by the drug dens, gang lands and poverty of Balitao where she shared a tiny, wooden shanty hut with 17 relatives. When she was six years old, her dad abandoned the family after becoming a drug addict. Overwhelmed and unable to care for her children, Michelle’s mother retreated from family life and Michelle was sent to live with her relatives.

She soon learnt that they held her in low regard because she looked like her father. “It was difficult growing up thinking that my entire family considers me a disappointment. I can remember when I was very little I told myself I will prove these people wrong.”

One day, Michelle was taken to a local Compassion project and she was enrolled into the programme. For the first time in her life, people began showing her love, care and protection. A sponsor soon followed, along with hope for a better future.

Michelle has always been thankful for her sponsor. “The first thing they wrote to me was that ‘Jesus loves you.’ Through their letters I learned that God is my father. I finally found in God the love that I longed for. They always wrote to me to say that they are proud of me. That meant a lot growing up because my parents never said things like that to me.”



The positive influence of her sponsor and the opportunities presented at her Compassion project gave Michelle the chance to turn her dreams into reality.

At 18, she was honoured as an outstanding high school graduate; a few years later she represented the Philippines at several international youth conventions; and at 24 made history by becoming the youngest ever Head of Marketing for Asia’s first gospel theatre group, Trumpets.

Today, Michelle raises funds for Trumpets so the group can put on free shows to share the gospel with orphans. Her long-term goal is to build a school that will offer free education for children who can’t afford their tuition fees, so they are given the same opportunities she had through Compassion.

Against all the odds, a little six-year-old girl who was abandoned by her father and rejected by her relatives has grown up to speak into the lives of hundreds of children who face similar challenges to her own.

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