

How a Bike Racer in the Philippines Saved Lives After the Strongest Cyclone Ever

BY ALIYA KARIM

“Around 6:30 to 7 a.m., the first wave of water came in,” he recalls.

Daniel Crisostomo, a Filipino mountain bike racer, chokes up whenever he thinks of November 8th, 2013 – the day Typhoon Haiyan made landfall and swept through his hometown of Tacloban.

When his family realized the water seeping into their home was seawater, Daniel rushed his confused 4-year-old daughter upstairs. He then grabbed his bikes and had each member of the family wear his race jerseys, hoping that his name emblazoned on the backs would make them identifiable... just in case. At its peak, the water level reached the family’s second floor and didn’t go down until nightfall.

It wasn’t until the following day that Daniel ventured out of his home, coming across multiple dead bodies on the street. In the days following, he collected relief supplies, traded them with others and barricaded his home – protecting it from desperate looters and fugitives who had escaped from a nearby jail.

An extreme sports enthusiast, Daniel had been a sports shop manager on the precipice of opening the first waterski school in the Philippines. But the typhoon washed away many of those dreams.

The Journalists and Aid Workers

In the days that followed, journalists from across the globe arrived in Tacloban to survey the damage the streets and interview survivors and aid workers. Daniel and his father helped several journalists maneuver the city. In doing so, Daniel met a Save the Children staffer who recognized his vital knowledge of the city and its residents.

At midnight, Daniel's phone rang. He picked up and was asked if he'd like to volunteer with Save the Children the following morning. Daniel immediately said yes.

He traveled about 24 miles to Dulang, a coastal town.

“It was the first time that I got out of Tacloban City since the whole devastation, and I was in shock and awe,” he says. “I could see dead bodies being burned by the street, houses shifted across the street.”

Daniel shadowed several distribution managers – aid workers responsible for providing blankets, tarps, household supplies and food from the World Food Programme (WFP) – before officially joining as a field coordinator.

“My role was to talk to the village chiefs and gather the population of their village so we could determine the ratio of rice to be given per household,” he explained

Often, an area had to be surveyed for several days before a smooth distribution method could be strategized and implemented. This involved figuring out the time of day for distribution, which trucks to use, how many staff to deploy and other logistical details.

Daniel and WFP’s distribution partners found “a very efficient and effective way of distributing the rice,” working with families one-on-one to divide rations – donated by the governments of Australia, Japan and the United States – in the most transparent and fair manner.

“I would wake up at 5:30 am and end the day at midnight. It was very tiring but very rewarding,” he recalls. “It was the best feeling ever, seeing people smile.”

Bayanihan and the Aftermath

When I reached Daniel over the phone, I asked him about a phrase from the Tagalog language – [bayanihan](#) – about communities working together. He chuckled and spoke with tears in his voice.

“That word originated decades ago when people would transfer their house from one place to another town. And

people would help the house owners to lift that house and carry it and walk with it,” he explains.

“It reminds me of how we survived and got back on our feet, helping out each other. It doesn’t matter if we’re from a different culture, race, religion. We help out together to achieve a goal.”

Daniel continued working with Save the Children until early 2015, when he left the Philippines to follow his wife and children to the U.S., bringing his mountain bike and race jerseys in tow.

Today Daniel lives in Pflugerville, Texas and works as a sales specialist and instructor at REI, an outdoor apparel retailer.

“Every time an emergency responder comes in to get equipment, I outfit them and spend most of the time that I can,” he says.

Daniel reminisces on his time as an aid worker and remains hopeful that he will one day return to the humanitarian field.