



Finding for Good

Stories of migration and reintegration



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FOREWORD

In the typical Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) story, ‘for good’ is the ultimate ‘dream’ and goal, envisioning all the time the OFW returnee can have to spend with family without having to think of issues or problems related to resources and assets. Many of our migrant workers, especially women, labor in jobs where low wages, limited social protection, and lack of opportunities for advancement place the prospect of ‘for good’ far beyond their reach.

In the face of these challenges, we were heartened to see in the 20 stories included in this compilation, how women OFWs routinely muster the ingenuity and determination, as well as the solidarity and support, needed to overcome these barriers and to find their own version of ‘for good.’ We want to offer examples that going home ‘for good’ does not have to always be about having a huge amount of savings or assets acquired. That, it should go beyond material considerations.

We hope that in bringing these stories to a wider audience, we can help other OFWs and would-be OFWs, as well as their family and community members, find inspiration and ideas. At the same time, we hope these stories would encourage duty bearers, be they from government, civil society, or the private sector, to be more intent and mindful in designing and delivering policies and programs that harness the reservoir of strength and entrepreneurial spirit embodied by our OFWs.

We have made progress in moving beyond seeing our OFWs through the lens of vulnerability and victimhood, but there is more we can do in terms of seeing them as the ‘bida’—the protagonists—of their own stories, and ourselves as the supporting characters.

We in UN Women have had the privilege of working with diverse stakeholders over the past two years to implement the Bridging Recruitment to Reintegration in Migration Governance

(BRIDGE) Programme with support from the Migration Fund. Together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), we have sought to strengthen the capacity of migration governance agencies and actors to administer gender-responsive fair and ethical recruitment, decent work, dignified return, and sustainable reintegration – and we sincerely hope to continue to do this moving forward. How successful we have been will become clearer in the narratives of future generations of OFWs. But for now, we are honored to bring you this current crop of stories collected in partnership with the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), and generously shared by these 20 amazing women.

We hope you enjoy them.

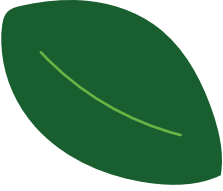
Ma. Rosalyn G. Mesina
Country Program Coordinator
UN Women Philippines

FORMER DOMESTIC WORKER IN SAUDI SEES FINANCIAL, FOOD SECURITY IN EDIBLE FERN

Almira needed to get on a plane and travel all the way to Saudi Arabia to appreciate her roots in a farming village in Dingalan, Aurora province. The realization did not exactly arrive in Saudi, where she worked as a domestic worker for four years, but in Africa, where she accompanied her employers on a visit. There, she saw the pains people took to grow simple crops like bananas amid the arid weather.


Almira's journey to that realization began when she put her high school studies on hold to earn and save up money to go overseas. Her original plan was to work in Taiwan but an economic crisis there prompted her to change course. In 2014, secretly and against her mother's wishes, she left for Saudi to become a domestic worker.





But Almira itched to continue her studies. In 2018, she flew back home and enrolled in senior high school. This was a monumental change in the Philippines' school curriculum, which took effect while she was in Saudi. Previously, Filipino youth only needed to have 10 years of primary and secondary schooling, but from 2016, senior high school— 11th and 12th grade— was introduced. The two additional years of studying discouraged Almira from continuing her college studies, even though she already had her sights on a degree in Mass Communications to fulfill her lifelong dream of becoming a radio anchor.

Instead, she took part in a government reintegration program for OFW returnees, eventually finding herself in a program run by the Department of Agriculture (DA). It was there that a DA employee sparked her curiosity about the pako (fiddlehead fern, scientific name: *diplazium esculentum*) business. At the time, she wondered why no one from Aurora planted pako despite it being native to and popular in the province. She quickly saw an opportunity in this. The desire to keep the edible fern species alive and accessible was a further impetus. "It is possible that the species might disappear. I panicked that Mama and I won't be able to afford pako. That fueled me to immediately start planting."



But the business had a rocky start due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When Almira went to do her research in Manila for the enterprise, the lockdown forced her to stay longer than intended. Nevertheless, the moment she got home to Dingalan, the mother-and-daughter tandem planted their first 20 ferns. Now, just a few years on, they have grown their crop to 15,000 plants.

"(This plant is) not just for money but because our next adversary is a food crisis," she explained. "I want to encourage people to plant pako," she said, emphasizing the fern's health benefits, including being a rich source of calcium.

Almira now looks to supplying big supermarkets in the country and expanding into products such as "pandefern," an equivalent of the popular Filipino pandesal laced with malunggay.

As a bonus, she has also found work as a radio anchor at a local radio station, where she recently shared her experiences as a fern farmer. Her dreams, it seems, needed nowhere else to grow than Dingalan's rich soil.



SIATON MILKSHAKE VENTURE IS HONG KONG OFW'S TICKET TO 'FOR GOOD' AMID COVID

COVID-19 shook the world, including Gemma's little corner in Hong Kong. Her two-year domestic work contract ended and the heightened workload she experienced during the pandemic helped her decide to return home for good.

Back in her hometown of Siaton, Negros Oriental, she set up Geward's Milkshake with her partner, who handles the production side while Gemma holds the purse strings. Though the business is only months old, the partnership appears to be working: They have added roast chicken, chicken mami, and beef pares (a Tagalog beef dish served with garlic rice and broth) to the menu. The beef pares, in particular, a dish her partner suggested they serve after seeing how popular it was with those from Manila— including Siaton natives who lived and worked there— was a hit.

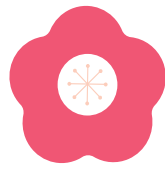
It was in Manila that the couple first met, in 2019, while Gemma was attending a week-long training on household service work prior to her departure for Hong Kong. The love affair blossomed in just a few weeks. Then, Gemma went to Hong Kong.

For two years in Kowloon City, Gemma worked for a kind family, cleaning and cooking besides caring for her employer's four-year-old son. The work was not completely new to her. Right after completing high school, she had been a household help in Quezon City.

At 20, she gave birth to her first child. Then in 2014, she earned a nursing-assistant degree in Dumaguete City and found work as a private caregiver doing 12-hour duty. "It hurt when patients I had grown close to died," Gemma said.

In 2016, Gemma became a nursing assistant at a private hospital in Dumaguete, receiving a higher salary and employee benefits. But her shifts were canceled on slow days, forcing her to work on call. When the hospital called on those days, Gemma was often already in the middle of her two-hour commute from Siaton to the hospital. While waiting for her nursing assistant contract renewal in early 2019, Gemma saw an online post about the domestic worker job in Hong Kong, an opportunity she decided to take.





She attributed her perseverance while cycling through different jobs to her mother, the family’s “wonder woman,” who raised her and her half-sister almost on her own. It was also her mother who looked after Gemma’s four young kids while she was in Hong Kong, supported by the remittances Gemma sent home.

But then, the pandemic hit, and Gemma’s workload suddenly doubled. The entire family was home all the time and she remained responsible for the domestic chores. When her contract ended, Gemma decided to return to the Philippines for good.

Now, Geward’s Milkshake has become the family’s main source of income. They are very much invested in it, especially with another baby on the way. But Gemma already considers herself successful. “I was able to conquer the trials that have come my way,” she said.

She dreams of building a bigger stall separate from their home to house Geward’s Milkshake. And, a true wonder woman in her own right, she’s not only dreaming about it, but making it happen.

She attributed her perseverance... to her mother, the family’s ‘wonder woman’



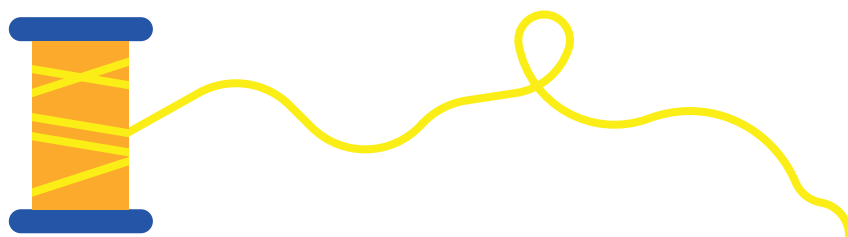
FORMER NURSE IN DUBAI TURNS TO DESIGNING, SELLING OWN CLOTHING BRAND TO FOCUS ON FAMILY

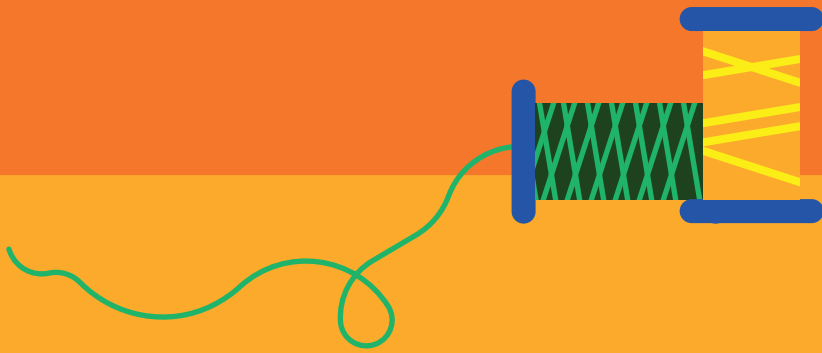
If only changing careers were as simple as changing clothes— Fayeazah, a former operating room nurse in Dubai, should know.

As a nurse, she assisted doctors in surgery and organ transplant, a job that needed her undivided attention. Now, she spends her days designing patterns for a clothing line, trimming cloth, talking to customers...and spending time with her family.

It was learning she was pregnant that prompted the career shift; Fayeazah knew at once that her priorities would change with the birth of her child. The decision, however, wasn't easy. For some time, Fayeazah regretted leaving her work in Dubai in 2019, along with her husband. "I had a lot of regrets before. We wanted to return (there) but we really wanted to be with our baby while she grows up," she said.

Back home, they decided to build a farm using aquaponics in Silang, Cavite, where they currently reside. Sadly, the cards were stacked against them. The farm was badly affected by the 2020





Taal Volcano eruption and the COVID-19 pandemic, sucking their savings dry.

To earn money, Fayeza turned to reselling kids' clothing from her sister-in-law's business, even as she mulled her own clothing line specializing in family wear.

By February 2021, after borrowing capital from a bank, Fayeza launched Kayish Clothing Shop. Kayish started its journey online through Facebook and online shops like Shopee and Lazada, with Fayeza doing her own promotions and investing in ads.

She credits her patience for helping her overcome the bumpy start. It was a virtue she learned as a nurse. "In surgery, there were times when we don't sleep or eat. We don't even have time for bathroom breaks."

Kayish is thriving despite only being a year old, receiving 500 orders for family twinning sets during low season, and around a thousand during Christmas season. "(This business) means family. My work as an OFW was fulfilling because I was a nurse and a person's life was in my hands, especially since I was in surgery. Now I am more family-oriented," she explains.

Fayeza puts being with her daughter above all else, even mentioning her experience as a daughter who had OFW parents. "Ever since I was one year old, my parents were already working abroad... That's why we tried our best for our baby because we want to be with her." Fayeza is looking forward to expanding her business, opening boutiques in malls and hopefully designing more clothing beyond her family sets. At some point, she and her husband also hope to revive their aquaponics farm. After all, starting anew is something they've had practice at.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR REMITTANCES HELPS HK OFW'S FAMILY OVERCOME DEBT, GROW BUSINESS

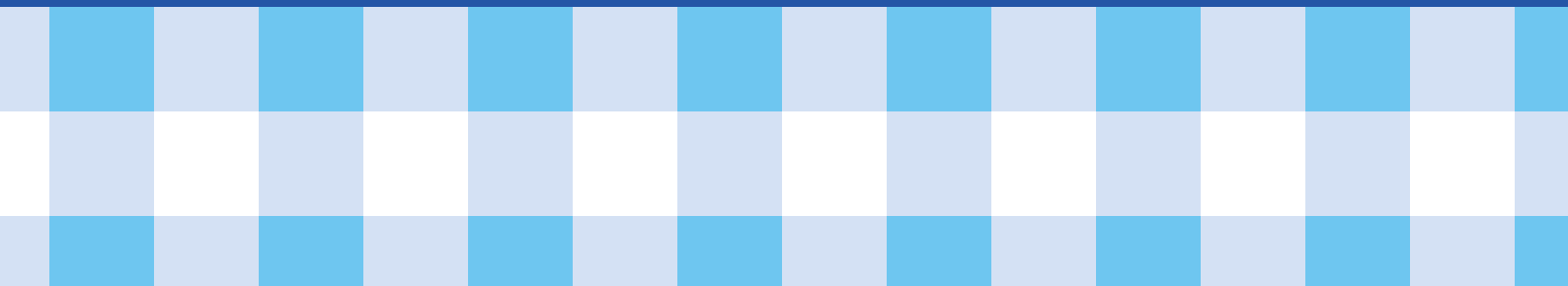
Buena Amor's family had been getting by with her parents' small farm in their hometown of Laak, Davao de Oro, when Typhoon Pablo devastated their crops in 2012. Their income was washed away by the typhoon, leaving mounting debts in its wake.

After graduating from college, Amor spent the next four years working to pay off those debts. First, she was employed as an encoder at a banana plantation in Tagum, Davao del Norte, and then, as a consultant at a call center in Davao City. Her call center job paid well, but living outside her hometown meant higher costs of living, shrinking the money that could go to servicing their debts. A year and a half into it, Amor started looking for another job that would help her family get out of the debt hole.

That was when working in Hong Kong as a domestic worker came into the picture. Not surprisingly, Amor needed funds for her application and migration. Her tight-knit family of nine helped by borrowing more money, adding to their current debt. It didn't seem like an auspicious start to overseas work, but Amor was prepared to give Hong Kong a chance. Since she arrived there in January 2018, Amor and her parents agreed firmly on using her salary solely to pay all their debts.

In her first few years, she experienced homesickness and loneliness, but keeping in touch with her parents and siblings helped her push through. She worked hard, adapted, and, eventually, Hong Kong proved to be worth it. "The moment we became debt-free, we had huge smiles," Amor shares.

In her third year as a domestic worker, Amor helped fund her parents' slowly growing carinderia (food stall), Caton Barbecue and Eatery. The eatery was a post-Typhoon Pablo venture for

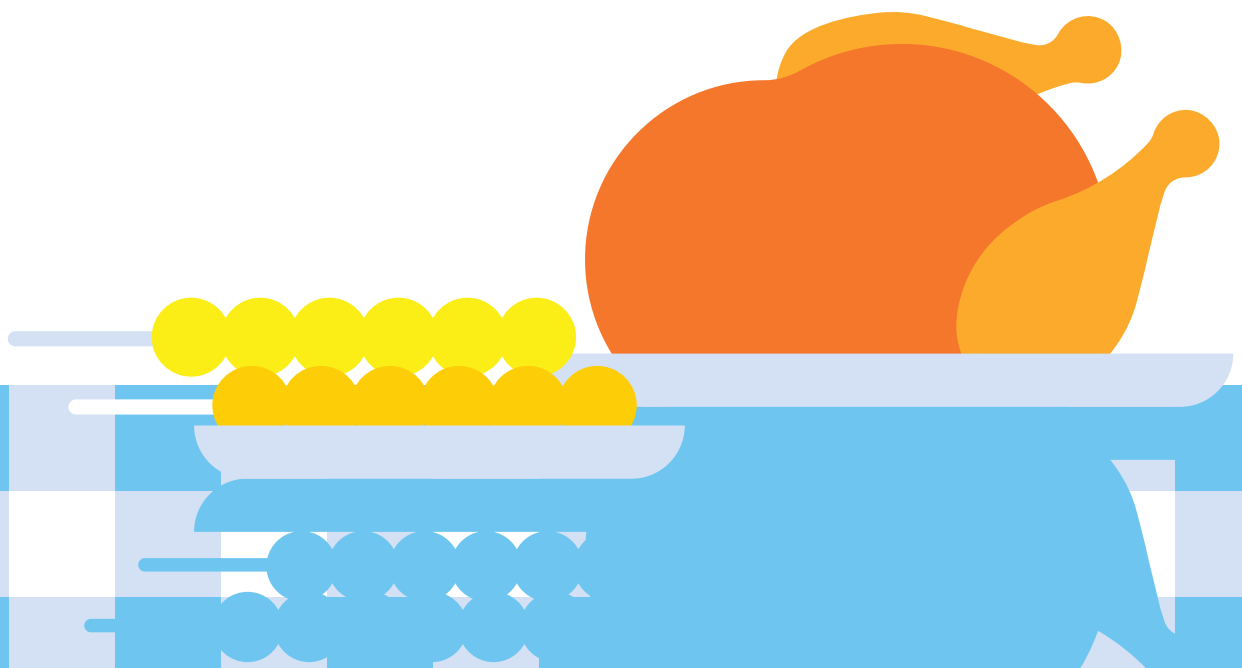


Amor's mother, who had been serving vegetable dishes regularly from their small backyard garden since Amor and her siblings were kids.

Her mother kept it going until a group of hungry farmers from a nearby banana plantation started turning up on their doorstep on a daily basis. Amor's father eventually pitched in with the cooking. "My parents are great cooks," Amor says proudly. Before the 2012 typhoon, her father busied himself by planting corn, rubber and coconut. The family sold their harvest to market vendors and piggery owners while ensuring their household had enough corn, the staple in Davao de Oro. But their farming venture was a bubble waiting to be burst by the typhoon. Her father depended on loaned materials, such as fertilizers and insecticides, to survive each harvesting season.

All those struggles are now history. Since becoming debt-free, the family's financial situation has been on the upswing. They have been able to rent out their farmland to a banana plantation for some years. And with funding from Amor, the carinderia was able to add lechon and barbecue stations just when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Moreover, the Caton family was able to buy the land across from their house and plans to build an establishment for lease to interested businesses.

Amor, now 28, is grateful to her current employers, whose four sons have been her sole responsibility. The family treats her well and pays her fairly, which, she says, were of huge help during her adjustment period. Now that the Caton family is in better financial shape, Amor dreams of building her own events organizing business. She plans to establish the firm in Davao de Oro after one more contract in Hong Kong, which should end by 2026. By then, she hopes, she could come home for good. To her supportive family and its growing ventures —and zero debts.



FORMER DOMESTIC WORKER AND ENTREPRENEUR RETURNS TO BATTLE CANCER, FIND PEACE IN ROMBLON



With “peace” surrounding her, Genevieve rests in a simple nipa hut beside her childhood home on Sibuyan Island in Romblon province. She has been a Quezon City resident for many years but endured the trip to Romblon. “I want to regain my strength back home,” she says. “It seems that I think peacefully here.”

But behind her peaceful façade, the 48-year-old is battling stage 4 colorectal cancer while raising a seven-year-old daughter. The COVID-19 pandemic and the limited mobility of townmates further burdened the former Hong Kong domestic worker.

Genevieve had begun to feel physical weakness slowly setting in even as this story was being written, yet she continued to put on a brave face, enjoying moments of happiness. Born to a

family of 11, Genevieve went to Metro Manila for college and was set to be a teacher. But after giving birth to her first child when she was 20 years old, she felt compelled to change her plans and stow away. “I was scared to return to my family.” Cooking was her foremost skill, so she began selling snacks (merienda) to her neighbors in a Quezon City subdivision where she was living with her former partner and their daughter. Her sudden entrepreneurial spirit may be attributed to her mother. After both of Genevieve’s parents died and after giving birth to her second child, she met her current partner with whom she had her youngest daughter. She continued selling merienda to earn a living.

In 2018, Genevieve found an opportunity to work in Hong Kong as a domestic worker through an acquaintance from Romblon. She was hired directly and found herself in the town of Tseung Kwan O. Like many migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, her work followed a routine and timetable. There was barely time to rest: CCTVs swarmed the house of the employer, and Genevieve wanted her employer to see how hard she worked—and to trust her like a “sibling.” Two years into working in Hong Kong, Genevieve began having irregular bowel movements. She found a small lump in her rectum, which she thought was a hemorrhoid. When she visited the local clinic, the doctor gave her an envelope that said “urgent” and told her she would be referred to a bigger hospital. There, they confirmed her colorectal cancer. “I cried and cried,” she said.

When her employer learned of Genevieve’s illness, they wanted to terminate her newly signed contract and send her back to the Philippines. But Genevieve wanted to stay so she could use her health insurance in Hong Kong. Genevieve’s female employer gave in only when Genevieve pointed out that her contract protected her employment status in case of illness. She was allowed to stay, but her employer did not help with hospital visits, even with the fare. It was the sense of her employer’s loathing that prompted Genevieve to finally return home via medical repatriation. “At least in the Philippines,” she says, “I have many loved ones who will take care of me.”

In October 2021, Genevieve returned to her home country and was admitted to a Manila hospital, not receiving any reimbursements for the medical treatment supposedly covered by her health insurance. “Forget about it,” Genevieve told herself. “It’s just money.” Instead, she dusted off her entrepreneurial spirit, preparing food to sell, in order to make ends meet. But eventually, that too had to stop because of her illness and the pandemic.

Genevieve’s siblings now attend to her daily needs. When she has the strength, they take a stroll together along her hometown’s seashore. There, it is possible to forget the setbacks. “I am at peace back home,” she says.

FORMER ENTERTAINER OVERCOMES JAPAN ORDEAL, STIGMA TO HEAD THEATER GROUP OF NGO THAT HELPED HER

For Mary Joy, Japan was a means to continue her studies and to help lift her family from rural poverty in the Philippines. But her six-month sojourn as an Overseas Performing Artist (OPA) saw Joy getting trafficked and compromised her sense of self-worth. Although she would eventually recover her self-esteem with the help of an NGO, the story of her journey from her hometown in Santiago, Isabela, to Japan's night clubs, and back, is worth telling as it captures the experience of many Filipinas who have been through similar journeys.



Joy learned the value of money at an early age. At the tender age of nine, she began earning, for helping to repack candies at a factory owned by her grandfather in Isabela. In the early 1990s, Joy became a nanny to the child of her cousin. But feeling the economic pinch, she thought of going to Japan. “What if I go to Japan?” Joy recalled herself musing, in Filipino. “Anyway, it will be for just six months. So when I come home, I can finally study.” Joy was not supposed to leave for Japan as an OPA because she was underaged, at 21 years old. A cousin, who was also her “manager,” and the promotion agency faked her birth certificate and obtained a passport for her using her sister’s name.

She contractually agreed to work in the city of Takasaki, a city west of Tokyo, but she was brought to the neighboring city of Maebashi.

She was also set to work in a hotel but was forced to work in a club. She once had to brave a winter night outside the club because she was not allowed inside without a customer of her own. And during a dohan (afternoon date), a customer exposed her to indecent videos. To avoid further conflict, she requested to be taken back to the club. Aside from this, she had to endure other harrowing experiences. This summarized her six-month ordeal in Japan. The return journey to Isabela almost crumbled Joy’s pride: the negative opinion about her being a japayuki, a common slur for OPAs at the time.

Using her meager savings from Japan, she opened a sari-sari store, bought a tricycle for her brothers, and got rights for properties which her parents managed. Meanwhile, the girl who once dreamed of becoming a teacher was ready to resume her studies. Unfortunately, Joy’s mother became sickly. And just as Joy was able to get a college scholarship with the help of her high school best friends, her mother died of diabetes complications. Back at school, schoolmates and neighbors continued to taunt her for being a japayuki. Eventually, she dropped out of school and gave her father and siblings the rights to her businesses.

Joy returned to Manila and sought help from a non-government organization, Development Action for Women Network (DAWN). She joined DAWN’s workshops and other activities for women migrant returnees and Japanese-Filipino children.

In 2006, Joy finally finished college with a degree in Bachelor of Science in Entrepreneurial Management with the help of DAWN. She now heads DAWN’s alternative livelihood program, SIKHAY, and directs the theater group, Teatro Akebono. The 48-year-old feels content working at DAWN. But if she ever wants to dip her toes into the business world again, she would put up a social enterprise. One, she adds, that “would be for the people and wouldn’t be just a business.”

OFW IN CYPRUS FINDS COMFORT IN HELPING KABABAYANS, MULLS RETURN TO COCONUT BUSINESS UPON RETIREMENT

With retirement looming, Armelita, a Filipino domestic worker in Cyprus, finds herself thinking of coconuts and how to create an economic safety net out of them. Back in the late 1990s, before she left for Cyprus, she and her mother had dabbled in a business selling products using coconuts—bath soaps, candles, shampoos, cleaning agents—and it is what she hopes to return to when she eventually comes home.

That home is Gasan, Marinduque, which abounds in coconut trees, making it an ideal business, in Armelita's view. Selling coco lumber and coconut husks (used to polish wooden floors, among others) could provide additional income streams. Not for nothing is the coconut tree known as the tree of life, she says: "Nothing is wasted."

Armelita previously worked for the Benedictine Sisters of St. Scholastica, but when the family faced an economic crunch, she decided to work in Cyprus in 2009. She was raising four boys and wanted them all to finish college. Armelita experienced culture shock and discrimination as a domestic worker in Cyprus. Amid these challenges, she claimed that her "guiding star" was to simply work. "I'll do my work. I don't care if you discriminate me, I will only do my work. That was my attitude to overcome culture shock," she said, alternating between English and Filipino.

Aside from her job as a domestic worker, Armelita also does part-time work as a translator for Filipinos. Among Cyprus's official languages is Greek, in which Armelita has received a B1 certificate after learning the language during her stay in the country.

With her added skill, non-government organizations and even the Cypriot police contact Armelita when they need to translate laws or policies in court hearings. Armelita has also had her hand in translating into Filipino, materials from the European Union to help migrant workers protect themselves.



“I make the materials available in our language because they (Cyprus government) want migrants to understand the policies. If foreign workers have knowledge, then they can protect themselves.”

Armelita’s kindness and commitment to helping her fellow Filipinos doesn’t stop there. During her free time, she volunteers as a trainer with the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), teaching OFWs how to manage their money and, hopefully, start their own business as well.

“If they are financially literate, they won’t be in debt since they can manage their own finances... We need to prepare for the next chapter of our lives, we can’t always be OFWs, we’ll get old and weak as well,” she said. It is sage advice she practices herself, toying with ways to turn coconut into her ticket to a comfortable retirement.

NURSING JOB IN GERMANY IS SINGLE MOM'S 'RISKY VENTURE' FOR DAUGHTER

At the center of Germany, in a rural town called Arnstadt (in the Thuringia region), Regille Anne found herself tongue-tied the first time she arrived. Arnstadt is the kind of place you might imagine finding in old storybooks. It sits at the edge of a forest and birds could be found chirping all over the place. "It's calm there," Regille said. But English was not widely spoken among the town's 27,000 residents, and the basic German language examination she passed barely helped the Filipina nurse communicate with them.

Regille found herself dealing with culture shock in spite of Arnstadt's idyllic landscape—or perhaps, because of it: She found herself longing for the vibe she was used to in the Philippines, with its malls and bustling places to visit. She then decided to take another risk by moving 317 kilometers northwest to Berlin, the German capital. It was all for her daughter's future, she explained. The Berlin setting for Regille's risk-taking was an intensive care unit (ICU) at a local hospital. Germany is chronically short of nursing staff, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As far back as the late 1960s, when the country was still divided into East and West, Filipino nurses were among those tapped by German hospitals to fill the gap.

Back in Berlin, coming into daily contact with severely ill and critical patients amid the gloomy yet fast-paced environment of the ICU took a toll on Regille's health. It was sad to see people in that kind of scenario, she narrates. "Even if you have studied German, when you reach the ICU, you need to be always on the go," she added.

After a year's experience in the ICU, Regille applied for a job in the operating room (OR) at another hospital. There, she found her passion: as a surgical assistant. "I like preparing the instruments for an operation," she said. The fast-paced work environment was different from her 12-hour shifts and four-day work weeks at a private hospital back when she was still in the Philippines. Another difference was the pay. So, after 3.5 years of working there, with what felt like insufficient pay, she decided to migrate.

Her daughter was seven when Regille moved to Germany in 2017, leaving the girl with her parents. “I told myself I had to earn and work hard for my child,” the now 33-year-old mom said.

Her journey to Germany started when a co-worker told her that an agency was hiring Filipino nurses to work there. Taking her chance, she sent her application and requirements online and was eventually invited for an interview. Regille passed the interview and soon started the six-month German-language course required of migrant nurses. Due to the difficulty of the language, she needed to resign from her job. “It’s a beautiful language but not the easiest to learn,” she says.

After completing the course, Regille spent another two months of intensive review for the exam, which she also passed. Finally, after a total of one year of preparation, she was able to fly to Germany. Once she found work she liked at the OR and some measure of financial stability, she began preparing to relocate her daughter so they could live together in Berlin. She wasn’t deterred even though COVID-19 had already hit the world by that time. She collected her daughter’s documents and got a new apartment that was suitable for them.

Travel restrictions snagged her daughter’s arrival in Germany. But when a fellow Filipino nurse and friend, Sarah, vacationed in the Philippines, Regille asked her to bring her daughter along on her return. A risk yet again, but also worth it. Mother and daughter (now 11) have now been living together in Berlin for over a year. The daughter is even excelling in class at a nearby school — earning a grade of “one” even if she was just new to Berlin. “I am very happy,” Regille says. Permanent residency is her next target, followed by German citizenship. “I’d rather let her finish college or university here in Germany,” Regille said. “I just want the best for her.”





GUIMARAS FORMER OFW RUNS FRUITFUL BUSINESS FOR CLOSE TO TWO DECADES

The small island of Guimaras in Western Visayas is famous for its sweet mangoes. Little wonder that former OFW Rebecca, who hails from the town of Buenavista in the province, should put the fruit, as well as other fruits like calamansi, at the center of her thriving business, McNester Food Products. What is more remarkable is how she designed the business to be good for people and the planet, as well as profit—McNester is zero-waste, creates jobs, and gives back to the community, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rebecca's altruistic impulses may be inspired by the help she herself has received throughout her life, starting with her parents, who supported her in their own way. Rebecca's mother, a housewife and seamstress, raised Rebecca and her four siblings as their father worked in the military for 20 years. Her mother ensured their daily budget was enough and each child had a school uniform.

This enabled Rebecca to earn a chemistry degree and secure a teaching job at the local high school. Afterwards, and still with her parents' help, she decided to become a domestic worker in Hong Kong, way

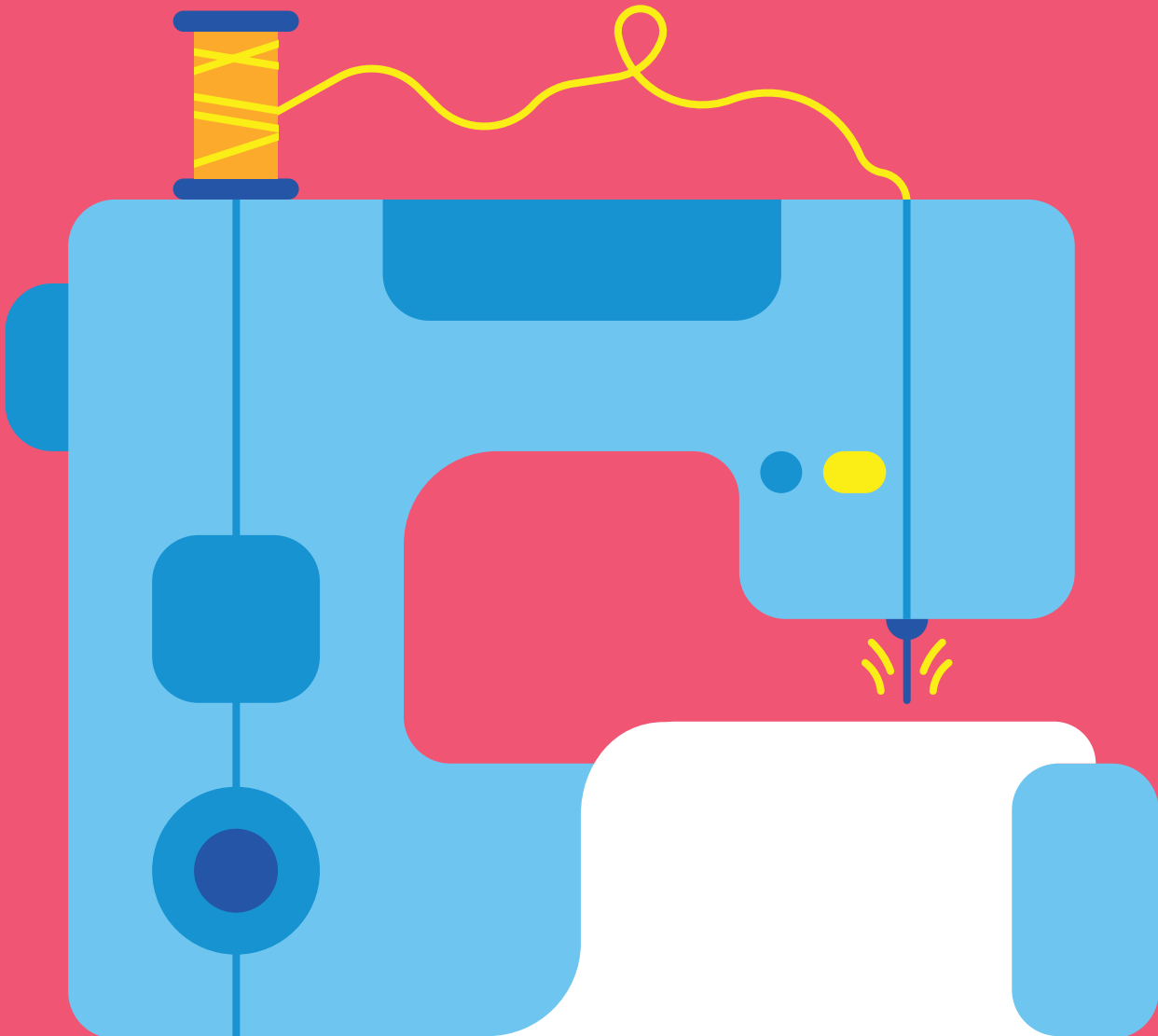
back in 1985. In 1992, she returned to the Philippines for good when she found out she was pregnant. She opted to give birth in Manila, afraid of her parents' disappointment over her pregnancy. Though upset at first, Rebecca's parents soon came around and accepted their grandson. But her son, himself, yearned for a father figure. When the boy was four years old, Rebecca rekindled a past relationship with a seaman. Their relationship blossomed alongside the bond between him and her son. They tied the knot in 1999 and had another son of their own in 2001. It was the names of the two boys—MacMac and Nester—that formed the name of the business.

The creative alchemy shown by that name hints at Rebecca's inventiveness. This same quality emerged when she developed a calamansi concentrate while a production manager at Guimaras Bottlers, Inc., a job she took while already back in the Philippines. After she left the company in 2003, she officially opened McNester, developing new products month after month. Guimaras' famous mangoes featured in most of them. The process of turning ideas into products bound for the market begins with "processable-grade" raw materials bought from local farmers, usable fruits and vegetables rejected by other customers. They end up in Rebecca's processing plant to help farmers earn and guarantee no produce is wasted.



Nowadays, McNester uses 300 kilograms of mangoes daily, most of which are turned to dried mangoes. But the process doesn't stop at the mango pulp. Living up to her vow of sustainability, Rebecca makes use of each part of the mango. The remaining pulp on the pit is turned into mango puree. The skin is made either into animal feed or compost. The seeds are mostly bought by the National Mango Research and the Bureau of Plant Industry for their nurseries. And over the years, Rebecca has provided seeds for students who used them in their theses. In 2015, Rebecca's family won the Model OFW Family of the Year Award for their sacrifices and contributions as migrant workers to the community. When COVID-19 hit, the demand for McNester products was enough to keep the company afloat. A grateful Rebecca recognized that McNester was uniquely placed to serve the community during the difficult time. She and her employees volunteered to deliver donations from other provinces to nearby areas under lockdown. "No one else could distribute the goods so we took care of it," Rebecca said.

McNester also donated calamansi juice to frontliners during the pandemic's peak, supplying them with much needed vitamin C. It also produced over a million bottles of calamansi juice for young students in nearby provinces. Closer to home, she rewarded her hardworking employees with a paid week off. And as for herself? "As I get old, I feel tired sometimes," Rebecca shares. "But with McNester, I'm still hands on."



FROM POURING SHOTS TO CALLING THE SHOTS, FORMER ENTERTAINER IN JAPAN HEADS NGO COOPERATIVE

A winning smile was useful in Gilda's former job as an "entertainer" in Japan. Nowadays, the 52-year-old's smile lights up the cooperative which she leads, that trains former OFWs in sewing. Gilda spent her 20s to mid-30s in four adjacent Japanese prefectures: Saitama, Chiba, Gunma, and Tochigi. She was able to work "legally" as an entertainer for two six-month contracts, but when policy changes in Japan made it unlikely that she would get another contract, she decided to move to Oyama City in Tochigi as an undocumented worker.

While employed at a short-lived Brazilians-only bar in Oyama, Gilda met her former partner, a Brazilian-Japanese working in automotive manufacturing. She had to switch jobs when the bar closed but they stayed together, soon bearing two sons. A “runaway” for the rest of her time in Japan, Gilda worked at a small bar called Hanamizuki. But one fateful night in 2005, while she and her friends were driving to another bar to unwind after a hard day’s work, they accidentally turned down a one-way street and were pulled over by police. Gilda and another undocumented friend were arrested. After a month’s detainment in immigration, Gilda and her sons were deported to the Philippines, leaving her partner in Japan. They returned to her hometown in Daet, Camarines Norte, where Gilda raised the two boys on her own. They initially had difficulty adjusting to rural life, especially as they grew up speaking Nihongo, but they endured.

For the first five years, Gilda received financial support from her partner in Japan. When the remittances suddenly stopped after that, she took on a job as a massage-therapist at a spa in order to pay the bills. At some point, though, her earnings were no longer enough to support her and her two sons. This was when she sought help from Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), an NGO assisting OFWs and their children who came from Japan and other destination countries. She received trainings under DAWN’s wellness program and her massage skills were put to the test. Her first major success at that time, with DAWN’s help, was finally graduating from high school through the Alternative Learning System. The child of a construction worker-turned-farmer and a housewife, Gilda left school during her high school freshman year despite being a hardworking and ambitious student. She felt envious of her well-off classmates.

Still with DAWN, she underwent a year’s training in sewing and weaving. In 2017, Gilda was promoted to training coordinator for sewing at the NGO’s SIKHAY Project. Over the next few years, she would pass her knowledge and skills to returning migrant workers. Recently, Gilda was elected chairperson of the DAWN Multi-Purpose Cooperative. Today, she plans to pursue a college degree in entrepreneurial management, hoping it would help her in managing the cooperative.

It is a lot to smile about. Previously accustomed to doing three shows a night in Japan, she is running her own “show” now through the cooperative. Once obliged to pour shots for her “guests,” Gilda is now the one calling the shots for those who depend on her inspiration and guidance. Gilda continues to be amazed at the things that came her way. “I didn’t know I could do it,” she said, referring to becoming a sewing coordinator and leading a cooperative. “I didn’t know I could be this good.”

BULACAN BUSINESS HEIR PURSUES STUDIES, FINDS PERSONAL “RENAISSANCE” IN FLORENCE

Inside a small apartment studio in Florence, birthplace of the Italian renaissance (meaning ‘rebirth,’ in French), Chiara is undergoing her own rebirth. The fourth-generation heir to a family-run food distribution venture in Bulacan is juggling freelance consulting and a university-based job. Before becoming a professional freelancer, it was a graduate scholarship at the Università degli Studi di Firenze (University of Florence) that brought Chiara to Italy. Known for its rich history, culture and arts, it wasn’t exactly the first place that comes to mind when you think of studying business. “You don’t go to Florence to study business, it doesn’t make sense,” she said.

But go, she did. She put aside her curiosity for art history and decided to focus on business administration, where she earned her undergraduate degree at the University of the Philippines. Her choice of what to study might not have been surprising given that business





“It would be a waste to let go. Not a lot of Filipinos get to be in that position.”

runs in the family. In their hometown of Pulilan in Bulacan, her parents run a food distribution venture, distributing goods like flour, rice, and noodles, which has been in the family for several generations. Despite her scholarship and the help of her parents back home, Chiara found life in Italy challenging and had to take on multiple jobs such as babysitting and restaurant work. Amid COVID-19, for instance, she was hired as a restaurant staff to check foreign tourists’ green passes before they dine in.

“One of the things they were conscious about is to hire people who are not Italians because it’s to their (employers’) advantage. It’s not because they want to give equal opportunity to everyone: they need non-Italians to attract (foreign) customers... It’s an advantage for (my employer) that I’m female, I’m not white and I speak English,” the Filipina explains.

But being a foreigner is not always an advantage. Chiara was struck by some locals’ racist remarks against Filipinas, even on bus rides, stereotyping them as domestic workers. Not that she had anything against domestic work. In fact, she said she would have considered that line of work if it weren’t for her family and friends— it even paid better than her freelance ventures.

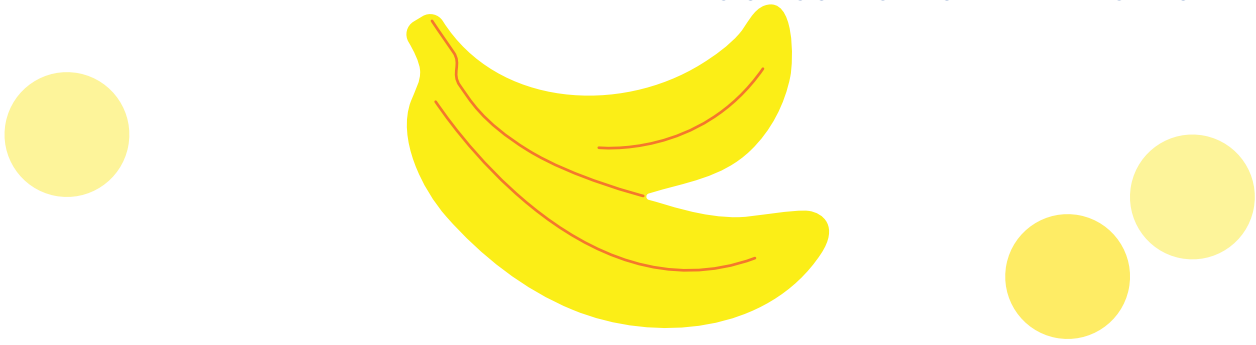
Chiara knows that as her parents grow older, she might need to take on the reins of the business along with her sibling. Her business studies would have prepared her well when that time comes. For now, though, she is making the most of her time in Italy. Just recently, she married an Italian, Jon. She has also secured a new contract as a project associate for the European University Institute’s Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. “It would be a waste to let go. Not a lot of Filipinos get to be in that position. Even though I’m only a project associate and I’m only new and my contract isn’t long-term... no (other) Filipino has cracked it there (at EUI),” she said.

FORMER AU PAIR, MECHANIC HUBBY IN GREENLAND EMPLOY NEIGHBORHOOD MOMS IN BANANA CHIPS BIZ

Walking down a particular street in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, you might wonder where the moms in the neighborhood have gone. You need to follow the smell of frying oil and sweet bananas to find them — they are inside a small factory, slicing bananas, deep-frying them, then placing the golden banana chips in clear bags with the Reina Banana label and a matching slogan “Banana chips fit for a queen.” This hub of women-powered industry belongs to GFA Marketing and its founder, 39-year-old Elaine, who markets and delivers thousands of packed banana chips to retailers herself. The bustling factory was shuttered for six months at the height of pandemic lockdowns in 2020, but Elaine and her employees regained their footing the following year. The pandemic forced some of their business clients to close, so Elaine had to restart the business at a similar pace to when it was just starting out in 2016.

Then came a lucky break. The business won a contract to supply banana chips to the Department of Education (DepEd), to be given to undernourished children as part of its feeding program. From late 2021 to early 2022, the masked, hair-netted, and aproned mothers worked until the wee hours to produce almost 150,000 bags of chips. Fittingly enough, it was from her





own mother, a livelihood trainer at the Department of Agriculture, that Elaine learned how to make banana chips. Back then, Elaine used to make her products on her own and commuted for hours by bus to deliver them from her Isulan home to the “big cities” in the Soccsksargen region, like General Santos and Koronadal.

Eventually, Elaine’s husband, now working as a mechanic in Greenland, helped fund the construction of GFA Marketing’s processing center behind their home. The couple had married in 2007 when her husband was based in Saudi Arabia. Elaine then became a housewife with a small sari-sari store. Eager to earn more, Elaine applied to become an au pair in Norway in 2010 with help from her aunt who worked in the country as a nurse. Her host family treated her well and most of her allowance was remitted to her family in Isulan. But Elaine also saved a bit of the money for the dream business that was still just brewing in her mind at that point. When her contract ended, she was about to turn 30, Norway’s age limit for au pairs. A new “no-kids policy” had also been put into effect for au pairs; Elaine already had a toddler before flying to the Scandinavian country. “Authorities are concerned about those who plan to leave their own kids back home to care for other people’s kids in a foreign country,” she explained in Filipino.

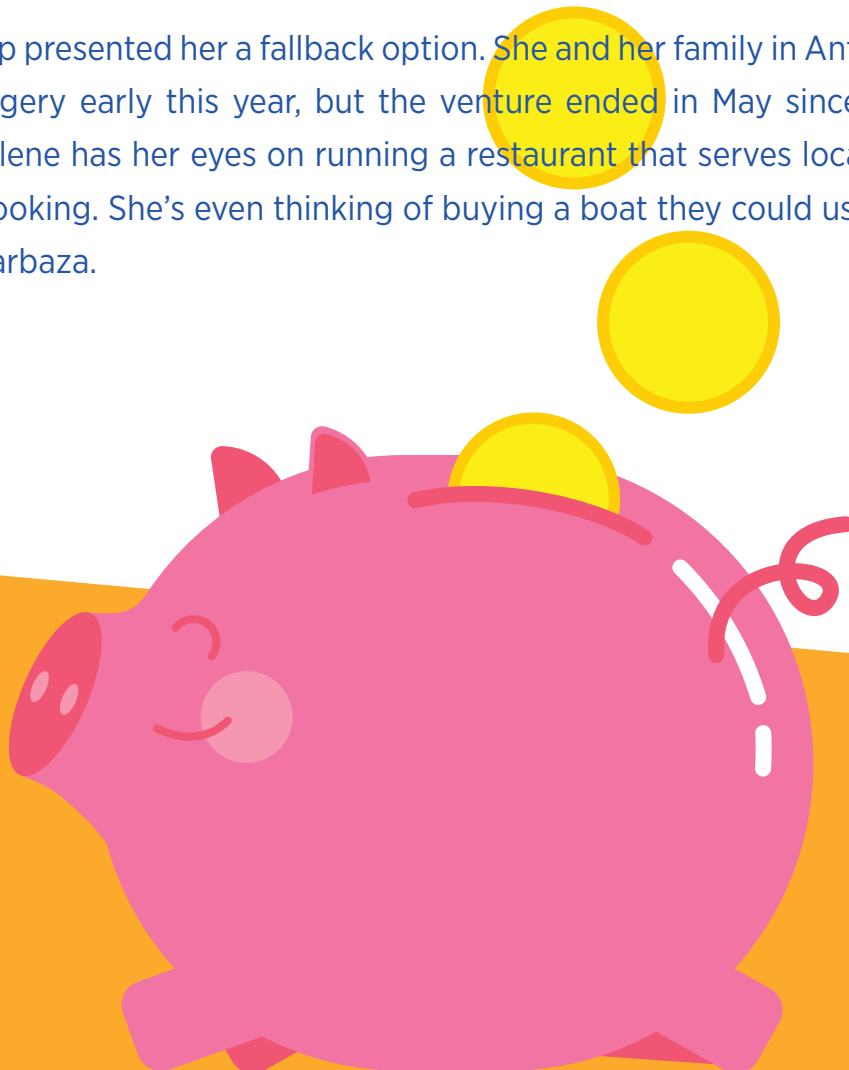
In 2012, Elaine returned to Isulan for good and began work on the business she’d been wanting to put up for her child. Today, she has three daughters on top of her brainchild. Her success has benefitted not only her own family but also others who had supported her. Banana farmers have GFA Marketing as a regular customer. The neighborhood mothers have a steady source of income. Even local students landed part-time work at her factory when the pandemic forced school closures. The students took part in Elaine’s 50-woman team that supplied the DepEd program with banana chips. But after that busy Christmas season, Elaine and her employees enjoyed being back to their regular production schedule. “I’m tired,” she joked. “But I’m happy.”

Still, she’s willing to do it again if they win the bid anew. The venture may be hard work for her and her employees, but Elaine says it’s worth it to help the community. Besides, she had come a long way from the hour-long rides she used to take on public buses to peddle her chips. The secondhand car she now owns might not be fit for a queen, but it definitely makes deliveries easier.

DOMESTIC WORKER IN HK SETS SIGHTS ON BUSINESS AS EYE SURGERY COMPLICATIONS MAKE WORK DIFFICULT

Through the haze of her blurring vision, Marlene could make out the horizon of her hometown of Antique, and her future there tending a business with her family. That future might have to come earlier than planned as the 49-year-old domestic worker in Hong Kong faces complications from a previous eye surgery and side effects from receiving a COVID-19 jab. Marlene admits she can't rely on domestic work and earnings in Hong Kong to help her condition in the long run. "At some point, I may need to retire and return home," she says.

Entrepreneurship presented her a fallback option. She and her family in Antique started running a three-hog piggery early this year, but the venture ended in May since it wasn't making a profit. Now, Marlene has her eyes on running a restaurant that serves local dishes, because of her interest in cooking. She's even thinking of buying a boat they could use to catch fish in her hometown of Barbaza.



You might say her health challenges sparked this single mother's entrepreneurial mindset, but going abroad to work itself entails an entrepreneurial spirit. In Marlene's case, she took the leap in 2006, flying to Malaysia to become a domestic worker, and leaving behind her children. "Even though I had a special child, I forced myself to leave and go abroad," she confided, in Filipino.

Without their mother around, her oldest son took the helm in the household and raised his three other siblings, including his brother with special needs. And now, with most of her children done with school, Marlene faces yet another challenge: declining health. She still works as a domestic worker for a household in Kennedy Town, Hong Kong. She still remits money to the Philippines to sustain her family and to build their home, but the long-term prospect of working in a foreign country has begun to fade with the complications from her eye surgery. Marlene has been in and out of hospital because of this, and may have to undergo another operation. Moreover, after receiving her second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, she found herself facing new health issues: She now needs medication to regulate her blood pressure.

She is grateful her employer has not sent her back home given the difference in healthcare systems between the Philippines and Hong Kong. She benefits from the free hospitalization and medication for foreign workers there. But apart from the free healthcare, making a living in Hong Kong appears increasingly fraught for Marlene. Thus, she has asked her eldest son to study and research possible business ventures, such as the piggery, while she was still abroad. Meanwhile, even with her eyesight blurring, she tries to watch instructional videos online on running a business, proof positive that there is more than one kind of vision.

“Even though I had a special child, I forced myself to leave and go abroad.



FORMER NANNY, COOK TURNS BAKING HOBBY INTO THRIVING BUSINESS IN DAVAO, LONDON

The printed tarpaulin on the newly painted façade of the building says it all: Mama Liz Bakes—The Taste of London. The shop in Davao City and the adjoining house belong to Liza, a former family cook based in the United Kingdom. Both were the product of decades of hard work abroad. Mama Liz Bakes “is only the beginning,” says the 53-year-old, who was vacationing in Davao. She beamed with pride at her dream business venture. “It’s a bit of a struggle, but I’m happy.”



Perhaps it helps that Liza is no stranger to struggle. For years, she endured being apart from her husband as she worked for a better life. The Naels met in 1991, when she was a registered midwife at a Davao City clinic, while he was in the Philippine Marine Corps.

But Liza migrated to Qatar in 1992 to work as a nanny for a royal family, leaving her partner back home. As her charge grew up, Liza was promoted to senior nanny, managing the other nannies employed by the family. In 1998, Liza briefly returned to the Philippines to marry. But the couple had to part ways again soon after, enduring their long-distance relationship for another 12 years. Even though Liza resigned from her job as a nanny and returned home in 2007, the same year her husband retired from the Marines, she was on a plane again soon after, this time en route to London. Her earnings in Qatar had gone to her siblings' schooling, and the UK's higher hourly rate compared to Qatar's beckoned as she sought to get her finances in order for her own family. Three years later, Liza was all settled as a family cook and was ready for her husband to follow her.

Liza's passion for baking started with her cheesecake, which her employers and their friends enjoyed. Eventually, she attended baking workshops offered by the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). As Liza's assorted cakes and pastries grew, she began selling them at Filipino festivals and other events in 2018. Then people started ordering online. While she worked weekdays as a family cook, Liza dedicated weekends to whipping up baked goods for her customers.

By December 2021, Liza was ready to leave her employer and focus on opening her own business. "It's my dream to become a successful bakeshop owner," she said. Bit by bit, with her husband's help, Liza added necessary facilities to her Davao store while already getting sales from customers pre-ordering on Facebook. Despite voluminous orders, Liza perseveres— a day full of sales, she says, compensates for a day with none. She likes being self-employed and having the freedom of time, not wanting to grow old as an employee in the United Kingdom.

During her vacation, she enjoyed her childhood home, which still houses her elderly parents, some siblings, and her five-year-old daughter. In the future, she plans to spend her retirement years in Davao City, while retaining her London home. It seems like a classic case of wanting to have her cake and eat it, too. But anything seems possible for Liza: She's the baker, after all.

AFTER 14 YEARS, 4 COUNTRIES, FORMER DOMESTIC WORKER FINDS HOPE IN SEWING, SARI-SARI STORE

Esther wakes up at 4 am to the sound of knocking on her kitchen window. It is her senior-citizen customers, asking for their usual morning brew. She sells coffee for 10 pesos a cup, some 20 percent cheaper compared to the coffee from stores outside their community in Quiapo, Manila.

The 53-year-old sells coffee at a discount “so my neighbors can afford it.” She understands they are all in the same boat she has been on for too long both here and abroad.

At 14, in Cagayan de Oro City (CDO), Esther decided to move her seven younger siblings, including a newborn, from her father’s home to their grandmother’s. Months earlier, her mother had died of childbirth, and Esther’s five older siblings were already married. While she worked as a household service worker for a family in CDO, Esther’s grandmother took care of her siblings. Her earnings all went towards the family’s upkeep—rice, money for her grandmother, milk for the baby, shoes for her siblings as they started school.

In 1986, Esther was hired by a higher-paying Makati household. Fortunately, her employers in the affluent Bel-Air subdivision were generous and she stayed with them for a decade. After that, her salary was no longer enough to cover her family’s needs, such as medical expenses, so she decided to go to Malaysia in 1996.

In Malaysia, Esther dealt with a difficult employer. At the same time, she got pregnant by her boyfriend, and gave birth to a daughter after returning home in 1999. In 2001, she left again, this time for Kuwait, where she ended up getting detained by her employer while defending herself against the family’s abuse. She came home through the assistance of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) in 2003. Esther went back to Malaysia in 2004, worked there for three years, and returned to the Philippines with her boyfriend. Then she worked in the United Arab Emirates in 2011 as a nanny. Her final pitstop was Saudi Arabia in 2015. A few times, she needed to fly back and forth between Jeddah and Manila after her original employer died in 2018, and then her partner in 2019. At her daughter’s request, Esther decided to come home for good in 2020. COVID-19 hit but she still managed to make it back in December 2020.



It wasn't long before her savings dried up and Esther again had to start from scratch. She did this by opening her own sari-sari store, a neighborhood sundry shop, in April 2021 with some funding from OWWA. Esther runs the store in between attending trainings at DAWN, where she learns to sew in the hope of making a living out of it. "I didn't know how to sew at all," she shares. "I've never used a machine before I started training." She goes to DAWN daily brimming with excitement. On the way home, she would often shop for merchandise for her store, including the coffee which she sells for a discount to her elderly neighbors.

In spite of this act of solidarity, Esther means business. She prices her products reasonably on condition that customers pay up front—not for her the old practice of "pa-lista" or IOUs. Even so, Esther continues to incur debts and subsist from day to day due to her limited financial knowledge. Recently, her daughter, now 23, started work as a security guard. The paycheck will help, but unless she is able to parlay her sewing lessons into a sustainable livelihood, as she hopes to, Esther knows she and her family will likely keep struggling to stay afloat.

AT 60, HK OFW COMMUNITY LEADER TAKES CROWN FOR SERVICE TO KABABAYANS

Seated in a quiet office overlooking the skyscrapers of Hong Kong's Central district, Leo pores through pages of paper. Those sheets contained names of fellow Filipinas, all seeking new employers in Hong Kong. Leo manages her Chinese employer's employment referral business, TrainTech, and it is what helps her realize her own life goals.



Leo wasn't really a business manager to begin with. She arrived in Hong Kong as a domestic worker, on part-time tenure. She was then approached by her employer, who asked her thoughts on what business to invest in. Leo first suggested a training center for domestic workers, though they weren't sure how sustainable that would be in the long run. Eventually, Leo and her employer decided to open TrainTech.

The sudden divergence in her career came slowly but expectedly, given her experience; her years of hard work and her name being known within the Filipino community in Hong Kong. Before pandemic restrictions were imposed, a throng of Filipino domestic workers could be seen gathering along Chatter Road in colorful dresses, high heels, and striking makeup every Sunday. Among the sea of dressed up women, the short-haired Leo — founder and chairman of the seven-year-old Global Alliance Hong Kong— stands out in a pair of jeans and shirt. Leo helps a number of contestants in a beauty pageant held in Chatter Road. This display of pomp and pageantry by Filipina domestic workers has been a common sight on Sundays. It even became the subject of the widely acclaimed movie *Sunday Beauty Queen* by director Baby Ruth Villarama.

But the COVID-19 pandemic put a brake to these beauty pageants, where Leo and her peers used to gather. Instead, Leo tries to focus on getting the business she is running off the ground. Before the pandemic, Leo recalled, the 2019 Hong Kong protests gave the employment agency a rocky start. Streets were unsafe so they opted to stay at home. Then the pandemic happened, which led to a temporary halt in TrainTech's operations. TrainTech reopened recently. "Business is not so good and there are a lot of competitors," Leo says, then adds, "Despite business being slow, we're still hanging on and hopefully we can flourish after the pandemic."

Now 60, Leo passionately wants to continue helping Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. "I mean as long as my body and my mind can work, then I'll work. Retiring never crossed my mind," she explained in Filipino, "A lot of people need my help."



As long as my body and my mind can work, then I'll work. Retiring never crossed my mind."

FORMER ABU DHABI OFW'S CONCOCTION IS LA UNION'S COOLEST FROZEN DESSERT

Sometimes, you just have to roll with the times.

Maria Jesusa, or “MJ,” was head of the recruitment department of a manpower agency in Abu Dhabi in 2015 when the agency decided to transfer all their employees to a new company. MJ was asked if she wanted to stay in Abu Dhabi or return home: she chose the latter and decided to open her own business.

Enter rolled ice cream, or fried ice, a frozen dessert made of milk or cream that could be mixed with flavors like chocolate or fruits. It took MJ almost four months to find the perfect ice cream base. Making it involved trial and error, facing rejections and approvals from her family until she found the perfect blend.

In 2018, she launched Honeydukes from their garage, selling to their neighbors and passersby. MJ had to grapple with anxiety, wondering if people would like her product. They did. Soon, her rolled ice cream was the hottest cold dessert in La Union's capital of San Fernando. When a video of the product garnered 50,000 views, MJ realized she could grow the business.

“It just happened,” MJ said, surprised by the sudden popularity. “It wasn't in my plan to make it this big... Suddenly customers from Baguio City, Pangasinan and Ilocos were also coming.” Before long, she was opening kiosks in numerous schools. But like most businesses, MJ's ice cream business was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools shutting down, she was forced to pull out her stalls and stop production.

Fortunately, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) conducted a rolling store during the height of the lockdown in 2020. With trucks and vehicles, numerous businesses like MJ's roamed the province of La Union in hopes of selling their wares to homebound citizens. The rolling store lasted for around four months, and throughout the pandemic, MJ also joined trade fairs in malls to keep the business running. Currently, Honeydukes has a kiosk in one of the province's malls.

On a given day, you might be lucky to find MJ operating the cold machine that helps solidify the ice cream's sweet flavors. She would roll the frozen cream with spatulas and expertly place the dainty rolls in cups, before drizzling them with syrup or toppings like crushed cookies.

Chances are, she is thinking of her future ventures while she goes through the motions honed by years of practice as she was building Honeydukes. She hopes to branch out to neighboring cities and provinces like Baguio City or Pangasinan, maybe build a production area that would supply rolled ice cream to various parts of the country. A franchising venture might even be in the cards if all goes well.

And if it doesn't? MJ will roll with the times. She's done it before.

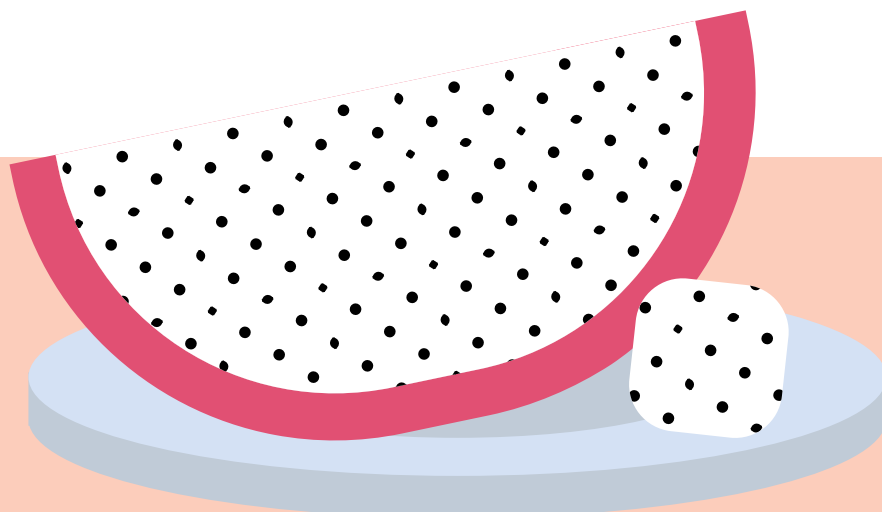


DRAGON FRUIT, BY-PRODUCTS CONJURE GREENER PASTURES FOR EX-OFW COUPLE IN ILOCOS

Even before the sun is up, you would find Agnes taking her daily 30- minute walk to her dragon fruit farm in Currimao, Ilocos Norte. For decades, she also had to rise early, to clean the house of her employers and look after their children, being a domestic worker in Hong Kong since the 1980s.

It was the promise of better fortunes that called her there. “I became an OFW because of how hard life was. My mother is a housewife and my father is only a fisherman. (Migrating) was for greener pastures,” she said. But after more than 20 years, Agnes and her husband, who has followed her to Hong Kong, decided to come back in 2003. “My daughters were growing up and they were starting to look for the guidance of their mother and it hurt me, so I decided I should return for good.”

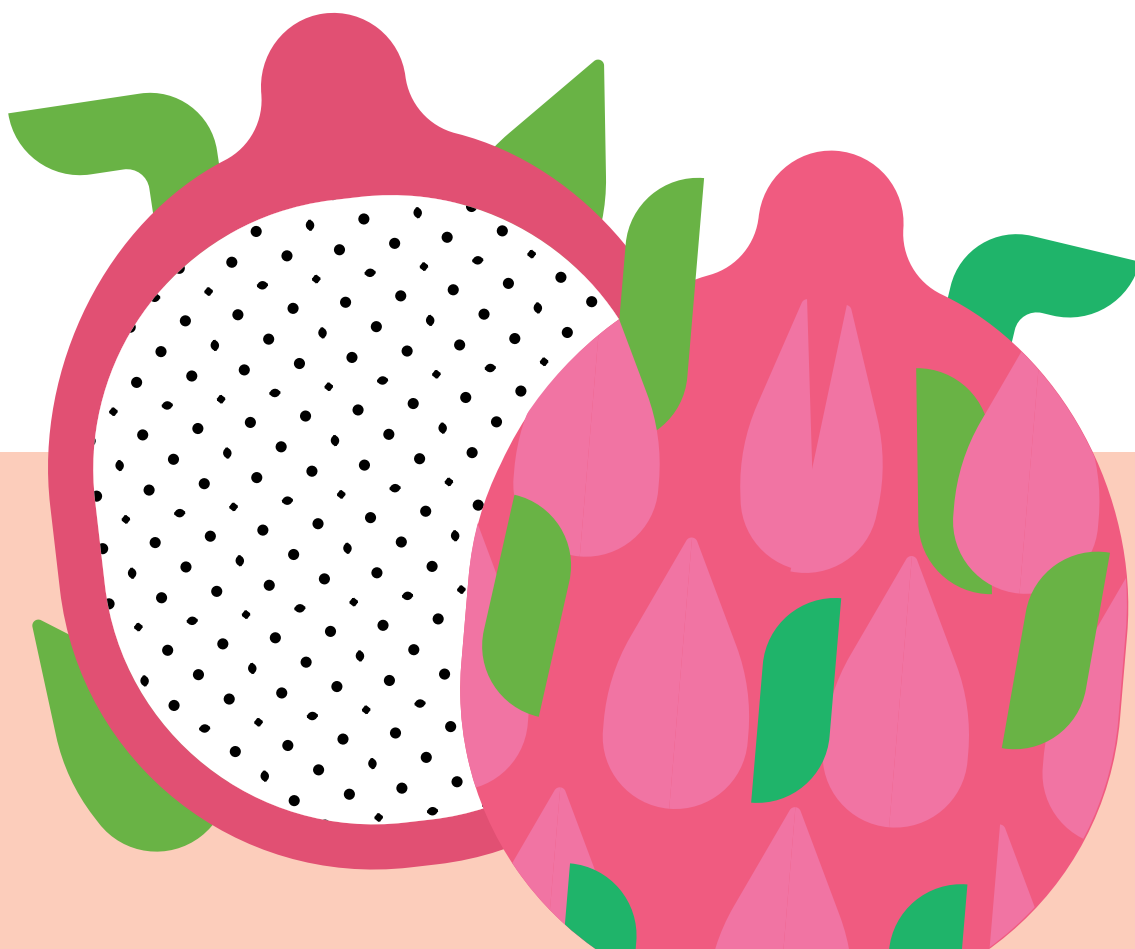
The couple turned to farming once they returned. For around five years, they attended seminars and training programs on farming run by the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRICE). Dragon fruit was not on Agnes’ radar at the time. It was the early 2000s and Euphorbia plants were popular, and that was what she took interest in. She attended seminars and tried to apply what she learned on her own. But like all trends, this one soon passed. Fortunately, Agnes discovered dragon fruit at a Farmers Congress competition in 2008. She won some prize money and used it to buy her first dragon fruit trees. “I used the P1,000 that I won to buy



three dragon fruit trees. When I saw the dragon fruit, I was amazed. It was the same fruit that we always ate in Hong Kong. That's why I was encouraged to plant it."

What started with a mere three fruit trees grew into 70 in two years; after another two, it reached 300, and now covers two hectares. The growing acreage encouraged Agnes to dabble in producing dragon fruit by-products such as soaps, massage oils and even wine. However, not everything has gone smoothly. When the farm was new, Agnes found it hard to hire workers. A number of her workers who received conditional cash transfers stopped showing up. Neither was the venture shielded from the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing construction of her new building had to be halted because income was scarce.

Nevertheless, the future looks bright to Agnes. She continues to sell her dragon fruit crop and their by-products through trade fairs and resellers, even offering shipping to her loyal customers. Agnes now has her eye on completing her new building and plans to export her soaps, massage oil, and wine. "Once the building is done, I'll apply for (a permit with the) Food and Drug Administration," she says. "I'm planning to export because many like my products." Agnes flew to Hong Kong in the 1980s seeking greener pastures. Coming home for good, she just might have found it in a field of dragon fruit trees, with their delicious pink fruit.





QC NATIVE EMBARKS ON OFW JOURNEY MID-PANDEMIC, SAVES FOR UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Many OFWs turn to business when they return home. In the case of Dennise, she had to abandon her business selling ready-to-wear clothes in order to become an OFW. Her hand was forced when her husband suffered a mild stroke. Suddenly, the entrepreneur, wife, and mother saw working abroad as her only choice.

Now in Hong Kong, the former Quezon City resident is weighing her future prospects: to build her finances to put up a new business back home, or to keep working abroad until she could bring her family to a more lucrative country of destination?



The choice is fraught given the challenges she has faced since coming to Hong Kong. Even before arriving, in fact. With the COVID-19 pandemic closing borders between countries, Dennise's flight had to be delayed.

Her luck didn't change after she arrived in June 2020. After only three months, she decided to terminate her first contract. "I broke off from my employer because I had no day-off, my salary was delayed and my meals were scraps," she recalled. She was afraid she might succumb to depression amid those conditions. The second employer who took her in refused to sign her contract despite Dennise working for him for around a week. She felt uncomfortable around him. Desperate to save herself, Dennise asked help from a neighbor, who directed her to a local church. That church sheltered her for around two months while she looked for a new employer. "Until now I serve in that church because their help was immeasurable," she said. "If they need help, I show up."

Determined to send money home, Dennise managed to find a new employer. "I have a dream. Actually it's not my dream, it's my husband's. I'm just fulfilling it. His dream is to go to Canada and bring the whole family." With the family's finances addressed somehow, she entertains hopes of again doing business back home. "I don't want my children to grow up without their mother for a very long time. It's hard to catch-up for lost time, especially now that I can't even go home."

Dennise knows having only one source of income isn't enough. She is unsure how long she could stay in Hong Kong, and the negative experiences from her early days in the city keep her constantly worried they might happen again. Thus, she is mulling the possibility of taking a franchise on a food business like selling siomai or Japanese cakes while she is overseas. But she wonders: Who would manage it? "If I open (a business), who will run it while I'm here?" With the recent rise in food prices eating into the profit margins of food businesses, Dennise's plan seems even more unlikely.

More and more, especially with her children still in school, extending her stay abroad appears to be the more practical option. Which is not to say Dennise is giving up. She is biding her time until the right opportunity comes—and saving for it in the meantime.

FORMER DOMESTIC WORKER TURNS EMPLOYER WITH BUKO PIE BUSINESS IN TACLOBAN

A small buko (coconut) pie shop sits along the busy highway of Maharlika while vehicles roar past under the afternoon sun. Inside the store, Charisse could be seen supervising her employees as they sell pasalubong to passersby, mostly tourists in Tacloban City.

Some of them might have been intrigued to see Buko Pie by Beezy Buddies Farm in a place like Tacloban City, far away from buko pie's origins, Laguna. They would be even more surprised to learn that the owner of the business did not start out as a baker or entrepreneur, but as a factory worker in Manila, then an OFW in Hong Kong, seeking dough of a different kind.

It was in the late 1990s when Charisse went to Hong Kong to become a domestic worker alongside her mother. "It would be quite a waste if I didn't send my siblings to school," she explained. Then in 1998, she encouraged her mother to return home and became the sole breadwinner of the family. Charisse's own homecoming came in 2019. She came home with hardly anything to show for her more than 20 years abroad, not even a single property to her



name. All that was left was the insurance money a former employers helped her acquire—that and the fruit of her hard work and sacrifice: her siblings' successful careers.

But she still had her own future to think about. With her modest savings, she bought a piece of land in the coastal town of Silago in Southern Leyte. Along with her sisters, Charisse now plants coconut palms and other fruits and vegetables in the property. She didn't want to stop there. So in May 2019, she earned a National Certification II in baking and pastry production from the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). Her younger sister Bam, a computer engineer, then helped Charisse purchase baking tools and became her taste tester.

It was a lot of trial and error. For months, Charisse experimented on her recipes until one day, she simply started uploading photos of her pastries online, where they slowly attracted customers. Even during the pandemic, she received numerous orders from her peers in Tacloban City. It came to the point when she was receiving 15 orders a day and needed help from her sister and mother.

“My sister is business-minded. Although the business is in my name, I'm the brawn, she's the brains and the financier,” Charisse said fondly. As orders kept coming in, Charisse decided to open a physical store and merge the Buko Pie bakery with her sister's honey business, named Beezy Buddies. Buko Pie by Beezy Buddies Farm is riding out the pandemic by producing 50 buko pies a day, thanks to its 13 employees. “I give salary to 13 people, mostly women, mostly ones who have to work for themselves,” Charisse said.

Helping her employees is enough for Charisse for now, a kind of continuation of the sacrifices she endured abroad to see her siblings lift themselves out of poverty through education. “It is a small business but it creates a ripple... It's a good feeling to think you are able to help a lot of people. You're only small, you know, just a speck of dust.”



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