



FUNDLIFE
INTERNATIONAL

Rueben is not supposed to be here. At the age 10, however, he was given a choice that would ultimately shape his destiny. His choice was simple: stay with his family or leave them behind and move to Tacloban to increase his opportunity to finish his education.


AN UNLIKELY CHAMPION

REUBEN

Not an easy choice to make at ten years old -

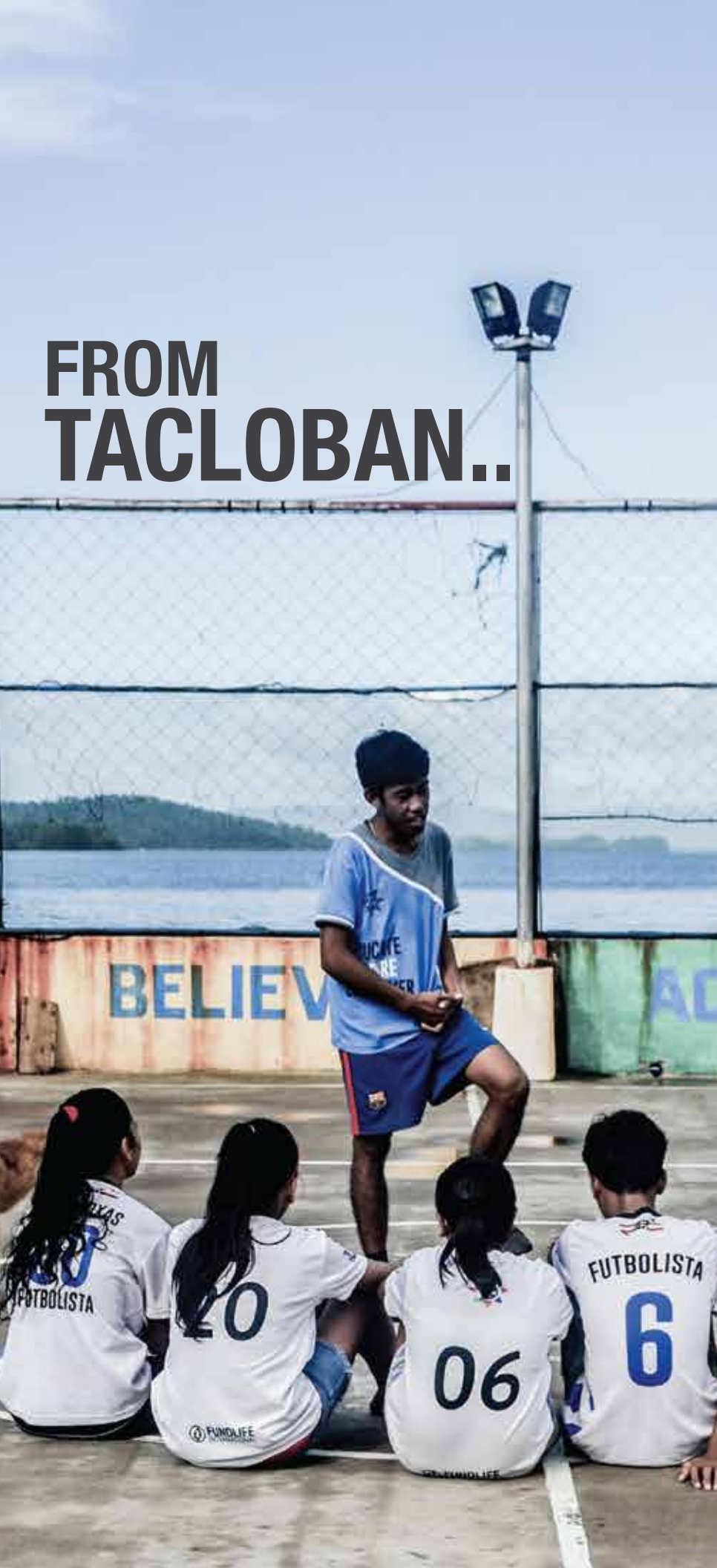
Reuben is the seventh of 11 siblings, none of whom previously completed their education. He decided then, after much heartache, to leave his family behind. Although he was only 10, he somehow understood the significance of the decision he had to make.

Almost a full 10 years on, Reuben has survived the world's strongest typhoon, graduated from college, and is a champion to children across Tacloban. On top of that, he has travelled to America, met Michael Johnson, and became the Philippines' scholar to his Michael Johnson Young Leaders Programme. Not bad for someone who was born into one of the the Philippines least advantageous regions, a country where nearly 25 million people on less than 160 USD a year (2 dollars a day).

A man with dark hair and a goatee, wearing a blue button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves, stands against a textured gold wall. He is smiling and has his hands clasped in front of him. He is wearing a black wristband on his right wrist and a metal-link watch on his left wrist. A quote is overlaid on the right side of the image, framed by two horizontal white lines.

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FROM TACLOBAN..



MI: Why do you think you were selected for the programme?

Reuben: I was selected because I think they (the selectors) saw my passion. It's funny because, at first, I didn't know I had that (passion) myself, and I thought I'm not meant for coaching. When I first met the children in Anibong, the site I was teaching at, I was challenged because the kids were so big headed, stubborn, and had attitude problems. The community was also different. I thought to myself that if I want to change this community, I could start by helping the children. And when I saw that changes were slowly showing in the community, I felt more motivated to continue coaching. I think I was selected because they saw this passion to sincerely help children.

MI: Take us back a little bit - in 2013, Haiyan Happened.. (Super Typhoon Haiyan is the world's strongest tropical cyclone, killing upwards of 7,000 people and leaving over 4 million without homes - Tacloban was the epicentre.)

Reuben: Yes. Before Yolanda (Haiyan), I was just focused then on finishing my studies and helping my family after graduating. I have a lot of siblings and they look up to me to take care of the family. I just wanted to graduate and earn money for the family. I first left my family when I was 10 years old. In the beginning, I wanted to go back home and it really was tough. And when Yolanda happened, it became even more difficult, but I saw the disaster differently - I was more motivated. I thought, I already survived the typhoon - what more is it that can come my way?

MI: Can you share more about the time you left your family for the first time?

Reuben: When I was 10 years old, I left my family for Tacloban - I was supported by relatives in Tacloban to finish my studies but I still missed my family. I would cry because I didn't know if they made the right decision in asking me to leave home. It wasn't easy staying with another family and struggling by myself, but I tried to endure everything, always remembering that the choice I made will give my family a better life in the future. But eventually, when I was 12, I gave up and returned to my home town. Between ages of 12-15, I started playing football and became really addicted to it - I was very happy to be back home. But then when I was 16, I decided to return again to Tacloban to finish my studies.

MI: What made you go back to Tacloban?

Reuben: One night, after playing until late in the evening with my friends, we took a rest and looked up at the stars. In deep thoughts, I somehow realized that I wasn't going anywhere if I continued to stay here. I told my friends that if I don't leave this place, nothing would happen to my family – nothing would happen to me. That was the turning point.

So, I decided to return to Tacloban. It was my own decision. I was inspired and challenged to resume studies, despite all the rules I had to follow and all the struggles I had to endure living away from my family. It was the hardest moment of my life. However, I made new friends and started playing football again. I made it to college, and I learned that I could get a scholarship if I'm a football player. I did my best to become part of the varsity team.

MI: So, how did you find out about Football for Life (F4L)?

Reuben: In early 2016, my friend who is also a football player told me about Football for Life. His father is a taxi driver, and one of his passengers happened to be someone from F4L. They got into conversation and my friend's father said his son and his friends are into football, and asked if maybe they could apply to be a coach. I told my friends about it and we went to the office the very next day to inquire. We got the job right away. Since then, my life has changed.

MI: Why do you say that - Can you share more on how exactly the F4L has changed your life?

Reuben: F4L opened so many opportunities for me, and just becoming a coach challenged me as a person. Being a coach gave me the confidence to teach and present myself better. With it also came the feeling of being responsible - not just for myself but also for the kids I teach. I saw myself in them, and I thought I needed to be a better person - someone whom they can look up to.

Also, as I mentioned, I had a hard time living and providing for myself, so working as a coach at F4L supported my daily needs. Also, when I was at that point where I almost had nothing, some people connected with F4L learned about my situation and they even helped me raise funds to continue my education and finish my studies - they raised funds for my school fees. Without the help of F4L, I probably wouldn't have finished college - at least, not on time. So, I'm really thankful to them.

MI: If Yolanda didn't happen, do you think this would have happened to you?

Reuben: No, I don't think so. I don't think I'd be able to meet the same people - FundLife and Football for Life's Coaches, Staff, and Kids - and the same opportunities to bring me where I am right now. Despite what happened, I'm still thankful for all the blessings that came after the typhoon - being a part of F4L, becoming a coach, earning for myself, finishing my studies, and all the other opportunities that us, coaches, were given through the programme.

If Yolanda didn't happen and F4L didn't come to Tacloban - and I didn't get to be part of F4L - I think I wouldn't have experienced freedom - freedom to choose what I want for myself and how I want to live my life. It's not a lot of freedom but probably better than what I had then - when I was tied to a certain path expected of me by my family. Now, I still carry with me the responsibility I have for my family but I am also able to do what I love.

MI: What did your family think or say when they heard about your trip to America?

Reuben: They were shocked with disbelief, happy, and proud at the same time! They didn't expect someone from our family - considering our background and history - would be given such an opportunity. They told all of our relatives and friends that I would soon be going to America. They were all excited for me.

MI: It was a long process before it was confirmed that you were definitely going to America. How did you feel when you knew you were finally leaving?

Reuben: At first, I was very happy and excited because it's my first time to travel out of the country. For me, being the representative of the Philippines was both a pleasure and an honor.

MI: What was your first impression of America?

Reuben: Big city - Dallas is! I thought there would be more skyscraper but it was still very impressive, though! When I went there, I felt so different and such a foreigner because the people were so tall! Americans are so different from Filipinos in terms of culture and attitude. Before my trip, some of the foreigners I worked with when I was coaching at Football for Life told me that the food and weather are different. Also, they told me that people there would probably be not as welcoming as us Filipinos, but they were actually the same - they also approached me, smiled at me, and made me feel welcome. I thought they would treat me differently because I'm a Filipino, but everyone was really nice.

Also, when I got to the hotel, I already thought, "This is going to be the best experience ever!".

MI: Let's go to the programme — did you have expectations of the MJYL Programme?

Reuben: I thought we were going to the Michael Johnson center everyday, people would go check me for injuries like a true athlete, and that they would only feed us healthy food - no rice! I also thought there would be a lot of media crew to cover the programme and interview us like a celebrity - but no, there weren't any haha! Other than those, I didn't have any other wild expectations as I honestly had no idea about it.

MI: What was your favorite part?

Reuben: Can I share two? First, when we went to the AT&T Stadium on the second day of the programme, because it was a dream come true! When I was in high school, I dreamed of seeing an actual football stadium/pitch, and when I got there - wow, I couldn't believe I was there! I was so happy when the tour guide was showing us around, and at the last part of the tour, we went to the center of the pitch, and I was really amazed - it was sooooo huge. In my disbelief, I even touched the ground, took a lot of photographs, and - wow. Second is when I met Michael Johnson. I thought his attitude was very distant from people, but when we talked one on one and I told him my story, I saw that he was very kind and open. We also went shopping afterwards - I got to buy the football shoes I've just been looking at and dreaming of in the internet! I'm so thankful to all those who contributed for me to be able to purchase my dream shoes. Also, another thing I enjoyed was the multiple plane rides and transits - I felt so independent and proud of myself for being able to do it by myself because it was my first time, and I had to speak English all the time.



TO AMERICA..



..Whenever I'm about to give up, I should remember the word 'purpose'.

Who influenced you the most in the programme?

Michael Johnson. He gave us inspiration to continue what we are doing. He inspired us with his own story to success. I saw my story in him. Our purposes are aligned - what his project is all about, like gathering different youth leaders from all over the world. He taught us how to be more effective and strong youth leaders to enable us to be successful in our projects.

Can you share with us the best thing you learned in the programme?

My purpose.

I learned that whenever I'm about to give up, I should remember the word "purpose" - that I need to fight for that purpose! My co-trainees and I promised to each other that we will do it because it's not just for us - it's also for the kids in the projects we are handling.

We understand that you're expected to start your own project in your own communities. Can you tell us about your big idea?

My project is to teach football in schools and communities - deliver sessions like I do in Tacloban. I will contact new schools and communities, but my target is to return to my team in my hometown in Samar and then expand from there. I just want to share the love and passion for sports, specifically football. I want to inspire the children on how to overcome their problems through the values they learn in sports. I want to empower and encourage them to finish their studies and achieve their dreams. Sports, for some parents - like my own - are nonsense. I want them to realize that playing any kind of sport is not nonsense - it helps in the development of children and youth, and provides opportunities for them, too.



MI: In your video, you said you were the children's "Champion", right? How do you feel as their role model?

I'm a little ashamed, actually. It's the first time I've been looked up to or considered as a role model - it's quite unexpected. It's a good feeling too, because I'm able to share my story and they can relate to it. It's a big responsibility because you also become their motivation to do what they want to do in life and to be better persons.

MI: How about you - who is your champion?

My father. He is my champion he does everything he needs to do for us even if there are a lot of hardships that come our way, he still strives to make life better for us. He has a lot of children and we make a lot of mistakes - still - he's kind to us. I think that's the reason why I have the same attitude towards life - whenever there are struggles, I just face it and go through them because I think of my family.

One last thing, what is your message to the children you coach, or anyone who probably has the same story as yours, who wish to follow your footsteps or be like where you've been or where you are right now?

First, NEVER GIVE UP. I always keep this thought in mind. But it has to be accompanied with the thoughts of your purpose, motivation, and inspirations. Because whenever I hear this phrase, I remember my family and my goals in life. I was able to overcome all the obstacles and struggles I encountered because I kept these thoughts in my head. Second, FAITH. Any problem that comes your way, as long as you have faith, you will think of it as a blessing, not a problem. It keeps us strong. And last, PASSION. Maybe the reason why I got to where I am is because of my passion. You won't get to where you want to be if you don't have the passion to achieve it. That's all.

Sounds like a true Champ! Any last words? :)

Motto? hahahahahaha "Work hard. Stay humble."


Reuben was talking to Margaux Inocando, Community Development and Communications Manager of FundLife International.

Photo Credits:
Margaux Inocando
Michael Johnson Young Leaders Programme





..AND
BEYOND.



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