

A YOUNG LEADER HELPS SHAPE THE FUTURE BY PRESERVING THE PAST



Right in the small, quaint town in Western Visayas is a window into a world that is more than a hundred years old. Welcome to the City of Silay. Wandering into its streets, a traveler could peek into century-old grandiose houses, with their art deco windows, white stone walls, and antique furnishing that feel as if one is transported back in time, back in the days when heritage mansions dot Silay's villages symbolizing its sugar industry's fortune.

It is no surprise that the next generation of Silaynons embraces this city's old charm with a renewed sense of pride.

Neil Solomon Locsin, 25 years old and works as tourism consultant in the city government's tourism office. He shared, "At the heart of Silay is its people who appreciate their past," referring to Silay's success as a key tourism destination in the Philippines, known for its heritage houses, arts, and culture.

While other young people are attracted to the big city culture, Locsin stayed in Silay after college graduation and did volunteer work in Silay's tourism office. "I grew up and spent my childhood in one of Silay's ancestral houses. My aunt who owns one of Silay's preserved ancestral houses took care of me so I have my own personal memories living in an old house. Aside from my passion for history, this background inspired me to pursue this kind of work of preserving Silay's rich heritage."

Silay has an illustrious history. It is known as the Paris of Negros and a cultural and intellectual hub brought about by its early inhabitants' love for knowledge and the arts. During the 19th and early 20th century, the city of Silay had become a leading sugar producer; its landscapes marked by vast sugar plantations and exquisite houses and architecture.

In 2008, JICA helped build Silay's international airport which also transformed the city's tourism and economic activities. Small hotels, restaurants, and history tours complete a traveler's sojourn in Silay.

In 2010, Locsin was among the 16 young men and women sent by the Japanese government through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to Japan for a short course on community tourism promotion under the Training Program for Young Leaders. "I saw a lot of complementary traits that the Japanese people have in common with the people in Silay. They're both kind and gentle and value their past. Our visit in Akita prefecture made me realize that a people's strong sense of their past as well as leadership support are essential in sustaining the community's tourism success," he added.

As part of the training program, Locsin prepared several action plans to contribute to Silay's tourism. "The action plan I am pursuing is different in a way that it already blends into the Silay Tourism Promotion and Development Plan and the Silay Master Plan for growth and development.

The components of the action plan are already being implemented. The challenge is how to make it sustainable."

From community awareness campaigns instilling 'pride of place' among Silay folks to designating heritage zones and heritage conservation guidelines, it seems that Locsin's contribution to Silay's future stemmed mainly from his appreciation of his hometown's past. "We also want to preserve Silay's old poetry, hymns, and chants," he said.

Hiligaynon literature, one of the oldest Philippine folk literatures, flourished in Silay and Locsin said the city's tourism program is trying to preserve it.

Aside from the arts, the city also partnered with a Japanese NGO in the program Ikaw, Ako Japan-Negros Partnership for Environmental Protection in rehabilitating the city's mangroves. The city government has supported the project by constructing lamp posts along the streets leading to the mangrove plantations, making it a sight to behold as an ecotourism park.

"When one is working for tourism, one is also working unconditionally. It is not strictly an 8 to 5 job behind a desk," said Locsin who also works as tour guide on certain days. "My training taught me that tourism promotion is also about having the right strategy and the right leadership support to become a success."

"In other historical destinations, tourism is all about business. But here in Silay, it's not all about the money. People have stayed put living the way they have been in their old houses. And they're proud of their history. That's very important," Locsin said.

Representing the next generation of Silaynons mindful of the past and determined to help Silay become a dynamic heritage community, Locsin is proof that the youth is never really wasted on the young.

Locsin enjoys tourism views of snowcapped Japan



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-Neil Solomon Locsin, TPYL participant



Silay tourism is supported by local officials Mayor Jose L. Montelibano (center) and Vice Mayor Mark Golez (left)