



On weekdays, Joby John Pama wakes up at 7 a.m., cooks breakfast, and packs lunch. From his home in the island province of Guimaras, he takes a pump boat and *jeepneys* to Iloilo City, where he goes to school.

Joby John is an exceptional athlete with gold and silver medals at different national competitions in shot put, power lifting, discus, and table tennis from 2006 to 2008. In 2007 he won the silver at the Special World Games table tennis in Shanghai. Earlier on, he took home the table tennis gold from the 1999 Special Olympics World Summer Games in North Carolina.

Joby John is 33 years old, and his school is *Balay Dalangpan* — House of Refuge — a learning and work center for young adults with disabilities, in the government-run Special Education (SPED) Integrated School for Exceptional Children. He is a person with developmental disabilities.

Ryan Mosquera, 28, also has developmental disabilities — and sports medals. He has been champion twice in the 100-meter dash at the ASEAN ParaGames. He took the bronzes at two triathlons in 2009, defeating athletes without disabilities. At the 42K World Marathon held in the Philippines in 2009.

Erika Seki, in her 20s, has long nurtured a fundamental idea that Ryan's and Joby John's achievements effectively illustrate.

Some years ago, Erika's elementary school in Japan had a special class for children with mental retardation, and they became her friends.

"Even if people have disabilities, they are like us," Erika says, adding in her soft voice that she has always felt that way. "And they show kindness."

Erika is a volunteer social worker at *Balay Dalangpan*. Under a 2008-2010 program, she is a social worker with the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, a JICA undertaking in developing countries that began in 1965. JICA has sent about 20 volunteers to the Philippines every year and has totaled to 1,378 as of September 2009, making the country its second-biggest recipient of volunteers in the world.

*Balay Dalangpan* is for persons with disabilities, or PWDs, who are currently attending or have finished SPED but are yet unable to join the social mainstream. Erika helps to improve their vocational skills through activities that at the same time sustain their mental progress and prevent them from retrogressing.

Erika, who graduated with a degree in social work from a university in Hokkaido, Japan, previously worked for four years in Tokyo, supporting livelihood skills training for adult PWDs.

"There is little or no work opportunity for PWDs in the community," Erika observes. "I have helped to create opportunities" as a matter of "equal rights of people," she says.

Providing work to *Balay Dalangpan* students is now one of her advocacies. She is currently developing prospects for jobs in the summer of 2010.

Ryan has taken a job opportunity at the SPED school itself, working as a janitor from mid-afternoon to evening after classes. With the money he has earned, he has sent his brother through school and his brother now works at aircraft maintenance for the Philippine Coast Guard.

Nowadays, Ryan is preparing for the 2010 ASEAN ParaGames that will be held in Laos.

Joby John has likewise begun entering the mainstream. Every summer he works as an attendant at a gas-station convenience store since 2005, the year he started at *Balay Dalangpan*. He now also has a very special interest. He has adopted a one-year-old baby girl. He takes care of her after coming home.

Erika is quite small in physique as compared with Joby John and Ryan, but she also has an athletic side to her. She likes running and mountain trekking.

When going up a mountain, she says, "I can stop anytime, but if I stop I will not reach the top where I can see everything."

### Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers

## In the House of Refuge



JICA volunteer **Erika Seki** (extreme right) with fellow teacher **Gilbert Cang** (second from right) and *Balay Dalangpan* students

The skills that Erika and other teachers provide Joby John, Ryan and 10 other students, aged 19 to 45 years — like T-shirt printing and making bread, candles, tile-art, and masks — also earn them money. Their products are sold at the SPED and other schools, and they get the sales proceeds, says Erika's fellow teacher Gilbert Cang, the current coordinator of *Balay Dalangpan*.

"Erika is very good for the students," says the SPED school principal, Elizabeth Orquiola. "She is patient with our special young adults, and she inspires them. Her heart is really in what she does. And the skills she teaches are very helpful."

*The SPED school has 118 students with developmental disability: Down syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy. It has 171 students with hearing impairment and 15 students with visual impairment; for the latter, there are two teachers, including one who is totally visually impaired. The other teacher is late-deafened.*