

## The Good Kind of Domino

Growing up, my dad used to tell me that it was pure grit and hard work that his parents were able to send him to school. My grandparents barely finished grade school. They were arranged to be married when they reached the age of 18 years old, then my dad was born. My dad told me he would go to school without even a pen or notebook, and he would sew his slippers with the small metal wires he'd randomly find. When I was young, I had fond memories of my Lolo taking me to the farm on his kariton. It is only now, as I look back, that I realize that the kariton was his and my lola's home on the fields – where they would rest, and what they would bring to work. My grandparents worked tirelessly on the farm, from a young age until they were plagued with their bones that turned fragile, until they could no longer walk. My dad always says that my lolo's constant reminder was “*mag-aral kayo kasi ‘yan lang ang maiiwan namin sa inyo.*” Now, my dad repeats the same thing to *Ate Grace* – who took care of me and my brother, and now my nephew since I was 6 months old. *Ate Grace*, who also barely finished highschool, has a son she is raising alone, who is now excelling in highschool. I'd like to think that it was a domino effect. If my grandparents didn't encourage my dad to study, my dad would not be able to also help *Ate Grace*. To me, this domino effect is what safeguarding liberty and nurturing of prosperity under the rule of law is. If everyone is empowered by another to freely make choices, everyone would have a fighting chance at a prosperous life.

In one of my classes under Local Government Law, we learned about the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). Institutionalized by RA 11310, 4Ps is a conditional cash transfer program for poverty reduction. Families under the program receive a stipend if they are able to accomplish key conditions, which are in line with Development Goals. I asked *Ate Minda*, who used to take care of my nephew, about this program, and she said that 4Ps is the reason why she has to go home to her family every once in a while – to make sure they are compliant and can claim their 4Ps stipend. She mentioned that because of this program, she encourages her children to go to school, even if it is financially burdensome for her family. *Ate Minda* has since left to take care of her young children, but I am hopeful that the 4Ps program will continue to help her and her family. This is an example of legislation that ensures the safeguarding of liberty and nurturing of prosperity under the rule of law.

Without the 4Ps program, *Ate Minda* and her family will be stuck in a vicious cycle. Her children will not go to school because it is costly, and when they are old enough to work, they would rather work unstable jobs instead of studying.

Through the 4Ps program, *Ate Minda's* young children are encouraged to go to school, and they have the chance to break the cycle.

Targeting low-income families is only one way to safeguard liberty and nurture prosperity under the rule of law. There are countless opportunities to use the rule of law to break the cycle, and start a better one. For instance, the LGBTQIA+ is clearly a marginalized sector. In the Philippines, LGBTQIA+ are not allowed to be in a civil union. No matter how long the LGBTQIA+ couple has been in a relationship, they may never be able to legally co-parent or adopt a child. Arguably, the most basic right to a family is denied from these couples. They are not given the choice to either start a family recognized under the law, or not to start a family at all. They are not given the choice to decide a thing as simple as that, which is, on the other hand, freely given to everyone else.

Another way is improving the healthcare sector. In other, more developed countries, citizens do not need to think of their diabetes or hypertension maintenance medications, or even regular dialysis appointments. They do not need to think of whether or not they have the means to pay for a major, life-altering, procedure. In contrast, most Filipino citizens would think twice before even going to a check-up for fear of knowing that they are sick, and a bigger fear of knowing that they cannot afford to be sick. The working class pay for monthly government healthcare dues, only to get a meager amount of money when it is most needed. Most Filipinos do not have a choice to go through a procedure, because they know they will not be able to pay for it anyway.

Lastly, another way is ensuring a quality education system. Although tuition is free in public schools, there are many considerations that parents have to think of even before sending their children to school. Many students need to walk long distances to school, even traversing streams every single day. It is not only a question of the length of time it takes them every single day, but also a question of safety. Children in their formative years should be focusing on learning and exploring the world. Unfortunately, for most parents in the Philippines, the various complications and considerations do not even give them a choice of whether they want to send their children to school or not – they simply cannot afford to do so.

Safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity is all about the freedom of choice. A truly free individual has the freedom to choose what is best for him. A member of the LGBTQIA+ will be truly free if he can decide to marry or not. A sickly senior citizen will be truly free if he can choose to push through with a medical procedure, without thinking much of his financial circumstances. Parents

and children will be truly free if the children can choose to go to school if they want to. It is only when these marginalized sectors of society are given the choice to decide for themselves, that they can truly be prosperous and live their lives the way they wish to do so, as every person should be entitled to. If only each Filipino citizen were given the opportunity to choose, every Filipino citizen would surely choose to live a prosperous life.

Legislation is a powerful tool to ensure liberty and prosperity in various sectors. Just like the 4Ps, which was begun by the executive department but institutionalized by the legislature, our lawmakers and government officials are given much power to empower citizens to be truly free, and to propel them to live prosperous and productive lives. It is progressive legislation such as the 4Ps that give the marginalized sectors a fighting chance to break the cycle. Through progressive legislation, a domino effect may begin to help nudge the marginalized sectors towards the right direction.

As a law student, I read dozens of cases daily that talk about the typical problems faced by Filipino people. I am brought closer to their trepidations, their hopes, and dreams. I read about the laborers that are treated unfairly by powerful corporations, the farmers that are summarily driven off by their landlords, the citizen who wants a new name to reflect her identity, and even the government officials who appropriate taxpayer funds for their own use. My eyes are opened to the realities outside the four corners of the classroom through the cases I read. To live out the philosophy of safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity, I must start with spreading awareness. The information I gain from reading cases and listening to my professors are not meant to be kept to myself. It is through actively engaging in day-to-day discussions that I will be able to live out this philosophy.

For instance, my own family members, whom I love so dearly, may sometimes be closed-minded towards LGBTQIA+ rights. It is through explaining to them the oppression that the LGBTQIA+ experience, and what they are advocating for that I am able to live out the philosophy of liberty and prosperity. Through engaging in meaningful conversations without dismissing the thoughts and opinions of other people, I am able to help the LGBTQIA+ feel more comfortable in the society, albeit only small steps at a time. It is no longer the time to stay quiet and keep my thoughts to myself. I cannot expect to spread awareness through just staying silent. Even though it is sometimes difficult, especially given the generally conservative nature of Filipinos, it matters that I speak up about these issues, even if the conversation will be difficult. If no one speaks for and about the LGBTQIA+, then they will never achieve true freedom.

Furthermore, it is continuing to step out of my bubble that I am able to live out the philosophy of liberty and prosperity. My professor, while discussing the 4Ps, was the one who told us to try asking the people around us about the program. I went ahead and asked *Ate Minda*, and only then did I truly understand its impact. Because I asked *Ate Minda*, I realized that there is so much opportunity in legislation and government programs, more than just regularly giving out financial aid. We need government programs that “teach men to fish” instead of “give men the fish.” It is only if and when I am knowledgeable about the pressing issues the people around me experience that I can in turn, help them, in small ways, to achieve true freedom. As a student, I admittedly do not have much yet to give, but it does not mean I am completely empty handed. If the words I read daily in these cases are what will help spread liberty and prosperity to the people around me, then it is these words that I will wholeheartedly share with them.

With this philosophy of liberty and prosperity, I realized that there is truly so much left to be done, and so many opportunities for me, especially when I finally reach my goal of becoming a lawyer. Entering law school, I was set on learning the law because I was interested in doing well in business, as I graduated from a business degree. However, as I went through law school, I realized that that is not all that I can do. Once I am fully knowledgeable about the law, my knowledge will be a powerful tool in sharing the freedom of choice with those that I encounter. Although I am not fully set with what field of law I want to pursue, or what career track I want to take at this point in time, I am certain that whatever I choose to do, I will think of how it will break the cycle of the *Ate Minda's* in the country. I will think of *my grandparents who started a good kind of domino*. It is a broader view of the law and my legal career. More than just achieving my dreams of becoming a lawyer, and practicing law, I hope to be a lawyer that allows people a little bit more liberty than they currently have. I hope to be a lawyer that empowers the people around me to choose more freely, live more prosperously.

Whether I am entering the field of litigation during my first years in practice, or pursuing my duty to the government after, I will always think of how I use the knowledge and capabilities that I have to help make the Philippines a freer country to live in. If I end up in litigation, I will think – in helping my client, am I breaking the cycle or am I aggravating it? If I end up working under the Office of the Solicitor General, I will think – in advocating for the government, is this the best the government can do to start a good kind of domino? If I end up working at the Bureau of Internal Revenue, I will think – what are my decisions doing for the *Ate Minda's* in the country?

Regardless, I will continue to step out of my bubble and engage in day-to-day conversations with the people around me about the most pressing issues, although it may be difficult. They say that people are generally averse to change, that there's no use in changing something that has been effectively working for far too long. To live out the philosophy of safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity under the rule of law, I would humbly beg to differ. For it is in these difficult conversations, risky decisions, and most importantly, progressive thinking and legislation that we will be able to break the cycle, and start a good domino.