



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Winefreda Geonzon / FREE LAVA - Free Legal Assistance Association (Philippines)†

(1984)

...for giving assistance to prisoners and aiding their rehabilitation.



Winefreda Geonzon

When she became the Legal Aid Director of the Philippines' Bar in Cebu City in 1978, lawyer Winefreda Geonzon found herself confronted with the many injustices and abuses of the legal system which occurred during the martial rule years of the Marcos regime. People, including young children, were jailed without charge or trial; often they were imprisoned beyond their term, tortured and brutalised, or simply forgotten.

In response, Geonzon setup the Free Legal Assistance Volunteers Association (FREELAVA) as a legal aid office for victims of human rights violations, prisoners who could not afford lawyers to act for them and people whose cases had implications for social justice. FREELAVA sought to serve the many prisoners in these categories, firstly by seeking them out and then visiting them in jail, where its volunteers obtained first-hand experience of the appalling conditions to which inmates were subjected. These included poor or non-existent sanitary facilities, chronic overcrowding (in 1987, Cebu City's main jail had almost three times the number of prisoners for which it was designed), concrete floors with no sleeping mats and little protection for inmates against assaults by fellow prisoners.

As its reputation grew, FREELAVA involved increasing numbers of lawyers, students and community groups in its work. A Documentation and Research Group gathered legal evidence for abused or wrongly imprisoned inmates, a Legal Services Group undertook their representation, and a Civic Assistance Team sought to provide for their basic needs in prison and their rehabilitation. This latter part of the work included cultural programmes, sports activities, literacy classes, limited economic assistance and a spiritual ministry.

By 1987, twenty-six community groups were involved in FREELAVA's works, carrying out a triangular programme of crime prevention, free legal assistance and rehabilitation. In fact, martial law had been lifted in 1981, but the aggressive habits of some law enforcers had not changed.

FREELAVA was able to negotiate some reforms, among other things permitting prisoners in the city jail to organise their own council to dialogue with the authorities.

Winefreda Geonzon's legacy of community service passed to her associates, staff and volunteers when she died of cancer in 1990. They have continued to pursue her mission of helping the oppressed and under-privileged. FREELAVA has maintained its free legal aid to poor prisoners confined in various jails of Cebu Province and has expanded this to provide training for people on their basic legal rights. Paralegal clinics have been established in various depressed communities, bringing these services to people on their own doorsteps with the help of paralegal volunteers.

FREELAVA has also continued to provide formal educational assistance to more than 400 out-of-school children and young people, hand in hand with the financial assistance provided for the income-generating projects of their parents. These services are now working in 30 communities of Cebu City.

In 1995, FREELAVA established the Balay-Pasilungan, a temporary shelter and rehabilitation centre for released young offenders from the jail centres of the province of Cebu. In 2002, FREELAVA initiated a Community-Based Prevention, Diversion/Mediation Program for Children in Conflict with the Law . Through the project, Children's Justice Committees have been established in some selected areas of Cebu City.

Quotation

"We find it futile to be criticising without offering alternatives, and we have proven countless times that people are by nature good. In our own work we see the beauty of reconciliation rather than making confrontation."

Winefreda Geonzon

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD
AWARD FOUNDATION