

Kabalikat sa Kabuhayan goes to Tagaytay Highlands

SM Foundation and Belle Corp. partner to make farm-to-table more sustainable.

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A harvest festival marks the end of the KSK training program.

Picking your own organic vegetables fresh from the vine is divine, but nothing compares to knowing how a relaxing pick-and-pay activity for the well-off creates a happy medium with the farming community.

Recently, SM Foundation's Kabalikat sa Kabuhayan (KSK) program and Belle Corp. (the company behind the famous Tagaytay Highlands) partnered to provide a livelihood training program and assistance for eight barangays surrounding the premier leisure and residential development.

Conducted in partnership with Harbest Agribusiness Corp., which supplies all the seedlings, fertilizers, even the equipment for KSK trainings, the 12-week training honed 91 farmers in growing certain varieties of crops which are commonly used in dishes served in Tagaytay Highlands. These include lettuce, melons, sweet corn, zucchinis, papaya, and gourds, to name a few.

For the training, Belle Corp., through its corporate social responsibility arm Belle Kaagapay, reserved a half-hectare open land that serves the Pick-and-Pay Bistro Saratoga, a regular weekend getaway for Tagaytay Highlands' guests and residents. In the future, the company is devoting another hectare for farmers willing to partner with it.

“We see it as a long-term opportunity. The intention is to supply the requirements of the club. We have started talking to the chef of the club to find out his weekly requirements so we can address and talk to our farmers. Our members are normally here Fridays to Sundays and they drive all the way here to get their own pick. Summer is eight months away, and we’ve already programmed it. By summertime, they’ll have their melons to pick,” says Belle Corp. VP for governance and corporate affairs Michelle Hernandez.

The training is hoped to make the farmers full-time suppliers in the future as well as directly connect them to potential buyers in the area. SM Foundation’s KSK has been addressing important social challenges such as food security by teaching participants updated and doable farming methods which they can replicate in their own backyards.

“During each KSK training launch, we tell our farmers that the core of this training is for them to be able to provide for their family,” says SM Foundation AVP for livelihood Cristie Angeles. “After they have fed their families, they can sell the rest of their produce for additional income.”

Before Belle Kaagapay joined the string of SM Foundation’s KSK benefactors, it had been sending scholars to college and conducting annual feeding programs since 2014. The feeding program, which is sanctioned by the Department of Education, runs for 120 school days and has benefited 350 elementary students from the surrounding communities. Sadly, Belle found out that the students’ normalized weight went back to “wasted” stage after a year.

To make the school-based health program more efficient and sustainable, Belle wanted to include the participation of the parents and communities.

Hernandez shares: “As we were planning our activities (for 2016), we said, ‘ Why don’t we level up? Why don’t we give something that is going to be sustainable, so that there’s going to be food on the table? We have land here. We can let the people use it. Land equates to food. Why don’t we invite the parents, even 4Ps beneficiaries to this program, and see where it would lead us?’ We knew for a fact that SM Foundation has this livelihood training program. So we contacted the foundation last year and asked if we could be included for this year’s program.”

On May 31, the Belle Kaagapay launched the KSK training program, which culminated with a harvest festival at Tagaytay Highlands and a graduation ceremony at SM City Lipa.

One of the graduates, 64-yearold Elena Caro, shares how the training motivates her to craft her own little sustainable vegetable garden: “Malaking tulong ang project na ito dahil natuto ako kung paano talaga mag- prepare ng lupa para sa pagtatanim. Ngayong napag-aralan ko na, alam ko na ang tamang pagprepare ng lupa para magtanim ng mga gulay; halimbawa, yung secret sa

pag-germinate ng mga seeds in a uniform way at ‘yung paggawa ng mga Bokashi fertilizer (mixture of rice bran, animal manure, EMAS, fermented fruit juice). At ‘yung experience ko na pinakahindi ko malilimutan ay ‘yung mga tinanim namin na namumunga within 40 days — mga kalabasa, melon, upo. Kahit pala malakas ang ulan at hindi suitable ‘yung climate condition, posible pa rin ang pagtatanim.’”

Since KSK started in 2007, SM Foundation has trained over 14,000 farmers nationwide.
